

Guest Room

104 Percent

Steven Cariddi

It is still too early to judge the full impact of the terrible tragedy on Tuesday when, for an instant, there were two bright suns in the Florida sky. Spokespersons are speaking very little, few fingers are being pointed and only the smallest fraction of the space shuttle Challenger is expected to return to the earth it so proudly left. It is not too early, though, to feel grief for the families and friends of the astronauts, or to wonder why it happened. It also seems that it is not too early to say, "I told you so."

Cornell's Thomas Gold and other critics of manned space exploration, while recognizing the astronauts' bravery and showing genuine grief for the catastrophe, have felt the need to scold NASA and its supporters. The critics say manned space flight is a futile and now fatal pursuit. The shuttle is over budget, they tell us. It's constantly behind schedule. It's not cost-effective. And, by the way, it killed seven Americans the other day. None of these terrors would have occurred, they say, if the United States had let robots and rockets take the place of humans in space.

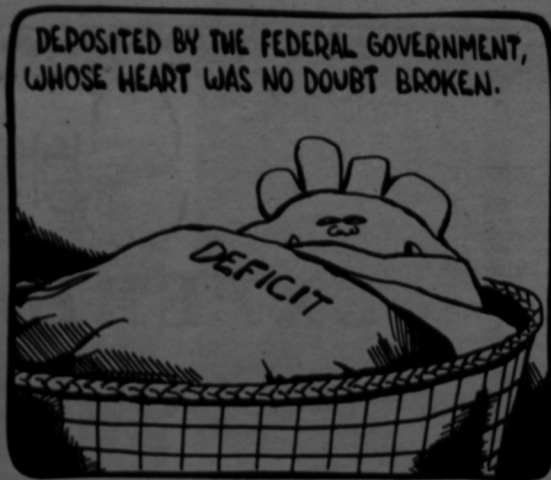
According to the critics, it's not as easy as it seems to become a critic of manned space flight. First, one must be immune to the spectacular publicity stunts for which NASA is famous. The scientific equivalent of the moon landings, we are reminded, could have been achieved for a tenth, or a hundredth or a millionth of the cost by sending a few round-trip robots in our stead. Second, one must realize that man's presence can only detract from the normal, flawless performance of remotely controlled spacecraft. The first few in-orbit satellite repairs by astronauts were by no means promising or economically worthwhile. Third, and most important, to really condemn manned space folly, one must firmly believe that our home is, and always will be, the planet Earth. To entertain unfounded, extravagant desires to live in space when the earth offers an infinite amount of living area and natural resources is like not wanting to live with one's parents all one's life.

I appreciate the arguments of the critics, but they are somewhat off the mark. There is more to cheer about manned space exploration than its obvious triumphs, and much to worry about when its aims are being questioned. It is both ironic and symbolic that the end of Challenger came just as it was achieving "104 percent" thrust. For the critics, this is symbolic of us overstepping our bounds, doing more than we should. But to me, 104 percent is the essence of the dedication of those taking part in the noble effort of manned space flight.

Even before Tuesday's disaster, the shuttle program was certainly not without flaw, but what it lacked in promptness, frugality and immediate rewards, the program made up for with the promise of a permanent presence in space. The Soviets are far ahead of us on this count; their manned space stations show that the Soviets are heeding the advice of the great rocket pioneer Konstantine Tsiolkovsky: "Earth is the cradle of man, but man cannot stay in the cradle forever." We will leave Earth out of a sense of curiosity, adventure and longing, but more importantly, we will leave out of necessity: Who can close their eyes to the increasingly crowded conditions on Earth, a planet whose population will double in less than 50 years?

It is no exaggeration to say that the 104 percent given by astronauts today will benefit our great-great-grandchildren in ways no unmanned satellite ever could. The astronauts who died Tuesday did not die trying to study Halley's Comet or launch a communications satellite. They died giving 104 percent of themselves to a cause far greater than our myopic, temporal concerns. Their contribution, and the contributions of the 55 previous American manned space flights, bring us closer to the day when we will leave the cradle for good.

Steven Cariddi is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences.



