

IN THE AFTERGLOW OF 'COLUMBIA,' THE SENATOR WHO'S BEEN THERE WANTS NASA TO SHOOT THE MOON

Pride in Yankee technology, a sometime thing of late, got a dramatic boost when John Young and Robert Crippen—the first Americans in orbit since 1975—rode the shuttle Columbia 933,757 miles through space and after 54½ hours brought it down to a picture-perfect landing in the Mojave Desert. Their glorious mission confirms the viability of the reusable shuttle, and propels NASA into an era of substantially more economical exploration of space. But the shuttle has had its critics, principally because it took 10 years and \$10 billion to launch. Even now, the prospect of continuing the program in a time of curtailed social services discomfits many, but not GOP Senator—and former astronaut—Harrison “Jack” Schmitt of New Mexico. As chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Science, Technology and Space, Schmitt, 45, argues that President Reagan’s plans to trim the NASA budget by almost 10 percent, to \$6.12 billion annually, are ill-advised. He elaborated to PEOPLE’s Karen Feld.

How does Columbia’s flight compare with other U.S. achievements in space?

Landing on the moon represented a leap for the spirit of mankind. The shuttle is a milestone of another sort. Like the Panama Canal, which linked the commerce of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the craft now connects the terrestrial environment with the resources of space.

Will last week’s triumphant flight affect congressional voting on NASA budget cuts?

It certainly won’t hurt. But in order to get cuts elsewhere, you’ve got to take cuts in NASA and other science programs. If the slashing continues, however, it’s going to be evaluated by history as shortsighted.

Why?

The nature of the U.S.-Soviet race in technology is that we spurt ahead and then yawn while they catch up. They have a very inferior technology base compared to ours, but that doesn’t



For John Young, 50 (left), it was his fifth orbital mission—a U.S. record. Robert Crippen, 43, had never been in space.



Before winning a Senate seat in 1976, Schmitt was a geologist and an Apollo 17 astronaut; on Dec. 11, 1972 he became the 12th man to walk on the moon.

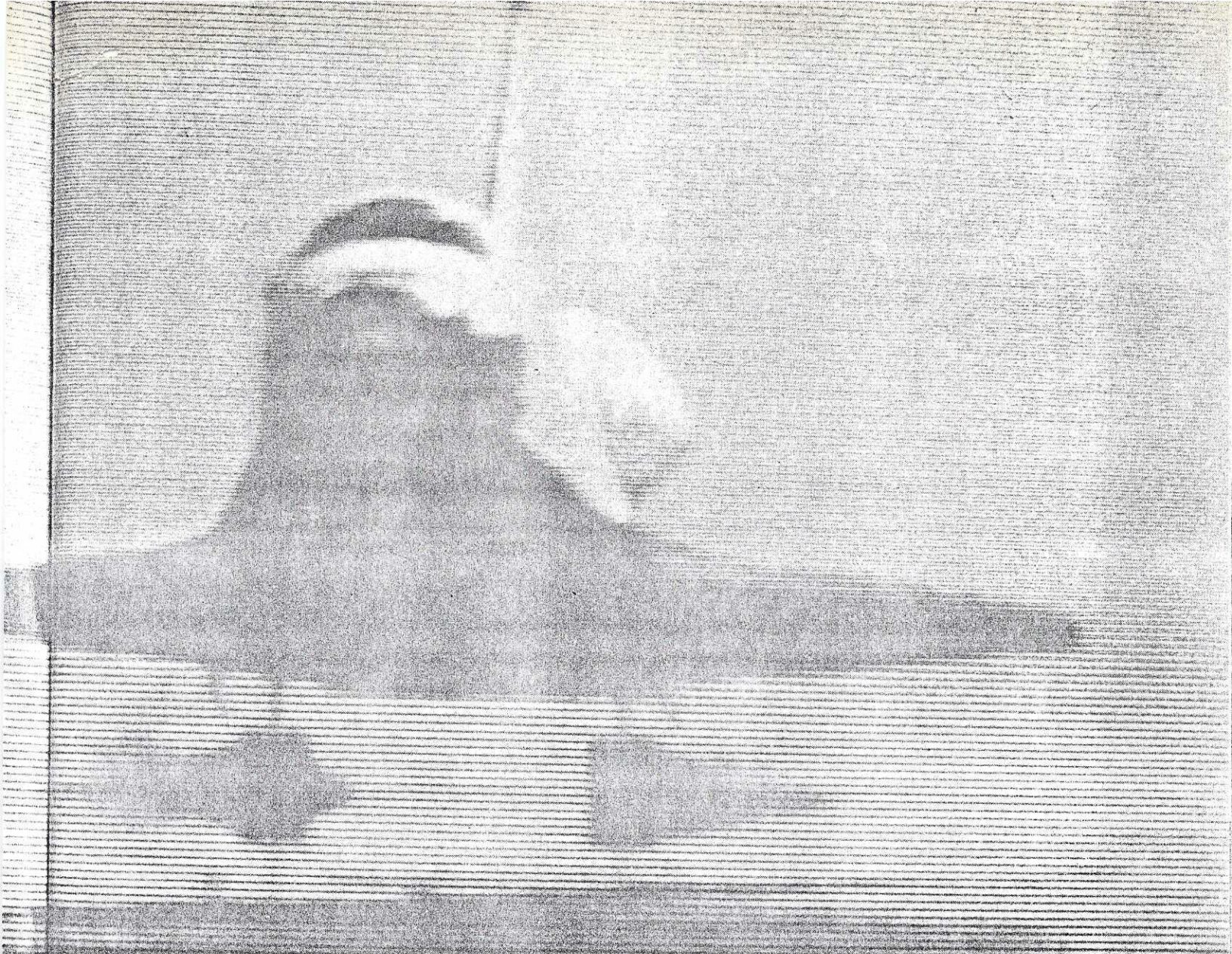
mean the turtle-and-hare story can’t apply. Their strategy is to use negotiations and treaties to slow us down. We ought to be careful in signing any agreement that limits our use of high technology in the defense of our country. There are strong indications that the nuclear test-ban treaty limiting underground testing has been violated

