

# The Future We Deserve, And the One We've Gotten Instead

by Carl Osgood

Feb. 18—For the past week or so, I have been immersed in *The Rocket Boys*, an engaging memoir (turned into a Hollywood movie in 1999 called *October Sky*) about life in a West Virginia coal mining town in the late 1950s, and about a group of boys growing up there, who dreamed of greater things than digging coal out of the Earth. The author, Homer Hickam, Jr., became a NASA engineer who made a career out of training astronauts for the Space Shuttle program.

This seems like an unlikely path for a boy who grew up in a West Virginia coal mining town, an area that is, today, one of the poorest areas of the country. Hickam had many obstacles to overcome to make the career that he had, not the least of which was his own father, who wanted his son to follow him into the mine where he was the superintendent.

In some ways, Homer's father reminds me of my own father, who was a hard worker, himself, and just as hard-headed, though, unfortunately, he lost a lot of time later in his life barking up the wrong tree. But I didn't become like Homer Hickam, Jr. I came of age about 20 years later, when the inspiration that drove Hickam had passed, having been taken down by the Vietnam War and the rock-drug-sex counterculture of the late 1960s.

At the age of ten, I was completely taken by the Apollo moon landings—I built models of the Saturn moon rocket and the Apollo spacecraft, and the astronauts that had flown into space were my heroes—but the Apollo program came to an end a few months after my eleventh birthday. With my father and brother, I watched the Skylab fly overhead on a summer night in 1973, and I did a high school science report on the Viking Mars lander, but by the time I was a freshman in



*Homer Hickam as a high school student, standing in front of the entry he prepared with his friends, which was the gold prize-winning exhibit at the 1960 National Science Fair.*

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high school, the inspiration I had felt at the age of ten had largely dissipated.

I had a chance to see the Space Shuttle *Columbia* in 1981, shortly after its first flight, when it passed through Oklahoma, where I was stationed in the military, aboard its 747 carrier aircraft on its way back to Cape Canaveral, and I still remember the huge crowds of excited people I was caught up in, who wanted to see it, too. The excitement of space travel remained with me, but my dreams of flying into space had long before come down to a much lower altitude.

Hickam, on the other hand, came of age at a time when the future was being force-fed to America. That

was the accomplishment of the Soviet Sputnik satellite launched in 1957. Even in Coalwood, West Virginia, the mine company town where Hickam grew up, there were people who recognized the significance of the Sputnik launch and the efforts of the team of Dr. Wernher von Braun at Cape Canaveral, Florida, to build American rockets that would match the Soviet accomplishment.

Part of the Eisenhower Administration's response was a beefing up of high school and college curricula to produce the scientists and engineers that would take the United States into space. This policy was even felt in southern West Virginia, the heart of coal country. Sputnik could be seen orbiting high overhead even from there. Until Sputnik, about the only chance kids growing up in Coalwood had to leave, was to go to college by way of a football scholarship.

With the support of his mother, and of Miss Riley, Homer's eleventh grade chemistry teacher, and eventually almost the entire town of Coalwood, Homer and his friends, constituting themselves as the Big Creek Missile Agency (BCMA), built rockets, not simply by trial and error,— though there was plenty of that,— but by studying the science of rocketry. Their rocket experiments made them locally famous and won them the gold medal at the National Science Fair in 1960. "If you have any hope of understanding what the grand and glorious future holds for all who dare seize it, you must come to see the rocket boys of Coalwood," reported the *McDowell County Banner* in August 1958. Indeed, the Rocket Boys were aiming at the future that should've been, not just for themselves, but for humanity as a whole.

## **McDowell County, Today**

What McDowell County has become, today, is the future that President Obama has given us instead, a future with no space program, no fusion economy, no health care, no education, not even running water for a good section of the population. A 2013 study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that the average life expectancy for a male born in McDowell County was 63.9 years, compared to 81.7 years in Fairfax County, Va., one of the richest counties in the United States. Southern West Virginia, today, is at the heart of the heroin epidemic that runs across the entire Appalachian region, as documented by the *New York Times* in a Jan. 19, 2016 article.

A caller to Lyndon LaRouche's Jan. 14 Fireside Chat described the situation in McDowell County vividly. Her grandfather had worked for UMWA leader John L.

Lewis (who was "Lucifer himself," to Homer Hickam, Sr.) as a union representative, and she had grown up in the county. "I mean, the schools have been closed," she said, "but not where there are many schools, and some are shut down, but where most of the schools are shut down. The parents actually rely on the schools to feed the children, because they can't even provide them with anything to eat at home. There's one hospital there, which is limited in practice, and this is a place where health care was provided by unions and companies, which are gone and the people have nothing."

"Where the people had formerly been living when the mines were open, in company shacks, people still live in these same places, as they were left, without running water, without proper sanitation, today, in 2016. We actually saw people standing in line with empty bottles, in areas where water run-off from the mountains is being collected, so they can get clean water." People commonly use outhouses because they don't have indoor plumbing and their houses have tarps for roofs. "So in this county where my family was once living, the population was 100,000, and today the population is around 20,000, and more than half of the population is living in abject poverty, and they're actually living in Hell."

McDowell County, the caller pointed out, has among the highest rates of heroin and drug addiction in the entire country, and Obama's response was to promise more drug treatment systems "so he could further manage the people's deaths," she said. The only escape many young people have is to join the military—no more rocket building—only to fight the Bush-Obama wars. "And they only come back to this Hell, where these veterans are committing suicide at alarming rates."

