

Shuttle-Mir: The United States and Russia Share History's Highest Stage,
by Clay Morgan.
NASA History Series, SP-2001-4225.
Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, 2001.
208 pp. plus CD-ROM, \$93.00 (softcover).
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This official NASA history of the 1995-1998 Shuttle-Mir program, which put a series of U.S. astronauts aboard the Russian space station to gain experience for missions to the International Space station, has so much marvelous material that it seems only a curmudgeon or a chronic complainer would object to what was NOT included. And yet, from the perspective of historical accuracy, this book is a failure because of the omissions.

Readers will find mission-by-mission summaries, descriptions of each of the support teams in mission control and elsewhere, beautiful photographs with detailed explanations of each scene, extensive transcripts of interviews with dozens of key participants, and much more. The contents are impressive and extremely well presented and organized. Apparently, an equally thoughtful strategy lies behind what was left out.

Author Clay Morgan, husband of astronaut Barbara Morgan, had access to the records and the participants in the project that put a series of U.S. astronauts aboard the Russian space station to gain experience for missions to the International Space Station. He was assisted by a talented research team and by NASA's highly-regarded history office.

Sadly, the tone of the book is that of the corporate histories paid for by companies who expect to be glorified by the writers. The author even seems to give credit for the end of the cold war, as if space cooperation were the cause -- and not the result, as many believe -- of those diplomatic shifts. Astronauts and NASA public spokesmen are expected to put the best spin and the happiest face on their stories. But a book purporting to be 'history' should be held to a higher standard.

Morgan makes no mention of any mistakes NASA or Russia made in the program, and characterizes all opponents as politically-motivated partisans and ignorant cowards. He leaves out the dark side of many events he does mention. For example, he refers to a 1995 Mir space walk that was merely canceled because, he writes, one cosmonaut wished it so. He does not mention that the crew actually refused orders to do the walk, a space mutiny they were severely punished for when they returned to Moscow.

More serious omissions occur in discussing the national debate over the safety of the program. When the U.S. House of Representatives held hearings in September 1997, four witnesses testified, all giving prepared statements. The full text by program director Frank Culbertson is included in this book's companion CD, but a more critical view by NASA's own Inspector General is omitted, as is the even more skeptical testimony of the other two expert witnesses -- Marcia Smith of the Library of Congress' Congressional Research Service and myself. There was plenty of room on the CD, and the omission is consistent with the pattern of half-truth throughout the book.

Naively, the book treats the context of the US/Soviet 1945-1991 cold war as some sort of turf battle between morally equivalent street gangs. The conflict, he writes, was "a situation similar to Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' with its 'two households, both alike in dignity', yet sharing 'an ancient grudge'." While he does refer to the "free" ideas in the United States, Morgan describes Soviet communism as a political system that had in contrast merely "worked for planned economies and planned lives." It is dismaying to find this misreading in an official history project funded by a US federal agency.

The achievements of NASA's team of Shuttle-Mir workers were highly impressive, even more so when judged in the light of the mismanagement and bad Russian behavior, which are left out of this book. Genuine pride is absolutely deserved, but Morgan's over-enthusiastic claims tarnish that pride. The book is a good chronicle of the space events, an incomplete description of their context, and a poor interpreter of their historical significance.

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JimO adds: I didn't have space to include this telling quote from a NASA interview with astronaut Charles Precourt on July 12, 1998, after his third visit to the Mir space station. Precourt is a highly intelligent and thoroughly decent human being, but his view that his exploits in space can force unwilling world leaders to make peace despite themselves strikes me as a bit overblown: "So I just think that the fact that we're cooperating with so many countries, eventually perhaps on the new Space Station, it will provide the psychological impetus for politicians to force themselves to find an agreement to disputes that otherwise they wouldn't, because they'll look up there and say, 'Well, we have an investment in that, too. We have to keep this relationship going in a proper direction,' rather than doing something rash. So I think it's the right way to do business."