

SCHOLASTIC News

Challenger Tragedy Recalled

By Suzanne Freeman

The space shuttle program was only five years old when the *Challenger* exploded after takeoff on January 28, 1986. Seventeen years and four days later, the *Challenger's* older sister, *Columbia*, suffered a similar fate on reentry on February 1.

When the *Challenger* exploded, millions of Americans were watching the takeoff live on TV. The relatively new shuttle program had become almost routine after 25 successful shuttle missions. But the *Challenger* mission was special: NASA was sending its first civilian into space.

Teacher Christa McAuliffe was chosen from more than 11,000 applicants to train for the mission. She was to teach classroom lessons from space by satellite TV. Students gathered in assembly halls around the nation to watch the historic launch. Wild cheers of enthusiasm turned to stunned silence as the shuttle exploded 73 seconds after blastoff as it reached the edge of the Earth's atmosphere.

At the time of the *Challenger* tragedy, then-President Ronald Reagan was preparing to give his State of the Union speech. He postponed the speech and instead addressed the nation from

the Oval Office about the heroism of the lost astronauts and the importance of space exploration.

"There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space," Reagan said. "Nancy and I are pained to the core over the tragedy of the shuttle *Challenger*. We know we

share this pain with all of the people of our country. This is truly a national loss."

Reagan said that those on board the *Challenger* had "waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God.'"

Similarly, after the *Columbia* explosion, President George W.

Bush spoke to the nation in a televised statement.

"The cause in which they [the astronauts] died will continue," he said. "Mankind is led into the darkness beyond our world by the inspiration of discovery and the longing to understand. Our journey will go on."

NASA has suspended all future shuttle flights pending results of an investigation of the *Columbia* disaster. Meanwhile, two astronauts and a cosmonaut currently living on the International Space Shuttle are depending on future shuttle flights to bring them home.



The *Challenger* launches from Kennedy Space Center, Florida, on January 28, 1986. (NASA)