McDowell County has been the victim of an intentional effort to destroy the future. Of all the crimes that Obama has committed, LaRouche has been stressing in recent weeks, the shutting down of the space program was the most egregious. The space program wasn't just a science driver for the economy,— it was a vision of the future of mankind as a whole. Such endeavors inspire creativity in every child. "That's what I'm going to do some day," the inspired child says, just as I did when I was ten. The destruction of the space program denies the child that creative inspiration and denies it a future. By shutting down manned space-flight, Obama has shut down the future and turned back the clock. This is what is reflected in the destruction of McDowell County, today, where the only alternative to a drug-induced stupor is military service in the perpet-

ual wars of the post 9/11 world. Either way is Hell.

## The Future That Could Have Been

That McDowell County's future, and that of the country as a whole, looking from 1960, could have been different, was also indicated by another man who makes a brief, but significant appearance in Hickam's book. That man was Senator John F. Kennedy, then in the midst of a heated presidential nominating campaign against Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. Kennedy made a campaign stop in the town of Welch, on the same day that Hickam happened to be there shopping for a new suit to wear to the then-upcoming National Science Fair. By Hickam's account, not many people in the crowd were impressed by the promises of the Senator from Massachusetts, but Hickam, thinking only of the future, asked the future President: "What do you think the United States should do in space?" After making a joke about himself, Kennedy turned the question around: "I'll ask you, young man: What do *you* think we ought to do in space?" It turns out, Hickam writes, that he had been giving thought to that very question. He had spent many nights studying the Moon through a friend's telescope and so his answer just popped out: "We should go there and find out what it's made of and mine it just like we mine coal here in West Virginia."

It must have been exactly the sort of answer that Kennedy was looking for. "If I'm elected President," he said, "I think maybe we *will* go to the Moon. I like what this young man says. The important thing is to get the country moving again, to restore vigor and energy to the people and to the government. If going to the Moon will help us do that, then maybe that's what we should do." Kennedy, Hickam writes, "was talking about making the country great again. . . ."

Hickam, himself, never made it into space, because his path was diverted by what he thought was necessary service in Vietnam and other things he doesn't identify. He finally made it to NASA in 1981 as an engineer at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, the place where Wernher von Braun had brought his Saturn V rocket, and the Moon program, itself, to life. At



NASA/MSFC/Fred Deaton

*Students' interest in space persists. Here, university students prepare their rocket for launch at NASA's 2012-2013 Student Launch challenge near NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.*

Huntsville, Hickam worked with many of von Braun's colleagues, men and women who became his colleagues and friends. He helped train Shuttle astronauts and talked them through their science experiments. Before retiring in 1997, Hickam arranged for a piece of one of the rockets that he and his friends had built in Coalwood, to be flown on the Space Shuttle Columbia. The BCMA, he writes, had finally made it into space.

It's not clear to me whether or not Hickam really understands the implications of what he writes or of what has become of McDowell County, where a promise was made and nearly fulfilled, but then was cruelly taken away. The program that President Kennedy had initiated—perhaps including a little of the inspiration from the teenaged boy in West Virginia who had asked him about the Moon—ran on its own momentum for several more years after Kennedy was killed.

The United States, under various presidents afterwards, maintained the manned space program, but it no longer had the goal-orientation that Kennedy had given it, to drive the country, and humanity, forward in the extraterrestrial imperative that German rocket pioneer Krafft Ehricke wrote so eloquently about. President Obama finished off what was left of the manned space program not only by grounding the Space Shuttle, but also by cancelling the programs that were to replace it. Until those decisions are reversed, the McDowell County of today is the future for all of us.

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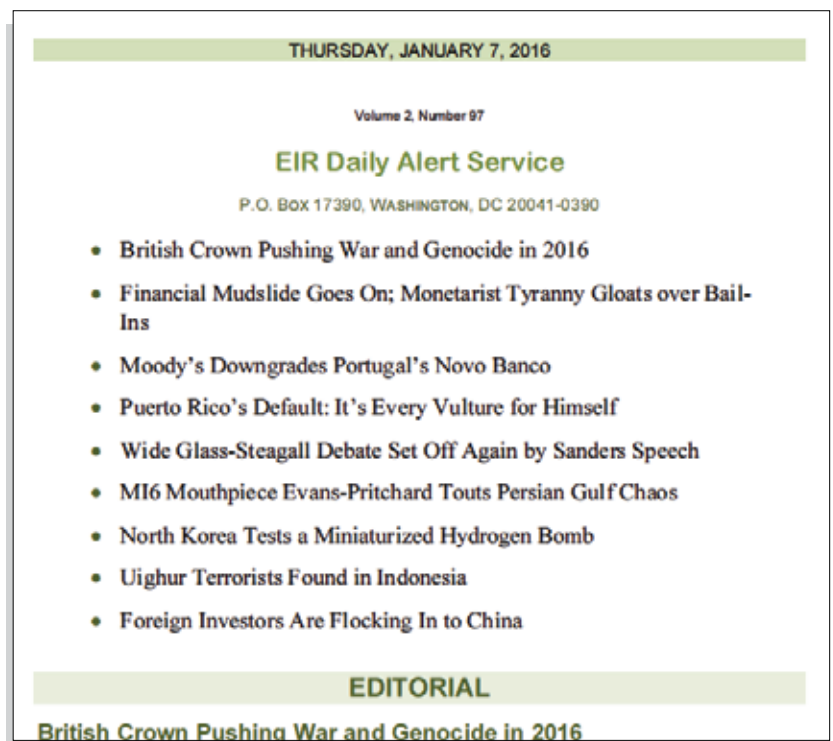
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