“It’s lonely out in space”: The desperate astronaut and the unreality of official American life

David Walsh
12 February 2007

The unhappy incident involving astronaut Lisa Nowak is the latest episode in American life on which official sources shed virtually no light.

Nowak, who flew on the space shuttle *Discovery* in July 2006, allegedly drove the 900 miles from her home in the Houston, Texas area to Orlando, Florida to confront a woman she considered a rival for the affections of divorced fellow astronaut William Oefelein. Police claim that Nowak pepper-sprayed the other woman, Air Force Capt. Colleen Shipman, through a crack in the latter’s car window, before Shipman was able to drive away.

Nowak, 43, has been charged with battery and attempted kidnapping and murder. A steel mallet, a knife, rubber tubing and a BB gun, among other items, were allegedly found in her car. At the time of the confrontation, police say, Nowak was wearing a wig and a trench coat.

Her lawyer, Donald Lykkebak, sharply criticized the attempted murder charge. “What we have is a desperate woman who wanted to have a conversation with another woman. She didn’t shoot her, didn’t stab her, didn’t do anything except want to have a talk.”

Nowak has been released on bail and returned to Houston on a commercial flight, accompanied by chief astronaut Steven Lindsey. Her teenage son and five-year-old twin daughters meanwhile are staying with her recently estranged husband, Richard Nowak, who works for a NASA contractor. Nowak is reportedly the first active-duty astronaut to be accused of a felony in the 50-year history of the American astronaut corps, which presently numbers 135.

This is obviously a disturbing incident. Nowak suffered some kind of an emotional breakdown. A simple glance at two photographs—one of her at the time of her shuttle flight only last summer, smiling and looking quite radiant, and a second, the police mug shot, of a distraught and disoriented woman, who also appears to have aged markedly—points to a process of mental deterioration, temporary or otherwise. The images seem of two different people.

The media treatment has varied, depending on the outlet. The television cable news networks hungrily grabbed hold of the story, always eager to attract viewers (and advertising dollars) on the basis of a crudely sensationalized approach to life. The snickering about Nowak’s predicament was also aimed, as always, at encouraging every bit of prurience in the population. Moreover, there is the not insignificant desire to distract attention from the ruinous war in Iraq and the unwillingness of the “opposition party” to do anything about it. (The cable networks have more or less dropped the story, at least temporarily, to devote themselves fully to the unhappy fate of Anna Nicole Smith.)

Understandably, Nowak’s family, friends and her fellow astronauts expressed shock and astonishment. NASA officials stated that there was “no indication of concern with Lisa” and “We were all taken by surprise.” One has no idea how genuinely concerned administrators of the space program are with the mental states of their astronauts, or how intimate their concerns *ought* to be. These are adults, after all, each of whom has been screened and re-screened. Nowak had an impeccable record: high school valedictorian, graduate of the Naval Academy, test pilot, an astronaut since 1998 and a mother of three.

Commentators have noted that Nowak’s flight in July, during which she operated a robotic arm and received praise for her work, was probably her one and only chance at space travel. *Time* magazine notes that “too many astronauts are queuing up for too few flights aboard shuttles that will be mothballed in 2010.” In fact, even before her flight, she told reporters, according to the *New York Times*, “There’s a good chance I won’t fly again.... They don’t need me to do another flight.”

Various pressures are clearly identifiable in Nowak’s situation. “Postflight letdown” is one, the reality of a mundane existence on earth after the extraordinary experience of traveling in space.

The Associated Press (AP) noted, “Buzz Aldrin, the second man to step on the moon, became depressed and had problems with alcohol after returning to Earth. Nowak ‘had to be somehow asking the question “What do I do next?”,’ Aldrin said Thursday. He said there is no good system to support astronauts after their spaceflight days are over: ‘Nobody is helping them readjust. It’s hard for NASA to take on that responsibility.’”

Time’s article observed: “Astronaut Dave Scott, commander of Apollo 15, recalls coming back from the moon and later attending a neighborhood barbecue held in his honor. The discordance between the lunar surface he had recently camped on and the small-bore world he returned to left him dazed.”

Some of the more sensitive comments have been offered by Dr. Jon Clark, a former NASA physician who lost his wife, a friend of Nowak’s, in the 2003 *Columbia* shuttle disaster. Nowak spent 12 to 14 hours a day “after Laurel Clark’s death,” writes the *Houston Chronicle*, “consoling her friend’s young son and keeping the survivors’ lives together.”

Clark says, “She really is a wonderful person—she’s a person of pure goodness. It’s sad, what’s happened.”

In another interview, with the AP, Clark noted that “there can be extra pressure on NASA’s female astronauts—and the men, like himself, who marry them. ‘They made more sacrifices than the “Right Stuff” guys,’ he said, comparing women astronauts to the original all-male astronaut corps. ‘They have to balance two careers—to be a mom and wife and an astronaut.... You don’t come home at night, like most of the male astronauts, and have everything ready for you.’”

One would assume that the official astronaut image, unfailingly courageous, a role model for young people, patriotic and heroic, must be a strain in and of itself. Along these lines, Dr. Patricia Santy, a former NASA psychiatrist, told the press, “I really believe that NASA goes

© World Socialist Web Site

overboard in promoting how heroic and super all these people are."

