

The Space Shuttle Decision: NASAs search for a reusable space vehicle (National Aeronautics and Space Administration)

National Aeronautics and Space Administration, TA Heppenheimer

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The Space Shuttle Decision: NASAs search for a reusable space vehicle (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) National Aeronautics and Space Administration, T A Heppenheimer The Space Shuttle Decision NASA's search for a reusable space vehicle National Aeronautics and Space Administration T.A. Heppenheimer Before anyone could speak seriously of a space shuttle, there had to be a widespread awareness that such a craft would be useful and perhaps even worth building. A shuttle would necessarily find its role within an ambitious space program; and while science-fiction writers had been prophesying such wonders since the days of Jules Verne, it was another matter to present such predictions in ways that smacked of realism. After World War II, however, the time became ripe. Everyone knew of the dramatic progress in aviation, which had advanced from biplanes to jet planes in less than a quarter-century. Everyone also recalled the sudden and stunning advent of the atomic bomb. Rocketry had brought further surprises as the Germans bombarded London with long-range V-2 missiles late in the war. Then, in 1952, a group of specialists brought space flight clearly into public view. The concept of a space station took root during the 1920s, in an earlier era of technical change that focused on engines. As recently as 1885, the only important prime mover had been the reciprocating steam engine. The advent of the steam turbine yielded dramatic increases in the speed and power of both warships and ocean liners. Internal-combustion engines, powered by gasoline, led to automobiles, trucks, airships, and airplanes. Submarines powered by diesel engines showed their effectiveness during World War I. After that war, two original thinkers envisioned that another new engine, the liquid-fuel rocket, would permit aviation to advance beyond the Earth's atmosphere and allow the exploration and use of outerspace. These inventors were Robert Goddard, a physicist at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Hermann Oberth, a teacher of mathematics in a gymnasium in a German-speaking community in Romania. Goddard experimented much, wrote little, and was known primarily for his substantial number of patents. Oberth contented himself with mathematical studies and writings. His 1923 book, Die Rakete zu den Planetenraumen (The Rocket into Interplanetary Space), laid much of the foundation for the field of astronautics.



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