At 1:22 p.m. EST on April 14, Columbia touched down, changing the history of the exploration of space.

by the U.S.S.R. The same can be said of the antiballistic missile treaty. The Soviets have a much superior will in these kinds of efforts, and they have the potential to dominate the new ocean of space.

Why does the U.S.S.R. perceive the shuttle as a military threat?

It will provide us with a more economical, faster and more reliable means than the Soviets possess for deploying reconnaissance and communications satellites, as well as other “sensors” important to our intelligence and military activities. In a crisis, the shuttle could be launched quickly, and the information gathered and returned,



NBC NEWS PHOTO

perhaps within one orbit. Unfortunately, our military doesn't grasp the full potential of space in terms of national defense.

Why?

It is difficult to imagine a future that is very different from the present. But we probably will see, not too far off, the creation of a "Space Command" as a full branch of the Department of Defense, composed of young officers who *do* have the imagination. We already have evidence the Russians are working vigorously on laser and particle-beam weapons with anti-satellite capabilities. Our military is developing an airborne laser-weapons system, but we have no programmed extension of our research utilizing the shuttle as a component of a weapons system.

Should there be?

President Reagan, in conversations with me, has expressed great concern over the continuing proliferation of nuclear weapons. Where does it stop? I believe only when you are able to make such weapons obsolete by destroying anybody who tries to use them. Lasers and other space-based weapons offer us that option.

Isn't that merely moving "the balance of terror" onto a higher plane?

You should look at the placement of weapons in space in the context of preventing war.

What are the possible commercial benefits of the shuttle?

In the weightless environment of outer space you can grow more perfect

crystals, manufacture truer ball bearings and purer drugs. Also, vacuum melting, to obtain high-purity metals, is very expensive on earth—but all of space is a vacuum. Already companies such as General Electric and Rockwell International are researching the commercial potential.

What should be the next U.S. priority in space?

In this decade, creating a large, visible, multipurpose station in space, one that establishes the permanent presence of America and its allies. Then we should venture on to the moon and to the planets—the ultimate goal probably will be settling Mars. In fact, there are young people now alive who may become the parents of the first "Martians." □