Finally, of course, Elton John and Bernie Taupin may well have been right, "It's lonely out in space / On such a timeless flight."

In general, the comments in the media, and the small samplings of popular opinion that have made their way into the media, have fallen into two categories: on the one hand, the views of people who know Nowak well, or can empathize with her, and who recognize, without condoning her apparently mad and desperate act, that any human being can succumb to pressure under certain conditions; and, on the other, the stereotyped, rigid opinions of columnists and individuals who respond as though life could be neatly summed up by a few narrow and self-righteous maxims, none of which would interfere with the ruling elite having its way on every front.

The *New York Times* editorial of February 8 ("The Tragedy of Lisa Nowak") falls squarely into the second category. It first argues that the charge of attempted murder against Nowak is not just "a tragedy for the astronaut and her family," it deals a blow to "the cherished image of astronauts as superior individuals who can cope with stresses that might crumple the rest of us." An image cherished by whom? And for what purpose?

Like a number of other media commentators, the *Times* editors seem surprised to learn that "astronauts are human, subject to the same marital strains and mental aberrations that afflict more ordinary mortals." This is not news, the Nowak case has simply exploded a debilitating myth and a great deal of pretense.

The editorial proceeds piously, "The space agency may need to revise its procedures for screening the psychological health of astronauts—particularly those who might embark on long space trips. The agency is taking precisely the right action in beginning reviews of its screening procedures, from the time of application into the retirement years."

One can only wish NASA good luck, in screening out any possibility of extreme human emotion and personal collapse.

As the *Times* piece demonstrates, when the authorized image of reality is shattered, the American media and powers that be are thrown into confusion. So many aspects of US public life are carefully stage-managed and calculated, from election campaigns and major party conventions to film premieres and entertainment award programs, to ensure that no hint of life's more troubling aspects will appear.

The brittleness and fragility of the existing social and political relations in the US is such that not only can the latter not tolerate the slightest direct questioning (hence the exclusion from the mainstream of all political views, even the most timid, that oppose the establishment-sanctioned ones), all signs of the contradictoriness and complexity of the human condition are generally banned. Somehow or other a recognition of the messiness of human affairs, some sign of life *as it is actually lived* by broad layers of the population, might give people ideas!

As a result, the American political, media and entertainment world has been narrowed, deadened, almost embalmed, to a point at which its connection to a recognizable, external reality is tenuous.

Still, as Galileo is supposed to have whispered, "And yet it moves." Life goes on in America. It would be the greatest mistake for anyone to identify the corpselike going-through-the-motions in Washington and elsewhere with the reality of American life. Increasingly, in every sphere—economic, political and moral—parallel universes exist.

The humane remarks made by Dr. Clark are not isolated. Friends and co-workers, and some NASA officials, have responded with a certain degree of sensitivity. It may be that if Nowak were not a respectable, well-educated, middle class mother of three, the commentary would not be so sympathetic, one doesn't know, nonetheless at some point the pompous and brutal voice of the American establishment will find itself contradicted, interrupted and even silenced.

Houston Chronicle interviewed a number of people in Clear Lake, Texas, Nowak's hometown (and once also home to Andrea Yates, who drowned her five children in 2001). A few responded in the predictable manner, expressing their shock at the woman who seemed so upstanding and such a fine role model.

Others reacted more spontaneously, more humanly. Deborah Hampton, for example, told the newspaper: "The thing that is most disturbing to me is the powerful emotions humans come under because of love, or lack of love, that cause people of incredible intelligence to do the wildest things. There have been several cases in the news, a woman running over her husband with a car, a Heisman Trophy winner [an award in college football] supposedly involved in the death of a wife. It just makes me realize that no matter how smart you are or how much education you have your emotions are such that they can just run away with the best of your senses. I can't judge because I haven't been pushed to that limit, but it is incredibly sad. It breaks my heart, for her, and for her family and for the other people involved."

Tek Rahman explained his view: "It's a very human sort of reaction, you know, it's a man and woman thing. Just because they are astronauts we assume that they will behave differently, but in reality they are human beings like you and me. It has nothing to do with one being an astronaut or a president, or whatever. It's a particular human failing, in some instances, you know, that has gone on for centuries. Empires have collapsed because of this weakness, a man has for a woman and vice versa, so I don't think being an astronaut makes it any different."

These are voices of human beings, not the perfectly coifed, perfectly dressed anchor people and reporters, "heads full of straw," that we are obliged to watch each and every day and night reading well-scripted lines whose contents fewer and fewer people believe in.

The Nowak tragedy is a not untypical episode of *amour fou* American-style—that is to say, complete with grand passion, self-delusion and weaponry; a little bit of a latter-day "Frankie and Johnnie" ("Frankie went home in a hurry / She didn't go for fun / She hurried home to get a hold of / A big forty-four gun / He's her man but he's doing her wrong")

In their dismay and pomposity, the *Times* editors and all the other officially-sponsored pundits reveal their own distance from the population and its concerns and feelings and difficulties.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site