

Ignored Warnings, Lost Lives: NASA's Responsibility in the Challenger Disaster (1986)

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Process Paper

How did you choose your topic and how does it relate to the annual theme?

I want to go to space. In a space shuttle and fly. That was the dream of a little boy as he played with the toy spacecraft. That boy was me. I was fascinated by the idea of exploration and of being so far away. At the time, I didn't know that space shuttles had already been retired. However, as I grew older and learned more about its history, I learned about the Challenger disaster, a tragedy that forever changed NASA and space travel. The more I researched, the more I saw how it was not just a technical failure, but a failure of responsibility. It was a moment in history where ignored warnings led to devastating consequences. I was drawn to the personal stories of the astronauts and the public response to the disaster, which made the topic more relatable and emotionally impactful.

How did you conduct your research?

To get the information I needed, I used a mix of sources. I started by getting into NASA reports, including the Challenger Crew Report and investigation documents, to understand exactly what went wrong. I also watched Reagan's speech right after the disaster to capture the emotional response from the nation. In addition to Reagan's speech, I read speeches from John Glenn, and students following the tragedy. Furthermore, I researched how Challenger led to major changes in NASA's safety policies and influenced future missions. These sources provided a broad view of the Challenger Disaster, from the technical aspects to the human impact.

How did you create your project?

I chose to create a website because it allows me to present the technical, ethical, and historical aspects of the Challenger disaster in a clear and engaging way. A website lets me combine text, images, videos, and diagrams. The website format also allows me to incorporate key speeches and quotes, such as President Reagan's address to the nation. The most enjoyable part of creating the website was putting together the design and organizing the information in a user-friendly format, while the most challenging aspect was ensuring the website was both informative and visually compelling.

What is your historical argument?

My historical argument is that the Challenger disaster was not only a tragic technical failure but also an ethical failure. The tragedy showed how prioritizing public pressure and schedule over safety leads to consequences, and it highlighted the responsibility organizations have when lives are at stake. The disaster became a turning point in the history of space exploration, leading to major reforms in NASA's safety engineering practices. It also sparked a broader conversation about accountability in high-risk scientific fields.

In what ways is your topic significant in history?

The Challenger disaster reflects this year's National History Day theme, "Rights and Responsibilities in History." as it highlights the ethical responsibilities that come with advancing human knowledge. This disaster not only changed NASA's approach to safety and ethics but also became a case study in how institutions must uphold their responsibilities, especially when lives are at stake. When responsibility is neglected, rights can be violated, often with fatal consequences.