

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
23-24 July 2011

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

THE SPACE SHUTTLE PROGRAM: A METAPHOR FOR AMERICA?

On 8 July 2011, the US space shuttle program came to an end. The shuttle *Atlantis* was the last operational shuttle to be launched into space; its mission was to resupply the International Space Station (ISS). The space shuttle program lasted for 30 years and involved 135 launches and two tragic disasters (the 1986 Challenger disintegration in mid-air shortly after lift-off and the 2003 Columbia disaster, which broke apart over Texas during re-entry). *Atlantis* will now join *Endeavor*, *Discovery* and the prototype *Enterprise* (after the TV series Star Trek) in various museums across the nation. As a result of the shuttle's end, billions of dollars in the US budget will be saved, albeit with a loss of a significant number of jobs along Florida's "Space Coast", along with others in Houston and other parts of the country. Now the ISS will rely on Russian, European and Japanese rockets for its supplies, and as *The Economist* laments, "the nation that won the space race by putting Neil Armstrong's footprint on the moon with Apollo 11, will be without the ability to send astronauts into space. Any that do [go into space] will [need to] rent seats on the Russian rockets." What does all this mean for America? Is it a symbol for America's decline or is it not that significant? Several thoughts.

- First, a bit of history: The space shuttle program was actually a compromise. The original program called for building a shuttle fleet and an orbiting space station simultaneously. However, President Nixon was unwilling to fund both, so the shuttle program began without any space station. The subsequent development of the ISS was largely due to the Russians. The original shuttle design was such that its cargo bay could hold spy satellites. Therefore, it was a multipurpose ship that could carry all of America's government and commercial cargoes into space. Initially, the shuttles were designed to save money because of their reusability. But a fully reusable spacecraft proved too hard to build, which is why the shuttles carry a huge external fuel tank that is jettisoned into the ocean after each flight. The shuttle's engines and the tiles that protect it from the heat of re-entry proved expensive to maintain, and dividing the work among various contractors added to the costs. Estimates for the cost of each shot into space vary, but the costs have been between \$450 million to \$1.5 billion for each shuttle launched into space! As *The Economist* demonstrates, "Russia's expendable Proton rockets (which are almost unchanged since the 1960s and which have a similar cargo capacity to the shuttle) are thought to cost around a quarter of NASA's figure for the shuttle." One of the crowning successes of the shuttle program was the 1993 in-orbit repair of the Hubble Space Telescope. With its 135 launches, the shuttle program became routine and public interest in the program actually waned.
- Second, what of the future? Former President Bush proposed the Constellation Project, which was designed to return America to moon exploration and eventually trips to Mars.

President Obama, upon entering office, cancelled the Project. Instead, President Obama has outlined his plans for a space program, which has as its signature element the task of ferrying people and equipment into low-Earth orbit missions using the private sector. For example, later this year two spacecraft, one designed by Orbital Sciences, a Virginia-based firm, and another by SpaceX, a California company run by Elon Musk, an internet entrepreneur, will make cargo runs to the ISS. So, without the burden of financing regular missions or the space shuttle, presumably NASA now will spend billions of dollars developing new engines, propellants, life-support systems, etc. NASA's plans include the Space Launch System, built partly from recycled shuttle parts, and built to lift astronauts and cargo into higher Earth orbits and even further missions to Mars, asteroids, etc. Nonetheless, Obama's comments have been vague and void of much detail. With the current budget and debt woes of the US, the brutal facts are that America is definitely in decline when it comes to space technology or leadership in such technology. *The Economist* correctly observes that "the space race was an outgrowth of the development of ballistic-missile technology, it was fueled by cold-war paranoia about Soviet science and it happened at a time when America's leaders were willing to spend huge amounts on propaganda." Furthermore, future manned missions, to say Mars, would be fraught with incredible dangers—it would take six months, not three days as it does to the moon. Further, astronauts would be bombarded with cosmic radiation and risk being baked by unpredictable solar flares. Communication between mission control and Mars would take much longer than the moon, making dealing with emergencies problematic. But non-human space missions will presumably continue. For example, robotics can alleviate some of these above-mentioned dangers, as recent robotic missions to Mars and Titan, one of Saturn's moons, have shown. And the use of satellites will not diminish, as the enormous number of satellites currently orbiting Earth demonstrates—satellites for farming, military surveillance, telecoms, weather monitoring, TV broadcasts, etc. But it does seem that the heroic phase of space exploration is over, unless China and/or India take over the leadership. In 2003, China became the third nation to put a human into orbit atop a rocket it had developed itself. Since then, China has launched five more "taikonauts," as the Chinese call their astronauts, have been sent into orbit. China is also launching more satellites to attract business for its Long March rockets and, later this year, it plans to build a very small space station of its own. It also plans a mission to the moon in 2017, with 2025 being a planned manned mission to the moon. Such opportunities and plans for America are distant, if not impossible, for America's future in space is uncertain; weighed down by foreign adventures against terrorism and burdened by a crushing debt, it is difficult to see America ever again playing the leading role in space exploration. So, in a sense, the end of the space shuttle program is a metaphor for where America is—nostalgic about its past heroic achievements but presently in decline. It simply cannot afford manned space travel any longer and it is ceding such leadership to Russia and perhaps even to China. It is a most interesting and rather sad development.

