

## Political correctness at NASA

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Judging by the public image it tries to put forward, the "new NASA" much touted by the White House is a federal agency which knows that political correctness is far more important than technical accuracy. At least, that's the message of recent news releases timed to coincide with the historic Shuttle-Mir linkup.

Celebrating the "centennial" of the one hundredth American astronaut mission, NASA scrupulously avoids the time-honored but now offensive term "manned" in describing its space missions involving astronauts. The "gender police" have triumphed to the extent that "piloted" missions, or "occupied" spacecraft, or "human space missions", have become the only acceptable verbal way to express the presence of men (and sometimes women) aboard space vehicles. For a while, NASA even tried saying "crewed spaceflight" but that came out sounding "crude" and was abandoned.

The ludicrous extent to which this semantic nonsense can go is exemplified in a special NASA poster just issued to commemorate "NASA Milestones". In discussing the history of the American space program, NASA's modern version of President Kennedy's 1961 call for the Apollo moon program relates that JFK declared that "America would land a human on the Moon before the decade ends". He called, of course, for landing a "man" on the Moon, but revisionists overcame historians to rewrite the speech in accord with current Washington sensitivities.

So far, fortunately, Neil Armstrong's first words on the Moon remain accurate: "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind". But it's easy to see where the trend is heading. Someday soon we can expect it to be "corrected" to read: "That's one small step for a person, one giant leap for humanity."

Throughout the recent NASA press releases, proper and accurate homage is paid to various first achievements of a gender, or ethnic, or diplomatic nature. But when it comes to reporting accurately the cosmic achievements of "old white men", sloppiness and misstatements abound.

For example, NASA newsletters have just published a list of space events that has the wrong date for Ed White's 1965 space walk, and the wrong missions for the Gemini tests which preceded the first manned (my terminology) flight. It misspells the last names of two of the most distinguished space shuttle astronauts, who unfortunately happened to be white men. Four-time shuttle veteran (and later director of the Kennedy Space Center) Robert Crippen's name

is given as "Crippin" and former astronaut team commander Dan Brandenstein's name is given as "Brandstein". Every real space worker in the shuttle program knows of these men and how their names are spelled, but not -- apparently -- the public relations experts at NASA Headquarters.

A summary report by a NASA headquarters historian went so far as to misquote the Bible when reporting the readings by the Apollo-8 crew in lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, 1968. As anyone with even the remotest religious background can recall, the phrase goes "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth....". But somehow, the closest that NASA's top expert could get was "And God created the heavens and the Earth...." Yet his report accurately listed first spaceflight events for United States African-American and Hispanic astronauts (although not for Asian-American astronauts, it should be pointed out).

One other long-standing error, however, lies in NASA's overlooking the flight of the Cuban pilot Arnaldo Tamayo Mendez aboard a Soviet spacecraft in 1980. Picked for clearcut propaganda purposes, he was the world's first black space traveler, preceding by many years the flights of United States astronauts of Sub-Saharan African descent. Also overlooked is the 1985 spaceflight of the first person actually born in Sub-Saharan Africa, who happened to be white. Such awkward facts, inconsistent with NASA's publicity intentions, are not mentioned

These humorous slip-ups and cover-ups show graphically the kind of public image that NASA has decided to portray, and the kind of agency it wants to be perceived as. Getting the facts right is no longer on the agenda, since they chose to skip the validation procedures which could easily have caught these errors. Pandering to the currently in-power pressure groups in Washington appears to be the main strategy.

If this behavior was only a superficial aberration, it could easily be dismissed as the inconsequential posturings of sloppy public relations flacks. But it may go much deeper, because it has apparently come about by explicit directive from the highest levels in the agency, and those directives apply to everyone else at NASA (and its contractors) as well. Whether an agency with such distorted priorities can be counted on to successfully and safely conduct high-risk and high-cost space activities is a good question to consider.