



Someone Left “Space” Out In The Rain

By Mark Stout

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While there are a number of truly awful songs in the inventory of the mind, one of the worst-ever all-timers has to be Richard Harris’ 1968 version of *MacArthur Park*. In *MacArthur Park*, Harris evokes the spirit of the true karaoke B-teamer; not nearly as bad as William Hung, but certainly not good, and perhaps more reminiscent of William Shatner’s later-arriving spoken-word version of *Rocket Man*. While *MacArthur Park* remains an interesting piece of work musically, the lyrical content is particularly, uh...*unusual*, especially the semi-famous stanza “*MacArthur Park is melting in the dark, oh the sweet green icing flowing down. Someone left the cake out in the rain. I don’t think that I can take it, ‘cause it took so long to make it, and I’ll never have the recipe again.*” So what do these bad lyrics have to do with today’s state of affairs? The last line, “I’ll never have the recipe again,” particularly brings to mind two recent events. The first is the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon walk.

There are no doubt plenty of space advocates who wonder if the U.S. still has the “recipe” to ever achieve another manned lunar landing. There are others who will claim in no uncertain terms that we still have that recipe, but this compellingly brings up the follow-on question: “why?” While there is a lot of hand-wringing about the retirement of the space shuttle, it has done remarkably little to enhance U.S. space leadership. Generally our manned space program has been constrained to providing things like tune-ups for the aged Hubble Space Telescope or more likely, a ride to the International Space Station. The ISS itself is a low-value (but not low-cost) piece of space debris in search of a meaningful mission. Even consider the moniker the *International Space Station*. As Dennis Miller used to opine, this is similar to adding *International* in front of the otherwise unsexy yet functionally descriptive *House of Pancakes*. But I digress--the slide rule generation has left the building--who, if anyone, *will be interested in* taking their places?

The second “loss of recipe” regards an essential national security topic, in this case, nuclear weapons. Several months ago the GSA reported that the manufacturing know-how for a product called Fogbank, made at the Y-12 complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee had been lost. Fogbank was made from 1975 until 1989 and is alleged to be a necessary part of the W76 nuclear weapon which rides on the Navy’s Trident II sea-launched ballistic missiles. In the case of Fogbank, it seems the recipe was literally lost (or thrown away). Recapturing that knowledge cost close to \$100 million and was no doubt a daunting challenge for today’s scientists and engineers who chances are, had to seek some gray-beard support.

Even the Russians are not immune to losing their recipe mojo. A test of their sub-launched Bulava ICBM failed again earlier this month. This is the sixth acknowledged failure in eleven launch attempts and it occurred about 28 seconds into launch. By the way, the Russians hate our missile defense programs. This is first because they work and might *one day* be capable of totally neutering their ICBMs, but also because they seem to motivate Russia to try and recapture their past-superpower glories – unfortunately and embarrassingly to demonstrate their catastrophic ineptness. The Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated he has a 90-percent plus confidence in the U.S. missile defense system. The Russians are now estimated to be spending about one-quarter of their defense budget--money they don't have--on nuclear weapon and nuclear-delivery systems. Reset, anyone?

While some are concerned about China and India as they are diligently working to create robust manned space programs, there is no way we can stop them, nor should we. For the U.S., our manned space flight program has proven to be a particularly poor investment--essentially a “stunt” program--which was always all about looking good in the shower vis-à-vis the USSR versus providing productive capabilities. While flowery manned space flight language like “to inspire current and future generations” sounded great and served a purpose in its time, future manned space exploration must have a better purpose.

Manned space flight has traditionally lacked an “in order to” imperative. This is because robotic space exploration, with satellites that don't need air, water, food, or space toilets seem to be doing the job cheaper, faster, and better. Additionally, while finding out about the universe or looking for alien life forms is no doubt fascinating--creating a large intellectual sand-box for scientists to play in--again, it should be accomplished for a purpose. You don't run diagnostics on your car, computer, or even your body for fun, you do it for a purpose, normally to make it work better. Unmanned space, however--using satellites--provides weather, communications, surveillance, and positioning, navigation, and timing. Look at GPS; unmanned space has proven itself highly valuable in making things work better; manned space has not.

Axis-of-evil states like North Korea and Iran now have space programs--they're called missiles--with North Korea already having tested nuclear weapons and Iran well on the way. So tell me again how anyone can *not* be for missile defense? It sure beats MacArthur Park melting in the dark.

MacArthur Park, penned by composer Jimmy Webb, was dramatically improved with Donna Summers' 1978 cover, resulting in a massive move forward in listenability. The Summers' version itself follows a common-to-life pattern: over time, things normally get better...but only with effort. Songs, materials, and services like missile defense *generally* improve, and sometimes the music does as well, provided you keep the recipe well within reach. In music, as in life, if you don't use it you lose it.

Mark Stout is a researcher and analyst at Air University's [National Space Studies Center](#) and sometimes posts at the blog [Songs of Space and Nuclear War](#). The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and may not reflect the views and policies of the US Air Force or the Department of Defense.