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REDSTONE VS. VANGUARD

Why Missile Was Delayed

(Staff Report Research Institute of America)

Space: Why we didn't get there first. If a certain indiscreet letter hadn't been written 5 1/2 years ago, U. S. could have put up the first satellite before the Soviet Sputnik. The story can now be told, since garbled versions of it have found their way into public print. Here is the true account:

The year is 1955. U. S. Intelligence warns of Soviet gains in the space-satellite field. Ike goes along with Chief Dulles' recommendation of a crash effort. Money is tapped up.

Enter service rivalry: Army pushes its Redstone missile as the most advanced vehicle. Navy argues for its Vanguard. For once, Air Force sides with Navy. (One factor in the debate: Redstone was developed by von Braun from the German V-2 rocket).

Quarles, assistant defense secretary for research and development, is determined to force a decision in favor of the Redstone. In fact, he writes to several of the men he knows that he will do so. Redstone stresses, is our only hope to be first.

Now comes the famous letter of Air Force Secretary Holt, who uses official stations to urge a contract for a first missile which he has no personal interest in. Talbot, suddenly.

This Quarles out of the Key department. He replaces Talbot. He writes to the military heads together. A reversal of the vote. No time to be swayed as Air Force Secretary at 11 a.m. He has to let the vote stand, rush off for the hearing in.

Quarles' successor, Furnas, is appointed 2 months later. He has no choice but to ride with the Vanguard program — a long shot gamble that lost.

History has confirmed the judgment of Quarles. The Redstone was the better bet. U. S. could have launched a space satellite before the Russians. (In Oct. '57, Defense Sec'y. McElroy gave Army pkg — 80 days later Redstone put up the satellite.)

Similarly Redstone could have pushed Commander Shepard into space many months earlier. (But we couldn't have orbited a man around the earth. Redstone's thrust not strong enough.)

So history would have been different if Quarles had not been pulled out at the crucial point. But the results have not been all bad — sometimes a licking teaches lessons:

In this age of vast power and impersonal forces, there's a tendency to underrate the role of men, and accident. It's so where better illustrated than in the personal story above.

Americans tend to want an answer, fast. As a result, we tend to add up the evidence quickly, jump to the obvious conclusions. Assume we had beaten the Soviets into space. This short-run gain would have produced the conclusion that we were ahead, that there was nothing to worry about.

In other words, there would have been no painful re-examination of many areas of American life. Example: If the Soviet Sputnik did no other thing, it forced the re-thinking of U. S. education. The result is a slowing of the long drift toward mediocrity in our schools — and a rediscovery of the need for excellence.