Technology should serve us

(Editor's note: The Tech received this open letter to President Reagan.)

Dear President Reagan:

Thank you for your consolatory speech soon after the space shuttle tragedy. I share your feeling that after such a loss we must not lose heart, but must press on. The future does belong to the brave.

Yet we must not press on blindly. Tuesday's disaster destroyed seven lives and the work of thousands of Americans. If any good is to be salvaged from this tremendous loss, it must be in the lessons we can learn from it.

President Reagan, you are a man who takes a wide, visionary outlook on the nation's future. I ask you to examine the course that you have set for us in light of the space shuttle disaster.

All day during an agonizing Tuesday, two themes kept recurring on my TV screen: the human dimension of the tragedy, and the technical dimension. The human dimension was made vivid in the persons of the teacher you called to be a part of this mission. The technical dimension was all too apparent — a ball of fire in the sky. I pondered the relationship between the human and technical aspects of what I witnessed.

As a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I think about this often — I am in the technical business.

The space shuttle stretches the limits of war technology. We learn from tragedies such as this one that man's technology, marvelous as it is, is fallible. We do not control nature, we cannot conquer nature with technology, we cannot with absolute confidence surmount any events with technology. Ultimately, if we are to survive on this earth, we must rely on our own humanity. Technology can be our servant, but only a servant, not a savior.

With this in mind I ask you to reexamine the course you have charted for our nation's future. What is the balance you would strike between a future relying on human values, and a future relying on technology?

As commander in chief, the defense of the nation is your primary responsibility. The greatest threat to our security lies in the possibility of nuclear war. Nuclear war has a technical dimension, the bombs and missiles themselves. But the underlying cause for nuclear weapons lies along a human dimension, namely, the affronts of the nations that build and possess these weapons. We know that we cannot control the human dimension of this threat; we cannot dictate the behavior of other nations. But, as the space shuttle tragedy makes clear, neither can we achieve absolute control of the technical dimension.

Yet you have charted a course for the nation which greatly emphasizes a technical solution to the fundamentally human problem of nuclear war. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) calls for technical wizardry far surpassing that of the space shuttle. On the human dimension, the Soviet Union perceives this as a threat, and they will respond as humans naturally do, with threats of their own. On the technical dimension, SDI places our fate in the hands of machinery.

As I watched replay after replay of the space shuttle flight Tuesday afternoon, I imagined fantastically complex computer programs running in tiny circuits to control invisible voltages to push giant motors to turn huge pumps to deliver tons of fuel to power enormous engines to hurl this great — and then it became dust.

And what was left were news commentators talking about the loss to the families, the impact on schoolchildren, and the future of the space program. I felt despair.

Then, in the midst of despair, you spoke. You said that we must press on, that we must continue to explore, that there will be more space flights, more civilians in space, and more teachers in space. You said that the future belongs to the brave. President Reagan, after the shuttle Challenger was gone, what remained behind was the human spirit. The lesson I learned from the space shuttle is to place faith in the human, not in the technical. Please do not place our future in the hands of machinery.

Eric Saund O

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