

OPINION

Before it acts, NASA must explore motives

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Go to NASA's Web site and you're greeted by an impressive graphic depicting the planet Mars with the words "We're Back!" screaming at you from the computer screen.

The implication is that as a result of the successful Jan. 3 landing of a new robot probe on the red planet, the space agency is back in the pink. Not yet. But it is a very good sign.

The last robot to land on Mars was Pathfinder in 1997. Two probes launched in 1999 apparently crashed upon their arrival. But not this time.

Thrilling photographs have been beamed back to Earth this past week from the probe dubbed Spirit. The pictures touched off wild celebrations among NASA scientists and engineers. But with the Feb. 1 anniversary of last year's space shuttle Columbia disaster looming, many people's emotions about spaceflight remain mixed.

President Bush apparently hopes to change that with his announcement Wednesday of new manned missions to the moon and, perhaps, Mars. Bush was expected to make a similar announcement on the Dec. 17 centennial of the Wright Brothers flight but backed down amid criticism that a return to the moon

would be of dubious scientific value. This time Bush portrayed a new moon mission as necessary preparation for one to Mars.

The president wants to take advantage of the good feelings generated by the initial success of Spirit. But it hasn't helped that the probe's planned hike to gather more data and photos has been delayed by a technical glitch.

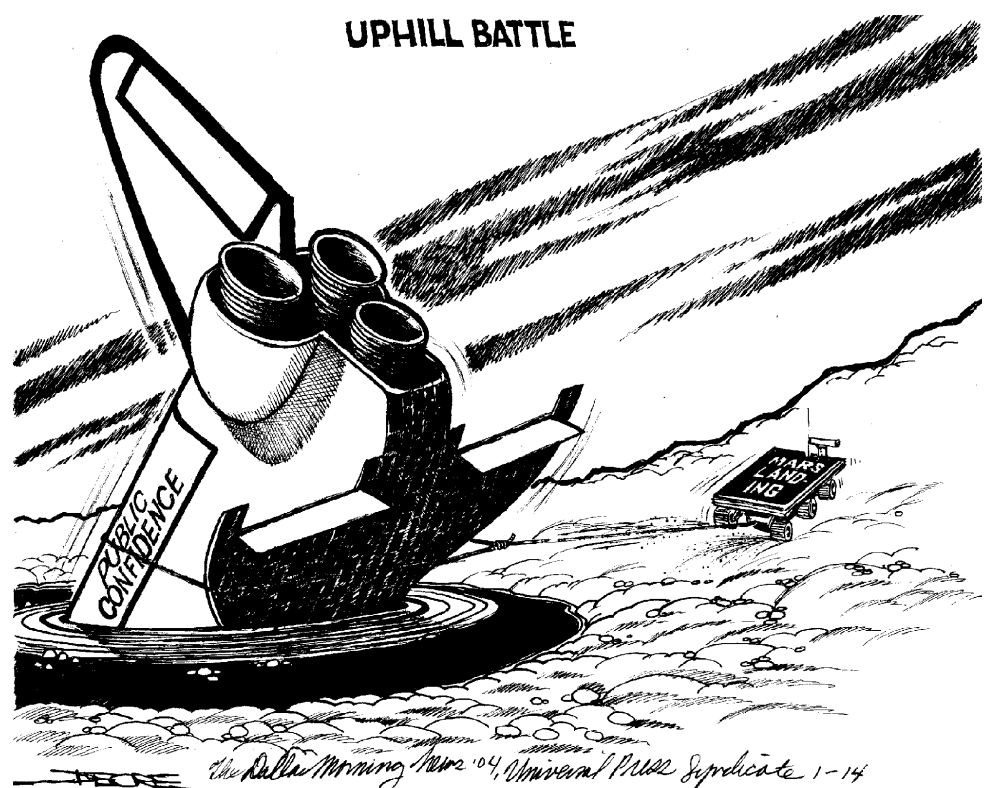
An identical probe, Opportunity, is scheduled to land Jan. 25 on Mars. Any problems Opportunity may encounter during deployment could chill a White House spaceflight announcement. But Bush will have made welcome progress if he can set a clearer goal for NASA.

Members of the board investigating the deaths of the seven Columbia astronauts noted NASA's lack of focus as a factor in its safety lapses. The space agency operates best when it has a specific goal, like President Kennedy's directive to reach the moon within 10 years. NASA did it in eight.

The first President Bush proposed a mission to Mars in 1989, but lost interest after NASA projected the cost at \$400 billion. Instead, NASA's manned missions have mostly consisted of shuttle trips to haul construction materials and equipment to the International Space Station.

The cost of a Mars mission still matters, especially when the nation's chil-

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dren are already faced with paying the debts of an administration that has decided deficit spending suits it just fine.

If the president is serious about going to Mars, he needs to make the case to the American people. It can be done. But not if he appeals solely to the romantic notion that human spaceflight must be the fulfillment of starry-eyed dreams.

NASA has outlined an ambitious program for the exploration of Mars through

2014, but it does not include manned flights. In the final missions robots would gather soil and other samples and store them for a return flight to Earth.

More than imagination is needed to have astronauts replace those machines. It will take a realistic plan that results from an overdue national discussion of exactly how the science that could come from such a project would make its expense worthwhile.

