

THE COLD EQUATION: EJECTION

Rob Tow

Nova Lux, New Mexico, USA, Sol III

8 June 2026

A counterfactual asked coldly: had Challenger kept Columbia's early command-deck ejection seats and SR-71 pressure suits, could the two men on the flight deck have lived? The Blackbird, M-21/D-21, and X-15 escape systems show the flight conditions were survivable in principle; the local geometry, the timing, and a crew of seven with only two ejection seats turn the handle into a knife. The cold equation is that escape may have been possible only while it still looked premature, and morally available only after it was too late.

I've been thinking about the Space Shuttle, and the Challenger disaster. As an engineer, and as a question of moral philosophy.

The Challenger "ejection question" begins with an absence.

There were no ejection seats aboard Challenger on STS-51L. There were ejection seats on Columbia's first four test flights, when the crew was two men and the orbiter was still being treated, in that one respect, as a flight-test aircraft. By Challenger, the seats were gone. The crew had grown to seven. The Shuttle had been declared operational by an institution eager to make a prototype wear a public happy face.

So the question is not why they did not eject in the disaster. They could not. There was no handle, no panel, no command-deck escape path. No high-altitude suits.

The counterfactual is narrower and colder. Suppose Challenger had retained the old Columbia command-deck seats and blowout panels. Suppose the commander and pilot wore the early high-altitude launch escape suits, derived from the SR-71. Suppose the seats were live. Suppose that when pilot Mike Smith said, "Uh-oh," the phrase was not merely the last human syllable on the cockpit recorder, but a recognized structural cue. Suppose his hand moved.

Could two men have lived? Not seven. Not the crew. Two. That

limitation is not a technical footnote. It is the *moral* center of the problem.

The question is indecent if asked too quickly. It is also a machinery question. Machines do not become less cold because we prefer not to ask. But let's not answer it yet. First, let's understand the escape machinery that makes the question nontrivial. Two men survived failing SR-71 Blackbirds at higher altitude and faster trajectory than the Challenger's failure.

THE BLACKBIRD PROBLEM

The SR-71 did not fly fast by being merely powerful. It flew fast by becoming a managed thermal and aerodynamic bargain.

At Mach three, the airplane was hot. Fuel was heat sink. Titanium was not aesthetic; it was survival. The inlets were not holes for air but shock machines. They had to slow and organize supersonic flow before the engines could use it. The spike, the shock structure, the bypass doors, the inlet control system—all of it had to keep the engine fed while the aircraft moved through air that punished disorder.

An inlet unstart was therefore not a minor engine problem. It was a sudden failure of symmetry. One side of the airplane could abruptly become a different airplane. Drag, thrust, yaw, roll, pitch, and pilot workload could all change faster than dignity permitted.

The Blackbird escape system lived downstream of that reality. It was not designed for ordinary inconvenience. It was designed for the possibility that the aircraft would stop being habitable, then stop being controllable, then stop being an aircraft.

The suit was half the system.

At Blackbird altitude, an oxygen mask is not enough. Eighty thousand feet is not thin air in the human sense. It is an environment where pressure, oxygen partial pressure, blood chemistry, and consciousness

all have short deadlines. At Mach three, the air is also shocked, heated, and fast enough to turn an unprotected human body into failed material.

The David Clark USAF S1030 pressure suit used by SR-71 crews moved the pressure vessel inward. If the cockpit failed, the man remained enclosed. If the canopy departed, the suit held pressure. If the seat fired, or if the airplane broke around him, the pilot became a small, temporary spacecraft: oxygen, pressure, visor, gloves, restraints, regulator, and sequencing.

The seat was the other half. Not a rocket chair, but rather a timed survival machine. Blow the panel, then get the man out. Keep the body aligned; stabilize the seat; separate man from seat. And deploy the parachute later when the air can be used.

That background matters before Bill Weaver enters the story.

WEAVER: WHEN THE AIRPLANE STOPPED CONTAINING HIM

Bill Weaver did not make a clean, commanded ejection from an SR-71 at Mach three. That shorthand is too tidy. The airplane disintegrated around him.

On a high-Mach test flight, a right inlet unstart produced a violent departure. The Blackbird yawed and rolled. The pilot's correction was not enough, because the vehicle had moved faster than the human control loop could follow. The structure failed. Weaver was expelled from the aircraft as it ceased to be a coherent machine.

He blacked out. Agency ended. Sequencing continued.

That is the important sentence. The machine deployed and brought him down from the edge of the atmosphere. The suit held pressure. The oxygen system did its work. The automatic escape chain did enough after the pilot was no longer a pilot in any useful

sense. Weaver lived because the survival system kept operating after the airplane, and his consciousness, had stopped participating.

His reconnaissance systems officer, Jim Zwyer, died.

That is the first law of this essay: the suit can save a man from the sky, but it cannot promise to save him from the machine that is disassembling around him.

For Challenger, that distinction is important. A pressure suit could make the atmosphere survivable. It could not manufacture a clean exit through fragments, plume, structure, fire, and changing attitude. But there might have been a narrow path, if executed quickly.