See *The Economist* (2 July 2011), pp. 66-68.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

POLYGAMY: THE NEXT SEXUAL REVOLUTION?

Nearly two weeks ago, my wife and I were watching ABC evening news and an ABC investigative reporter was summarizing a piece on Michele Bachmann's husband, who runs a Christian counseling center in Minnesota. One of the goals of his center is to help counsel homosexuals who desire to change their lifestyle. The report was cynical and filled with innuendo and criticism from other professional counselors. The Christian counseling perspective was not fairly presented. Instead, the clear impression was that Bachman's husband was narrow-minded and his center was doing more harm than good. The rights and liberties of homosexuality were defended and the clear impression was that the gay lifestyle choice is ethically identical to the heterosexual choice. There is no difference! Immediately following that report, Diane Sawyer reported on a Utah polygamist named Kody Brown, who has four wives, Robyn, Christine, Meri and Janelle. From this polygamist "marriage" has come 16 children. [This family is also the focus of a reality TV show called "Sister Wives."] As Brown was interviewed, along with his four wives, he summarized his position legally as "I have a right to do this. We are not harming anyone. The state has no authority over my personal choices. We only wish to live our private lives according to our beliefs. . . ." As Peggy and I watched this report, I said to my wife, "Brown is using the identical argument that gays and lesbians have been using over the last few decades, framing sexual lifestyle choices around the precious terms so dear to America—rights, liberties and no harm done to others." Let's think about this remarkable development.

- First some background to the Brown polygamous relationship. The state of Utah is investigating Brown for the violation of its state law prohibiting polygamy. In contrast, the Browns are expected to file a lawsuit that challenges the Utah law that makes polygamy illegal. John Schwartz of the *New York Times* reports that "the lawsuit builds on a 2003 United States Supreme Court decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, which struck down state sodomy laws as unconstitutional intrusions on the 'intimate conduct' of consenting adults. It will ask the federal courts to tell states that they cannot punish polygamists for their own 'intimate conduct' so long as they are not breaking other laws, like those regarding child abuse, incest or seeking multiple marriage licenses." Brown, in a rather typical Mormon polygamist relationship, has only one civil marriage; the rest are "sister wives," not formally wedded. The Browns are members of the Apostolic United Brethren Church, a fundamentalist offshoot of the Mormon Church, which gave up polygamy in 1890 so that Utah could become a state. The Browns contend that making polygamous unions illegal violates the due process and equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment, as well as the free exercise, establishment, free speech and freedom of association clauses of the First Amendment. When the *Lawrence* case was handed down, Justice Antonin Scalia noted, rather prophetically, that eventually legitimizing same-sex marriage would lead to legitimizing polygamous unions as well. He argued that there was a threat to "[state laws] based on moral choices against bigamy, same-sex marriage, adult incest, prostitution . . . , adultery, fornication, bestiality and obscenity."
- Second, the logic of the Brown case based on the 2003 *Lawrence* decision makes legal sense. On what basis will society declare that polygamous arrangements are any different than same-sex ones? If there is no personal harm and if there is consent, how can the courts legally deny polygamy? Framing the matter of polygamy around rights, personal liberty, autonomy and consent is brilliant for it makes the strong case that individual freedom is the

