

Refute Soviet charge of Shuttle espionage

by James E. Oberg

The Soviet Union claimed that KAL-007 was on a spy mission ever since a Soviet fighter pilot was ordered to shoot the plane down, murdering 269 civilians, on Sept. 1, 1983. In mid-June, the British Defense Attaché magazine, under a "P. Q. Mann" byline, published a "detailed study" of the incident, according to the Soviet news agency TASS, concluding that this "violation of the air space of the U.S.S.R. was not all 'by chance.'" It even "pointed out that the crew of the [space shuttle] Challenger performed the role of the coordinator of the entire espionage operation." James E. Oberg, a space engineer in Houston, Texas working on the space shuttle project, sent the following "Open Letter to Free World Editors" refuting such charges.

There has recently been a media flap over the allegation that NASA's space shuttle *Challenger* was directly involved in some anti-Soviet espionage in concert with the doomed Korean airliner of flight KAL-007 last Sept. 1. The fact that this preposterous fantasy was given the slightest credence by any supposedly responsible newsmen is appalling. This seems to be yet another example of the widespread passion to rush to publish the vilest slanders as long as they are anti-American, without any attempt to verify factual plausibility with experts.

Merely checking with experts could easily have established the fact that the claims were physically impossible: The shuttle's orbit of 300 kilometers altitude, inclined 28 degrees to the equator, put it over the curvature of the Earth with regard to all locations involved in the airliner atrocity. No radio signals could possibly have been exchanged, a limitation set not by policy or practice but by natural law. Yet many leading news media sources merely mentioned "official denials" without reference to the absolute physical impossibility of the scenario. Some nitwit at NBC-TV news in New York even created a graphic illustration of the claim showing the space shuttle hovering over Alaska as the airliner relayed radio spy data.

. . . At the time the airliner was destroyed, *Challenger* was over central Africa and the astronauts were asleep. On earlier passes across the Pacific, the spacecraft was never closer than 3,800 kilometers to the doomed plane—almost twice the effective radio range.

Published claims that an earlier scenario of aircraft/satellite coordination in 1964 set the precedent for last year's exercises are also not based on reality. The satellite which

"P. Q. Mann" designated an electronic "ferret" was nothing of the sort: It was one of the "P-35" series of military meteorological observers which later evolved into the still-existent DMSP ("Defense Meteorological Support Program") series. This would have been obvious to an expert, since the 1964 satellite was in a retrograde polar orbit of the type called "sun-synchronous"—a trajectory utilized almost exclusively for optical observation satellites. This kind of orbit automatically places the satellite over the same locations at the same clock times, a characteristic which "P. Q. Mann" found—in his obvious ignorance—to be "too coincidental." Electronic eavesdropping satellites (so-called "ferrets") of that era followed distinctly different orbital paths: the Air Force version had an inclination of 82 degrees and the naval version 70 degrees. All these facts would have been almost instantly available to anyone consulting with any expert. . . . But despite the widespread media attention to this claim, not a single newsmen has published these facts.

Moscow propaganda theme

The alacrity with which this claim was picked up by the Soviet press, along with the precise way it fits into some current Moscow propaganda themes, is a sure sign that it should be regarded with considerably more skepticism than many newsmen gave it. This malignant falsification provides Moscow with further artificial justification to claim that future military shuttle missions deserve the same gruesome fate the Soviets still unwaveringly and unapologetically insist the Korean airliner so "justly" received. In my opinion, it is disgusting how eagerly any anti-American slander can be spread and trumpeted in the Western news media, with a negligence bordering on the criminal. Such a severe judgment is justified in this case, since such downright dangerous fabrications encourage violent acts against innocent men and women aboard future space shuttles.

The oft-used excuse of journalistic naiveté is wearing thin. It is harder and harder to dismiss the promulgation of such preposterous fantasies merely as the ignorant blunderings of well-meaning but scientifically illiterate writers and incompetent sensation-seeking editors. In my judgment, anyone—newsmen, researcher, or citizen—who believed even for a moment that America's Space Shuttle could be deliberately involved in any activity risking innocent lives must be sick in the head or the heart. The story was *a priori* absurd and viciously insulting.

This particular article, arguably an obviously planted piece of Soviet disinformation, may serve as a "touchstone" for the ideological loyalties of Western public figures. As already mentioned, anybody who originally gave it even a moment's credibility is, in my opinion, sick; anyone who subsequently repeats it as a legitimate theory is flaunting their ignorance and/or their intellectual enslavement to the enemies of truth and freedom.