

Political Payload for the Myth of the Missing Women Astronauts

The “Space Age” is notable for its speed – physical, fashion, cultural, whatever – compared to previous historical epochs. And when it comes to creating mythical heroes and villains out of flesh-and-blood human beings, what used to take generations of fireside retellings now can be done in a few years, or even faster.

Spaceflight has just given us another example of this with the media frenzy in early May 2007 over an academic honor for some feminist heroes who suffered at the hands of male bigots – or so the story goes. The full (and very different) story can be found here (<http://www.thespacereview.com/article/869/1>), along with the sad tale of the USSR’s exploitation of a woman and of women’s hopes worldwide, over ‘the first woman in space’, here (<http://www.jamesoberg.com/tereshkova.pdf>).

With a proper historical context and established, verifiable historical realities, the university and news media coverage of the “Mercury-13” celebration can be evaluated for accuracy versus fantasy and fabrication. It is not a picture that the academics or the journalists can be proud of.

In the AP story, which appeared inter alia in the Washington Post, page A09, on May 8, 2007, the opening sentence falsely sets the stage by describing the women as having “trained in the early 1960s to become astronauts only to have NASA pull the plug on them at the eleventh hour”.

ABC news referred to the thirteen as “the first women astronaut trainees”.

A related story by Dallas Star-Telegram staff writer Adrienne Nettles appeared the previous week (<http://www.star-telegram.com/407/story/86937.html>). It refers to “letters written to a Dr. Randy Lovelace of NASA.” [Lovelace did not represent NASA and did not inform NASA of his private research]. In describing one of the women, the article states that she “was to train as one of 13 women selected to become the nation's first female astronauts.” [they were not selected for that purpose]. The article continues: “Some say NASA called the testing off, while others speculate that the order came from the White House.” – an old propaganda gimmick to inject the author’s own ideas into a story without verifiable sourcing. And the article added, “Congress later ordered that NASA astronauts come from the ranks of military test pilots, ruling out women altogether,” as if the choice occurred BECAUSE OF the women’s successful medical screening – when it had come from the White House (not Congress) three years earlier.

A reading of other subsequent headlines and the comments posted on discussion boards also make clear the semantically spun message of the story, for example, “First women astronaut trainees snubbed by NASA to be honored” [“They trained to become astronauts, but NASA cut the exercises short, saying they had more than enough men waiting in line.”]. Other stories merely say [incorrectly], “First women astronaut trainees to be honored”.

Such consistent and near-universal misinformation cannot be intended to inform the target audience – it’s clear it is to provoke them emotionally. A ‘Wired’ book reviewer made exactly that point in his comment on a book on the subject: “It’s a fine read that inspires **fist-shaking indignation.**”

Even one of the “Mercury 13” women, 80-year-old Beatrice Steadman, reacted that way when speaking with a reporter: "I wanted it so bad I could taste it, practically," she said, referring to the cancellation of some hoped-for tests. "I think we all wanted to punch somebody." Coming the same weekend as the release of the Lisa Nowak stalking videos, such a candid comment is not reassuring regarding the emotional stability of the group under stress and frustration.

And who might benefit by such an energizing message to women’s rights activists? Curiously, in a speech in 2006, Hillary Clinton made a passing reference to her own letter to NASA during the very same period, expressing her teen-aged interest in becoming an astronaut. And she reported being astonished and heart-broken when they answered that “they don’t take girls” (her words – no such letter has ever actually been found). It was, she said, her first introduction to male anti-woman bigotry.

Press officials at NASA, asked about the likelihood of such a message in any official letter, were skeptical. “I recall the early letters to women said that the program as then structured could only admit men, but that in the future it was expected that recruitment would broaden so their interest was appreciated,” one retired official told me. Others agreed: “No way we were going to officially tell girls to get lost,” another avowed.

But to report the story correctly – to truthfully describe the constraints of astronaut selection in those days and how they have expanded in the United States [but not in Russia] in the decades since – would not have served Clinton’s political campaign themes. That might help explain the unprofessional and misleading performance of top academics and working-level journalists in May 2007 regarding THIS story – but that’s a topic for further analysis and argumentation elsewhere.

Meanwhile, plans for further political exploitation of the early-1960’s women’s group (which actually had 12 members – but “13” was a sexier number so a Hollywood producer used it instead) seem to have stalled out. At one time there reportedly were plans for a special congressional recognition of the surviving women, with medals and public ceremonies – featuring speeches by Pelosi and Clinton and others. But too many other distractions seem to have derailed this idea – fortunately for accurate space history.