M-21/D-21: GEOMETRY JOINS THE FAILURE

The second Blackbird-family story is not a repetition. It adds geometry.

The M-21 aircraft carried the D-21 reconnaissance drone on its back. That is already a dangerous sentence. One high-speed aircraft carrying another high-speed vehicle, with a planned separation at Mach-three-class speed, in a flow field with no patience for ambiguity. Fast physics.

During a launch, the drone struck the mother ship. The combined system became wreckage. Pilot Bill Park survived. Launch-control officer Ray Torick ejected but drowned.

This story matters because escape is not an airspeed number. It is a path through a changing local geometry, followed by a recovery chain. The man has to leave not just “the aircraft,” but the neighborhood of failing machinery, with debris. Then the parachute, flotation, injury state, ocean, and recovery all get a vote.

That begins to smell more like Challenger.

An SR-71 was a single aircraft, monstrous but legible. The

M-21/D-21 was a combined vehicle becoming two vehicles badly. Challenger was worse: orbiter, external tank, solid boosters, main engines, plumes, fragments, fireball, attitude change, and aerodynamic breakup. A command-deck seat would not fire into clean sky. It would fire into a local neighborhood that had become hostile in the extreme.

THE UNUSED X-15 EDGE

The X-15 escape seat belongs here because it shows what engineers designed for.

The X-15 was not an airplane in the comfortable sense. It was a rocket aircraft that passed between aerodynamic flight, ballistic flight, reaction control, heating, pressure-suit dependence, and runway like landing on a salt flat. Its ejection seat had to contemplate escape at conditions far beyond normal aircraft logic. Stabilizing wings and booms were not ornament. The seat had to become a temporary aerodynamic vehicle, keeping a pressure-suited pilot from tumbling into unrecoverable chaos until speed, altitude, and air density returned to a parachute-solvable regime. It was designed for a pilot to survive far above where Challenger failed; Mach 4, above 120,000 feet.

No X-15 pilot ever used it. That is mercy, not rebuttal.

The point is that the flight-test world had already designed for open escape from rocket-plane regimes substantially uglier than the Challenger gross numbers. Mach two and forty-six thousand feet do not automatically end the discussion. The environment was severe, but not unimaginable.

The question is not whether a suited human could ever survive being fired into that sky.

The question is whether Challenger could still have offered a path—not merely physical, but *moral*.

RETURN TO THE ABSENT SEATS

Now return to Challenger, but keep the absence visible. The seats were not there. This is not an omitted action. We contemplate a counterfactual built from removed hardware. Could the commander and pilot have survived, if they still had the seats and the suits?

The accident point sat inside the large envelope commonly associated with the early Shuttle seat-and-suit system. Challenger was roughly Mach two and roughly forty-six to forty-eight thousand feet. The early system had been described in terms that reached higher and faster than that. So the first-order numbers do not kill the case.

Challenger was a side-mounted orbiter attached to a failing tank and two live solids. The right booster had turned from propulsion into cutting torch and structural lever. The external tank was failing. The stack was entering the transition from controlled ascent to aerodynamic disassembly. A seat leaving the command deck would not merely enter the atmosphere. It would have to pass through a moving slot in a machine that was ceasing to keep its shape. What is called in aerospace “sudden unplanned in-flight disassembly”.

The panel above the seat must depart. The seat must clear the orbiter. The trajectory must miss the tail, wing, OMS pod area, tank fragments, and booster plume. The local flow must not overturn the seat before stabilization. The pilot must survive acceleration, windblast, tumble, seat separation, chute deployment, ocean impact, flotation, and recovery.

None of those requirements is individually impossible. Together they make a narrow door in a moving wall. And the door must be opened fast.

ROGERS: CORRECT, AND TOO TIDY

The Rogers Commission post-accident was right at the program scale when they critiqued the Shuttle. Ejection seats were not a Shuttle crew escape system. They did not serve the middeck. They did not serve seven people. They did not solve first-stage ascent as a crew-survival architecture. If the Shuttle was to have meaningful ascent escape, the answer had to be something like a crew module, not two command-deck seats. Something more akin to the ejection system from the B-58 Hustler, a Mach 2 bomber that had almost as harsh an envelope as the SR-71.

But the treatment of the narrow counterfactual has a tidy quality. The Commission answered the institutional question: were ejection seats an adequate Shuttle escape architecture? No.

The counterfactual question I ask is different: could two SR-71 style pressure-suited command-deck crew, on working ejection seats, with the blast panels, firing at the last usable instant before breakup closed the path, have survived?

That question is not answered by saying the system was inadequate for the crew, as the Commission did. Note that this is not conspiracy. It is category error with bureaucratic advantages. The policy answer anesthetizes the mechanical question. Rogers proved inadequacy. It did not prove impossibility.

Those are not the same.

ARMSTRONG AND ENGLE: NOT SAINTS, OPERATORS

Now put Neil Armstrong in the command seat. Or Joe Engle.

Do not make either man a marble-stated public astronaut. The point is not hero worship. The point is operational cognition under closing margins. By the very best.

