

What's New

By Bob Park

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Friday, September 18, 2009

1. NORMAN BORLAUG: THE DEATH OF THE GREATEST AMONG US.

He died Saturday at the age of 95. Writing in the Wall Street Journal, Gregg Easterbrook described him as "the very personification of human goodness." He was that, but he was also a brilliant scientist and tireless teacher of poor farmers in distant lands. His own education began in a one- room schoolhouse in Iowa. His work in agronomy led to the Green Revolution and saved perhaps 1 billion lives. In accepting the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize, however, Borlaug warned against complacency: "we are dealing with two opposing forces, the scientific power of food production and the biologic power of human reproduction. . . Man also has acquired the means to reduce the rate of human reproduction, effectively and humanely . . . but has not yet used this potential adequately. There can be no permanent progress in the battle against hunger until food production and population control unite in a common effort."

2. MISSILE DEFENSE: OBAMA REVISES MISSILE DEFENSE STRATEGY.

The Bush plan to deal with Iran was based on the belief that long-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting Europe and the US were in the works. Long-range ballistic missiles are an awesome threat because they are stupid and cold, which makes them impossible to fool and difficult to see, except during the launch phase. But apparently our intelligence was bad. When has it been otherwise? How many missile-defense systems has the U.S. conceived, and how much did they increase our security? The National Missile Defense in Alaska, installed because of angry noises out of North Korea, was never turned on since no one believed it would work anyway. Meanwhile, the only credible defense against ballistic missiles is the threat of massive retaliation. So why would anyone attack us with ICBMs? The return address is on the package. We would know who to obliterate. Not so with terrorist attacks. The new plan is to defend against Iranian missiles of shorter range that threaten Europe and parts of Asia.

3. NASA: REVIEW OF U.S. HUMAN SPACE FLIGHT PLANS.

For those who believe it's not exploration unless there are humans on board, the summary report of the Augustine Commission, which came out last week, was not encouraging. To quote from the summary: "The committee has found two executable options that comply with the FY 2010 budget. However, neither allows for a viable exploration program. In fact the committee finds no plans compatible with the FY 2010 budget profile that would permit human exploration to continue in any meaningful way." Well, that's about as clear as you can get. Unless there is a substantial increase in budget, there will be no Constellation, no Ares, no sending humans back to the Moon anytime soon. Forget Mars.

4. ISS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM OUR INVESTMENT?

NASA has issued a 266 page report on research accomplished during the 2000- 2008 assembly phase of the ISS. Of course, assembly of the ISS has recently been completed. An appendix lists the papers resulting from this work. Most, but not all, are from the proceedings of NASA conferences, but some are from respected, peer-reviewed publications. However, I do not believe any major field of science has been significantly affected by this work, which is not so much wrong as just unimportant.

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Opinions are the author's and are not necessarily shared by the University, but they should be.