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February 5, 2003

NASA isn't hearing tough questions yetBy **JOE WARMINGTON** -- Toronto Sun

"Space travel is a very dangerous business."



Thanks for that insight. All weekend, silly quotes like that from NASA officials kept coming. How about, "we are a family and we are getting assistance with our grief."

In other words, go easy on the tough questions.

How's this for a tough question: Does the fact that space travel is dangerous mean people should not be held accountable for errors?

Is that unfair to ask right now? I don't think so when you consider the quotes that have been coming out of NASA.

They are ready to move forward now, even before the investigation is completed.

"We owe it to them to fly again," is one of my favourites.

I am sure the seven dead astronauts appreciate that. Just a hunch but we probably owe them an explanation of why they were killed first. And maybe new re-entry technology should come first.

"This is a dangerous business" just doesn't cut it.

Another great quote was something about "funding being cut from Washington." Sure. It's no one's fault. Well, actually, they insinuate, it's President George W. Bush's and Congress' fault.

It's amazing how quickly that so-called "family" wants to gloss over all of this and get back to work. You hear talk of tourism and jobs and how the economy will be affected.

Heaven forbid we take a few minutes for the dead while those who benefit worry about the potential shutting down of their wild-spending bureaucracy, which is funded with \$15 billion of taxpayers money annually.

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And let's not forget the failed \$3-billion mission here which resulted in a number of children losing parents. This is a fact. But the dead astronauts "would have wanted" the program to continue.

It's hard to know what they may have wanted now. Just a thought. Can't speak for them but maybe they'd want authorities to make sure it's safer next time. But, again, it's difficult to talk to the dead.

At least they have some comfort in this.

"We'll treat their remains with the utmost of respect and dignity."

That's a beauty quote, eh? Glad to hear it. These are people who plummeted in a speeding rocket 200,000 feet to their deaths and some guy is talking about dignity and respect.

Am I the only who sees the spin mode here? Please, tell me.

You know on Saturday, about an hour after the Columbia disaster occurred, I was having a coffee at The Roastery with veteran columnist Bob MacDonald and within two seconds we came up with the scenario of the damaged wing that everybody is talking about now.

Two hockey guys came up with this. The question then, as it is a few days later, was why didn't NASA properly address this issue and come up with a plan? Isn't it a fair question? This isn't a video game, after all. Lives were at stake. Oh, the bureaucratic machine, has a quote for that too.

"We didn't see it having an impact on re-entry."

Not even a bit? Well, were you right? As soon as that quote came across on CNN my phone rings. "Now, I am no expert in flight," says my sister Dana, "but whether you are a robin or the space shuttle, isn't damage to a wing always problematic?"

Yeah.

"Even if we would have determined that there was damage, there was nothing that could be done to repair those tiles," says NASA.

This is information they might have wanted to tell the astronauts before they went up there. Wonder if they knew their support on the ground would throw up the white towel like that?

I thought this was supposed to be "the brightest and the best?" Heck, I saw Tom Hanks in Apollo 13, the movie, and how real-life astronauts Jim Lovell, Fred Haise and Jack Swigert, as well as flight director Gene Krantz, worked overtime to ensure they made it home in April 1970.

Tom Hanks probably won't be buying the movie rights to this one. Not too many visible heroes so far. It may be shown that these astronauts didn't get a chance to be. And this "there's nothing we could do" approach is just not in the spirit of the space program we grew up with.

What happened to the right stuff?

You have to admit, despite the sorrow, there seems to be an awful lot of questions. I mean this did happen. It sounds more like they are laying out a foundation of excuses.

If they missed this problem, and the cause was the debris from the fuel tank, perhaps a better quote would be "we screwed up and to the families of those killed, we're sorry."

That would be forgivable. Mistakes do happen, after all. Even deadly ones.

Just three years ago in Quebec, eight children died in a mini-van accident and even though they weren't wearing seatbelts the mom driving was not charged on compassionate grounds that she'd been through enough.

That may very well happen here too. Maybe no charges are necessary. But no matter how it's spun, it seems unbelievable that in all of those brains no one understood the impact on the aluminum shuttle at 3,000C without the help of heat-resistant tiles.

Should they have seen this coming? The question must be asked.

By the way, Toronto psychic Anthony Carr saw it in his Jan. 1 predictions by writing "giant, comet-like object streaks through the heavens; bright enough to be seen during daylight hours." Originally he thought it was a UFO but "now I know what I saw."

He wasn't the only one. Toronto's own Nikki, Psychic to the Stars, wrote Jan. 1 "there will be a space tragedy around an American space mission."

Both expressed sadness that they were right.

If it shakes out that the damage at blastoff is what caused this whole mess, one thing will be clear. NASA's got some problems in how they operate the shuttle program. You won't have to be a rocket scientist to see that.

And you can quote me.

Joe Warmington's slices of Toronto nightlife appears Wednesday through Saturday. Reach him at joe.warmington@tor.sunpub.com or at 416-947-2392

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