

That TV makes space look fun doesn't make it so

By Craig Bowron

I hope someone got a multibillion-dollar buzz watching the Mars rover roll onto that planet's bleak red surface, because it didn't do anything for me. And I didn't rush off to my local NASA recruiter when President Bush suggested we should once again consider manned space exploration. When I was in grade school I wanted to be an astronaut and I had astronaut pajamas to prove it. Now I think we should can the space program.

Oh sure, people speak warmly of space travel and living on Mars, but these are generally people who have never been in space. The space shuttle rolls to a stop and the normally stoic astronauts scramble down the stairs all grins, shaking hands, hugging people, peeing into their spacesuits. These people have been delivered out of — not torn from — space.

Go ahead, think it through. What aspects of living in a space station sound appealing? Take the USS Enterprise, for example: a lot of serious folks running around in primary colors, staring at computer screens, walking through the nameless doors of their oversized hamster maze. And in every single "Star Trek" episode it's trouble, trouble, trouble, one galactic crisis after another; it's a great adventure but a lousy life. Yes indeed, space stations are a cluster of low-rent trailer homes bolted together and rocketed into orbit, a penal colony for geeks. The only thing drawing the USS Enterprise deeper into space is Captain Kirk's unquenchable thirst for exploring planets inhabited by powerfully built blondes.

Parents who consider life in space understand immediately that the idea is stupid — really, really stupid. The Enterprise survived thermonuclear war and strange gases and boardings by militant aliens, but put 15 toddlers on board and I can guarantee you that in three hours the whole thing ping-pongs through an asteroid belt and explodes in a fireball that makes the H-bomb look like a flare-up on your grill. The joy and wild-eyed energy of kids is something NASA doesn't have a contingency plan for, because it knows that none of the stiffs on board would ever conjure up the mojo to procreate. Catatonic depression and space station life are the most effective birth control measures known to humankind.

Yeah, so some boy-band member and an unfulfilled millionaire are paying the Russians top dollar to be launched in space, but they both bought round-trip tickets. Space travel only sounds exciting if you can return to our beautiful planet Earth, which seems to be warming up at an alarming rate. I say "alarming" because — technical issues aside — the next Earth doesn't appear to be 15 miles down the turnpike, or even several hundred light years down the turnpike. We've not even identified a potential

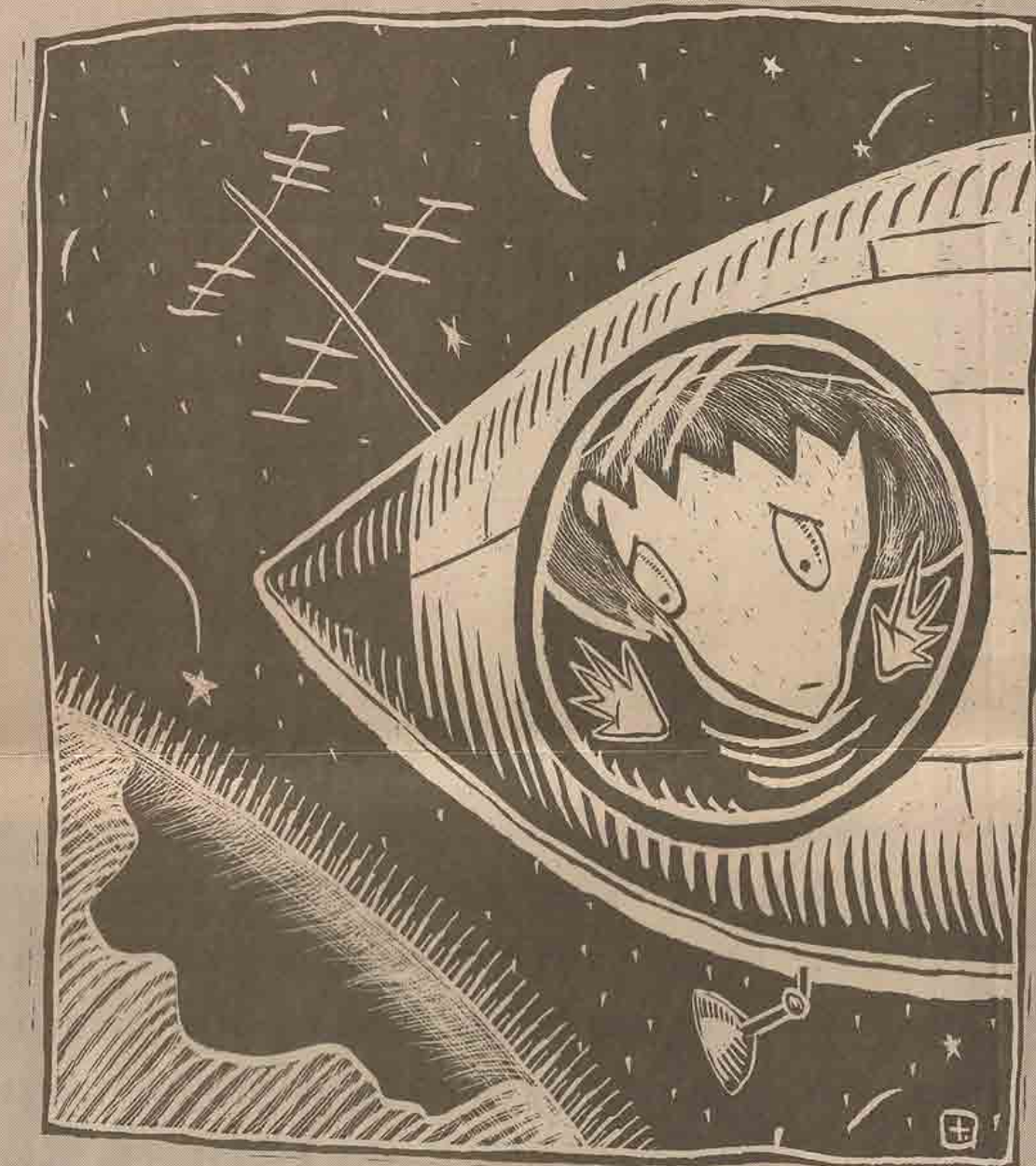


Illustration by Eddie Thomas/Star Tribune

replacement, something with food and running water and — what's that thing again, oxygen?

For the life of us I can't understand why we're spending billions of dollars a year to sort through a galaxy of pea gravel, when the diamond we're all perched upon is threatened with being steam-rolled into the asphalt of time.

When we get this little global warning riddle

ironed out, then I'd be interested in looking into the geological history of Mars, or how mice ovulate in weightlessness, or what pile of rocks happens to be spinning to our right, three galaxies down.

I say, "Dump NASA, Fix the Earth."

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