Guest Room

The Cold Reality

Sami Besalel

At 11:39 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, I was reading *The Hobbit* in an empty classroom in Baker Lab. In Cape Canaveral, Florida, hundreds of spectators looked on as the space shuttle blew up in a short burst of flame and the debris floated down with the smoke for the next hour. At 12:30, I was sitting in Goldwin Smith for my first day of English class while scientists were scurrying to and fro in search of answers. At 1:30 p.m. I stopped by the TV lounge to see what was up before having lunch;

word of the tragedy slowly got around. Ten spectators. Eleven. The cleaning people. Students returning from classes. And then they did it.

They showed the other camera's target, the proud faces of Mr. and Mrs. McAuliffe, as the shuttle was taking off. And then they showed their faces as their daughter and the other six people perished in flames before their eyes.

Perhaps someone could explain this to me. Perhaps one of you out there can analyze this morbid

tions as Jane the cleaning woman shook her head from side to side, still not looking at the screen, getting up to leave the room. The rest of the students were staring at the screen as if hypnotized. I met the fleeting glance of another cleaning person, who could look no more. And then I got up and left. When I passed by 10 minutes later, half of the people were still there, and on the screen they played the same takeoff scene and the same hot, impersonal deaths over and over again. Over and over again.

I don't know what to think about my fellow students. I guess perhaps I'm judging them too harshly, or that I'm blowing things quite out of proportion. But it doesn't feel that way.

I know one thing. The next time I pass Jane mopping the floor in the hall, I know I can look her in the eye and say hello.

Can you look in the mirror?

Sami Besalel is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences.

'And there was Peter Jennings looking at me with hardly a trace of emotion...'

I saw a lot more than I wanted to see.

This is not about the space shuttle, or Reagan's Star Wars plan; this is about people. This is about that elusive thing called "human nature" that writers have been writing about for thousands of years. This is about you and me. This is questions, not answers. Maybe you can supply those.

I popped my head into the lounge and asked what was on. Seven or eight pairs of eyes were glued to the screen, and I had to ask twice more before I was answered. So I sat to see what had happened and was forced to see the whole incident as it was filmed live, as the friends and relatives of the crew saw it, eyes wide with fear, mouths agape. The camera kept filming. My schoolmates kept watching. And so did I.

Do you want to know something funny? There were no neat sound effects. A low rumbling, I guess. No flashes of brilliant, gleaming colors. A quick orange and red glow as the rocket exhaust seemed to suck up the ship. No fabulous explosion like you see in the movies. A puff of orange and lots of smoke, billowing out into lazy clouds, like the kind you watch as a kid in the summer when you're laying on your back searching the sky for animals. Not "out in a blaze of glory" . . . just out like a candle. Se terminó. Seven lives snuffed out in the blink of an eye.

I could have turned away. But I was curious. I had to know what happened. And the camera kept filming. It was the camera person's job to keep filming.

There was a schoolteacher on the ship, the first civilian to go into orbit. Almost. Her parents were watching proudly as their daughter reached heaven before them. Twice.