A fair probe would attack Liberty misinformation

BY THOMAS MOORER

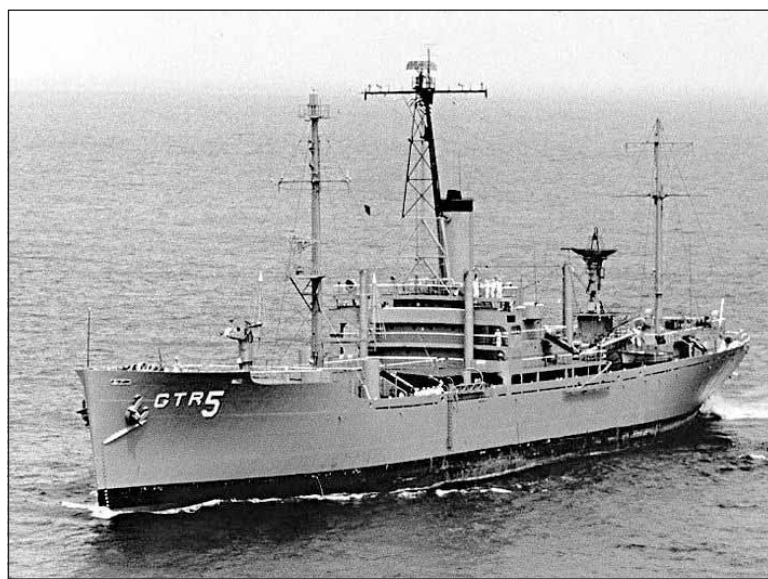
WHILE state department officials and historians converge on Washington this week to discuss the 1967 war in the Middle East, I am compelled to speak out about one of U.S. history's most shocking cover-ups.

On June 8, 1967, Israel attacked our proud naval ship — the USS Liberty — killing 34 American servicemen and wounding 172. Those men were then betrayed and left to die by our own government.

U.S. military rescue aircraft were recalled — not once, but twice — through direct intervention by the Johnson administration. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's cancellation of the Navy's attempt to rescue the Liberty, which I confirmed from the commanders of the aircraft carriers America and Saratoga, was the most disgraceful act I witnessed in my entire military career.

To add insult to injury, Congress, to this day, has failed to hold formal hearings on Israel's attack on this American ship. No official investigation of the attack has ever permitted the testimony of the surviving crewmembers.

A 1967 investigation by the Navy, upon which all other reports are based, has now been fully discredited as a cover-up by its senior attorney. Capt. Ward



Courtesy of U.S. Navy

The USS Liberty is shown under way in the Chesapeake Bay on July 29, 1967, seven weeks after she was damaged by Israeli air and surface forces while operating off the Sinai Peninsula during the Six-Day War. Before leaving the Mediterranean Ocean, she was repaired at Malta.

Boston, in a sworn affidavit, recently revealed that the court was ordered by the White House to cover up the incident and find that Israel's attack was "a case of mistaken identity."

Some distinguished colleagues and I formed an independent commission to investigate the attack on the USS Liberty. After an exhaustive review of previous reports, naval and other military records, including eyewitness testimony from survivors, we recent-

ly presented our findings on Capitol Hill. They include:

■ Israeli reconnaissance aircraft closely studied the Liberty during an eight-hour period prior to the attack, one flying within 200 feet of the ship. Weather reports confirm the day was clear with unlimited visibility. The Liberty was a clearly marked American ship in international waters, flying an American flag and carrying large U.S. Navy hull letters and numbers on its bow.

■ Despite claims by Israeli intelligence that they confused the Liberty with a small Egyptian transport, the Liberty was conspicuously different from any vessel in the Egyptian navy. It was the most sophisticated intelligence ship in the world in 1967. With its massive radio antennae, including a large satellite dish, it looked like a large lobster and was one of the most easily identifiable ships afloat.

■ Israel attempted to prevent the Liberty's radio operators from sending a call for help by jamming American emergency radio channels.

■ Israeli torpedo boats machine-gunned lifeboats at close range that had been lowered to rescue the most-seriously wounded.

As a result, our commission concluded that:

■ There is compelling evidence that Israel's attack was a deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew.

■ In attacking the USS Liberty, Israel committed acts of murder against U.S. servicemen and an act of war against the United States.

■ The White House knowingly covered up the facts of this attack from the American people.

■ The truth continues to be concealed to the present day in what can only be termed a national disgrace.

What was Israel's motive in launching this attack? Congress

must address this question with full cooperation from the National Security Agency, the CIA and the military intelligence services.

The men of the USS Liberty represented the United States. They were attacked for two hours, causing 70 percent American casualties and the eventual loss of our best intelligence ship.

These sailors and Marines were entitled to our best defense. We gave them no defense.

Did our government put Israel's interests ahead of our own? If so, why? Does our government continue to subordinate American interests to Israeli interests? These are important questions that should be investigated by an independent, fully empowered commission of the American government.

The American people deserve to know the truth about this attack. We must finally shed some light on one of the blackest pages in American naval history. It is a duty we owe not only to the brave men of the USS Liberty, but to every man and woman who is asked to wear the uniform of the United States.

Adm. Thomas Moorer was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1970 to 1974 and once was 7th Fleet commander. He is joined in the Independent Commission of Inquiry by Rear Adm. Merlin Staring, former judge advocate general of the Navy; and Ambassador James Akins, former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Gen. Ray Davis, former assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, was a member of the commission at the time of his death in September. For complete findings and the sworn affidavit of Capt. Ward Boston, go to www.usliberty.org.