basis for polygamous choice and the state has no basis for denying that individual freedom. If society no longer has an ethical basis for human sexuality, then how can society deny bigamy or polygamy? As our culture now looks at human sexuality, it still has reservations about incest and pedophilia but there are really few other reservations culturally. So, what was once unthinkable, becomes debatable and gradually acceptable. We saw this dialectic at work with same-sex arrangements and now marriage. We will see it at work with polygamy as well. We are witnessing what occurs to a civilization that no longer has any moral or ethical foundation. *Lawrence v. Texas* legitimized personal autonomy in terms of sexual choice into law. It is logically now being used to challenge anti-polygamy laws. God is merely “giving us over” to our depravity and our debased minds as a civilization. This is a very sad day for our nation. We have fallen ethically and morally! May God have mercy on us!

See John Schwartz in the *New York Times* (12 July 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

THE BOEING CORPORATION AND THE RIGHT TO WORK

One of America’s premier corporations, Boeing, has built a second production plant in South Carolina (its other one is in Washington State) for its 787 Dreamliner airplane, creating over 1,000 jobs so far. But the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), created in 1935 by the Wagner Act, has taken exception to Boeing’s decision. The reason for NLRB action is that South Carolina is a right-to-work state. Along with 21 other states, South Carolina, as a right-to-work state, protects a worker’s right not only to join a union, but also to make the choice not to join or financially support a union. (Washington State is not a right-to-work state.) If the NLRB action is successful, Boeing will need to move its plant back to Washington. As Mark Mix, president of the National Right to Work Defense Foundation, has correctly argued, “this would represent an unprecedented act of intervention by the federal government that appears, on its face, un-American.” The Wagner Act of 1935, which created the NLRB, is often called “Labor’s Bill of Rights.” To some extent, in the context of the Depression and FDR’s New Deal, such hyperbole is understandable. Nonetheless, the NLRB was actually harmful for the American laborer for it did not protect the individual worker’s right to not join a union. In many parts of the US, NLRB actions have resulted in mandatory union membership as a condition for employment. In that sense, such regulations impinge upon the individual’s right to choose.

Mark Mix adds another dimension: “Even more dramatic is the contrast if we look at personal income growth. From 2000 to 2010, real personal incomes grew by an average of 24.3 % in the 22 right-to-work states, more than double the rate for the other 28 as a group. But the strongest indicator is the migration of young adults. In 2009, there were 20% more 25-34-year olds in right-to-work states than in 1999. In the compulsory union states, the increase was only 3.3%--barely one-sixth as much.” The rationality of the free market is showing itself.

Finally, the NLRB affects only private sector workers. However, since the 1960s, 21 states have enacted laws authorizing the collection of forced union dues from at least some state and local public employees. Mix shows that “more than a dozen additional states have granted union

officials the monopoly power to speak for all government workers whether they consent to this or not. Thus today, government workers are more than five times as likely to be unionized as private sector workers. This represents a great danger for taxpayers and consumers of government services.” The best example of this growing concern within the United States is that in 2010, an average of 59.2% of public employees in these nine worst default-risk states were unionized, 19.2 percentage points higher than the national average of 40%. All of these states (California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin) except Nevada authorize compulsory union dues and fees in the public sector.

The absurdity of the Boeing case in South Carolina, which could result in Boeing being required to move its plant back to Washington (!!!), illustrates the point that American workers in all 50 states must have full freedom as workers, including the right and freedom not to associate in the area of union membership. Fairness, equity and the true meaning of freedom are all at stake on this issue.

See Mark Mix in *Imprimis* (May/June 2011).