

# NASA FLIES UP, UP AND AWAY

By DARA RUBIN

Has the United States' grand tradition of sending astronauts to discover outer space reached the end of the road?

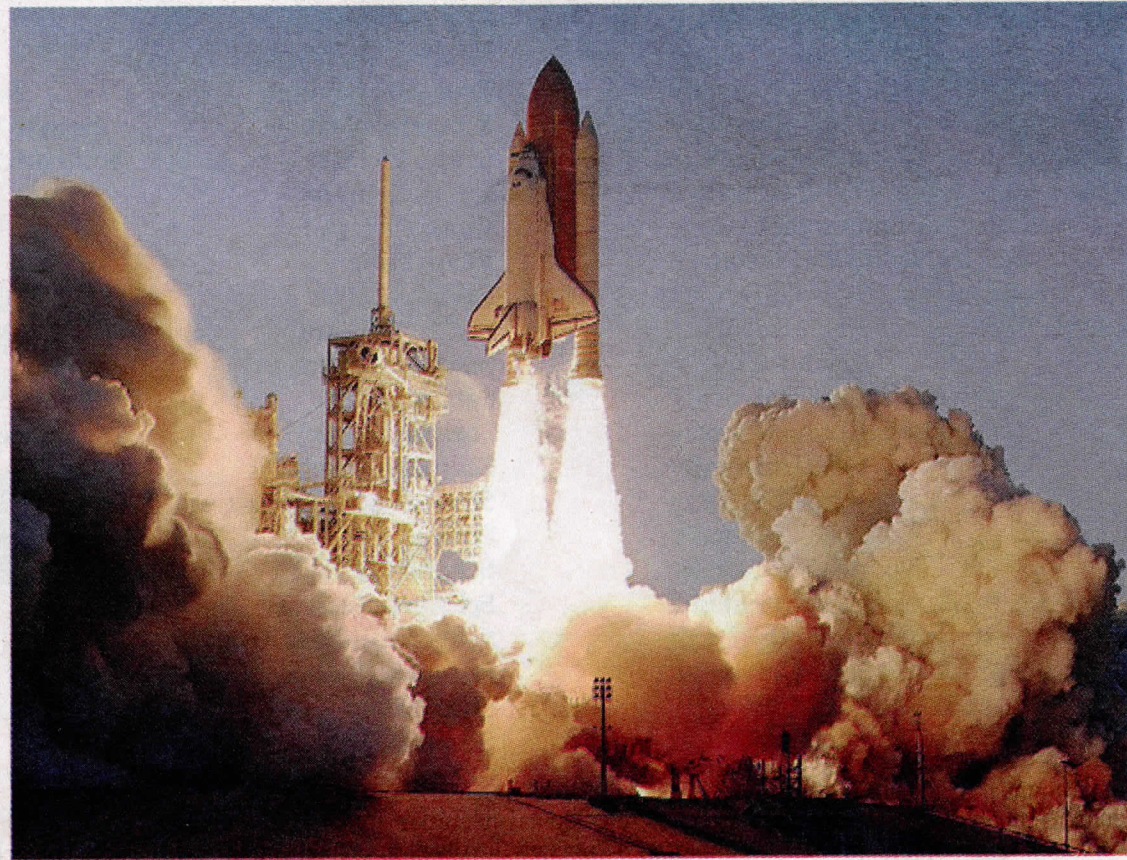
The NASA space shuttle program technically ended last July when the final shuttle, Atlantis, landed at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, and when thousands watched the Discovery space shuttle retirement as it flew to Washington, D.C., atop a NASA 747 transportation jet, but none of this means the end of sending humans into space.

"Unfortunately, the political system has taken over future space flight. It does not have the support of the president and NASA has financial constraints due to the overall economy. The priority of space flight is very different today than it was during the Apollo Program or the Space Shuttle Program," said Norman Bailis, a former NASA engineer who helped design the Portable Life Support System, in an interview with *The Masuk Free Press*.

However, the space shuttle program in Russia is still up and running and it looks like the U.S. will end up sending some of our astronauts to hitch a ride with the Russians in order to get to the International Space Station (ISS) for the next three years or so.

"I do think we are kind of hanging it out a little bit, but I'm optimistic about the future, and in the interim, we have our Russian partners. They'll get us up and down; we're paying customers, and they're good to their word," shuttle commander Christopher Ferguson told CBS's CNET.

However, if you have wanted to be an astronaut ever since you were a little kid, not to worry —



*The Atlantis — the last space shuttle — on its final journey to discover outer space*

NASA is still recruiting astronauts. It takes years to train an astronaut, so NASA must begin recruiting now if they want to send up any astronauts 10 or 15 years from now.

"For scientists, engineers and other professionals who have always dreamed of experiencing spaceflight, this is an exciting time to join the astronaut corps," said Janet Kavandi, director of flight crew operations at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

"This next class will support missions to the station and will arrive via transportation systems

now in development. They also will have the opportunity to participate in NASA's continuing exploration programs that will include missions beyond low Earth orbit."

"I think it makes sense to recruit new astronauts now. Eventually our economy will get better and the NASA program will start up again, and they will need astronauts when that happens. We're making the best out of losing NASA's shuttle program and preparing for the future," said senior Rachael McCollum.

"There will certainly be fu-

ture manned space flights and NASA will always need astronauts, but manned space flight is not a priority in today's political climate. I suspect that private enterprise will play a much larger role in space flight in the future," said Bailis.

According to Duane Ross, the head of NASA's astronaut selection office, the incoming astronauts will learn the Russian language, robotics, how to "spacewalk," and they will train for the ISS. NASA is expected to choose somewhere between nine and 15 astronauts for the class of 2013.

"Some say that our final shuttle mission will mark the end of America's 50 years of dominance in human spaceflight," said former shuttle commander Charles Bolden in a speech to the National Press Club in Washington.

"As long as it's temporary, it's an understandable setback. Space exploration is a point of pride for America, since in the '60s we beat Russia. So it's a bit of a blow to our pride that we're not the leaders anymore and we have to pass the torch, so to say, to other countries to take over for now," said junior J.J. Hutton.

"It's a bit ironic really, turning to Russia to help keep the U.S. space program alive, especially after the space race in the '60s. We went from thinking of Russia as our biggest competition to becoming dependent on them," said McCollum.

With the end of one era of space exploration, however, another may soon begin.

"NASA is designing and building the capabilities to send humans to explore the solar system, working toward a goal of landing humans on Mars," according to nasa.gov.

NASA is also further developing the Space Launch System, which, with advanced capabilities for heavy-lifting, should allow us to go farther in the solar system and explore near-Earth asteroids, Mars and its moons and beyond.

So although the space shuttle program is done in the U.S. for the time being, there are still ways to be involved in space flight and strong chances for taking off and discovering more about the world around us sometime in the future.