And the students here at Cornell were growing in number as

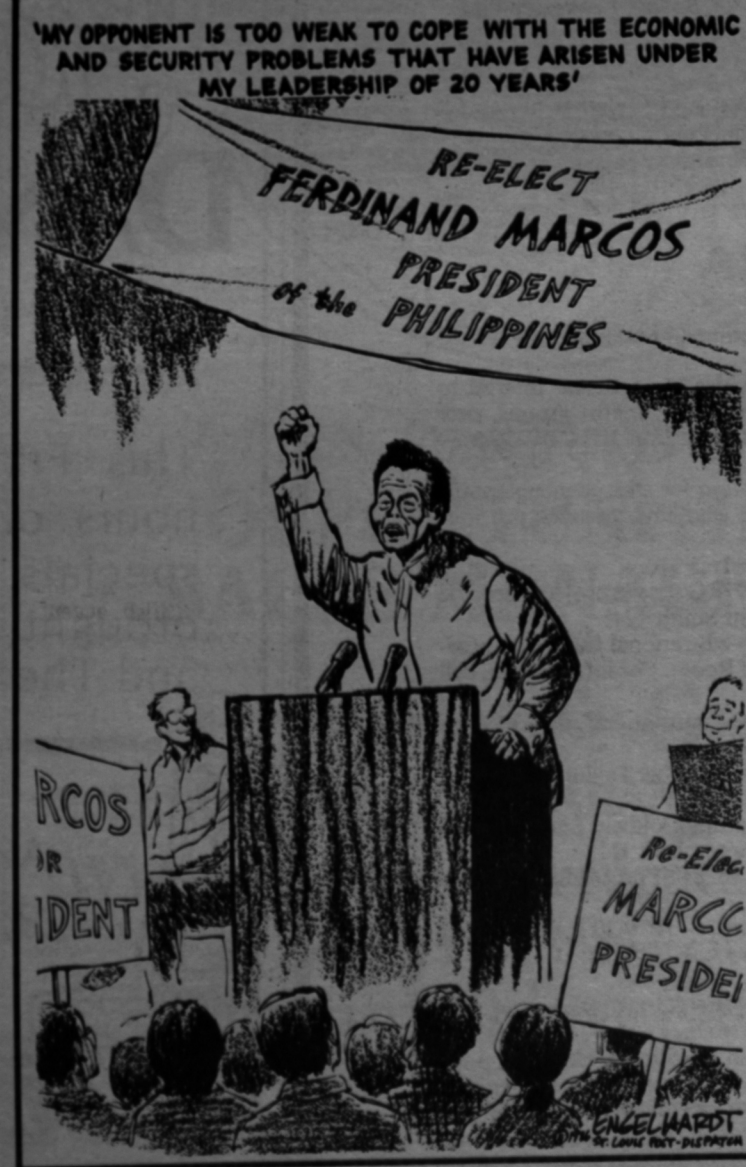
fascination the media have with letting us in on the horror of death first hand.

This is sensationalist. This is intolerable.

This is human nature? Stop the world. I want to get off. If you can convince me that this is human nature, then I'll stop now because I don't want to be in this race.

George Lucas? Stephen Spielberg? Who made us insensitive to these things? Why was I able to look on and see the fiery burst and the streaming smoke without turning away? It's simple. I've seen it all before. On TV. In the movies. Comic books, cartoons, Time magazine. And there was Peter Jennings looking at me with hardly a trace of emotion, speaking quickly so he could say what was to be said before another network did. And then there's the matter of that camera, the one that caught, entirely by accident, the anguished faces of McAuliffe's parents. Why did that person continue filming? Beyond that, who ordered that the clip be shown on the news? How could Jennings keep a steady voice and still sleep at night after that?

I looked around the room as the 14 people watched with rapt attention. Or should I say 12. The cleaning woman turned away, more sensitive than to be able to watch the faces of Mr. and Mrs. McAuliffe change from pride to shocked denial again and again on the boob tube. And I was looking at her, and all around me. On the television screen, Mrs. McAuliffe's lower lip quivered as she looked away and looked back again, not wanting to see this terror yet not being able to turn away, perhaps praying that somehow all will change, perhaps too struck to think anything. Mr. McAuliffe's brow furrowed and his face hardened against his emo-



Letter

No Majority

To the Editor:
It is a tragedy to see your criticism of the Student Assembly's vote to take no issue on the subject of divestment (Editorial, Jan. 28). In your own words, the Student Assembly "should serve as a voice of the students." If the Student Assembly should take a side, it would imply that this side represents the opinions of the students.

However, the student body hardly holds a consensus of opinion. A sizable segment of the student population does not agree that divestment is helpful in ending apartheid. And of the students that support divestment, one wonders how many understand the issues involved in apartheid and divestment. Can these students list the Sullivan Principles and their objectives? Can they name the leading figures in South Africa, other than Desmond Tutu? My point here is that the average student may know little of divestment or may feel divestment is not the correct path to follow. In any case, a majority opinion does not exist. It would be wrong for the Student Assembly to put forth the view that one does.

G. McFaddin '89