Armstrong had already done this sort of decision twice in different worlds, before the Shuttle era.

Gemini VIII is the spacecraft example. After the first docking in orbit, the docked Gemini-Agena stack began to roll. Armstrong and David Scott initially suspected the Agena. They undocked. The spin worsened. The failure was in Gemini: a stuck thruster. The rotation built toward blackout. Armstrong shut down the orbital attitude system and used the reentry control system to stop the spin, burning much of the propellant needed for reentry control and forcing an early abort. That was not theatrical calm. It was diagnosis under rotation, propellant, and physiology, with the wrong first hypothesis discarded fast enough to live. His copilot blacked out under the acceleration; Armstrong was able to act under extreme pressure.

The LLRV also flown by Armstrong is the atmospheric kill-line example. A lunar landing emulator, called the “flying bedspring”, it was a pilot’s nightmare. The vehicle lost control at low altitude, and Armstrong ejected at roughly two hundred feet. The parachute had almost no time to become a parachute. The vehicle crashed and burned. Armstrong survived because he left before the wreckage ratified his decision.

Engle matters just as much, but for the Shuttle itself. He was an X-15 pilot who flew that rocket plane above fifty miles, qualifying for astronaut wings under the American standard, which already puts him in the small fraternity of men who understood winged vehicles at the edge of space. More importantly here, on STS-2 he hand-flew Columbia from orbit through reentry to landing. Contemporary summaries describe him as the only person to have manually flown the Shuttle through reentry and landing, to a glider dead-stick landing.

That makes Engle uniquely relevant. He did not merely ride the Shuttle as a spacecraft and land it as an airplane. He manually flew the transition. He knew the orbiter as a hypersonic aircraft becom-

ing a glider, with energy, heating, attitude, rates, damping, control authority, and touchdown all in one continuous problem.

Fast hands matter. Fast recognition matters more.

Put Armstrong or Engle under a live command-deck seat, in a pressure suit, with a doctrine that says “hard first-stage structural cue inside the escape envelope means eject,” and the scenario becomes physically serious. Perhaps even survivable.

“UH-OH” AS SIGNAL

The film as shown later knows the plume. The report as published, with Feynman’s acerbic input, knows the O-ring, the joint, the aft attach, the tank, the sequence. The historian knows the shape of the failure because the wreckage has already been converted into explanation.

Now. . . The cockpit had signals. A vibration. A lateral acceleration. A rate that should not be there. Maybe an instrument moving wrong. Then Mike Smith said, “Uh-oh.”

That phrase should be treated with respect. It is not drama. It is not color. It is a pilot’s compressed diagnostic at the boundary between sensation and explanation. It says: something has become wrong enough to name, but not yet wrong enough to understand.

This is an alluring trap.

A pilot can eject from a dead machine. Armstrong did. The harder question is whether a pilot can eject from a machine that has not yet confessed. Challenger may have moved from suspect to dead inside one breath. If escape was possible, the command had to come during that breath, not after it.

A right answer that arrives late is wrong. That is not rhetoric. It is control law. Machines do not reward correct answers after the control interval has closed. A diagnosis after breakup is an autopsy. An

ejection command after the path has vanished is only a late opinion.

THE MORAL ASYMMETRY

The Blackbird contrast must be kept sharp.

In an SR-71, the escape decision was mechanically and morally symmetrical. Two crew; two seats, and a system intended for both. The pilot was not choosing to abandon a cabin of unequipped people. If the aircraft was gone, both men were in the escape architecture. It could still fail one and save the other, as Weaver and Zwayer show, but the design did not create five people without handles behind two who had them.

Challenger's retained-seat counterfactual is different. If only the commander and pilot had seats, then the ejection handle is not merely a survival control. It is a command act that says: the vehicle is lost, or lost enough; we two leave; the five behind us cannot.

That is a different moral geometry.

The machine may require action before certainty. Command may require certainty before abandonment. The right moment to pull may exist only while the evidence is still cue, not proof. But pulling on cue means leaving five people who cannot follow. Waiting for proof may mean the path has closed. That is not guilt. It is not melodrama. It is geometry expressed as ethics.

An automatic system can fire on thresholds. A lone test pilot can obey a kill line. A two-crew aircraft can eject both crew under one escape logic. A commander of seven, with only two seats available, must carry moral legitimacy as well as survival.

A handle that must be pulled before proof, while five others cannot follow, is not simply an escape control. It is a *knife*.

THE NARROW ANSWER

So could two command-deck astronauts have survived if Challenger had retained the early seats and suits?

Yes, possibly, under a stack of favorable conditions high enough to make “possibly” an austere word.

The seats would have to exist. The suits would have to be worn. The panels would have to clear. The command would have to come at the first valid structural-loss cue, not after visible breakup. The orbiter would still have to provide a physical path. The seats would have to miss structure, debris, and plume. The sequence would have to complete all the way through parachute, ocean, flotation, and recovery.

The large flight conditions do not rule it out. The SR-71 and X-15 worlds show that high-speed, high-altitude escape was a real engineering domain, not fantasy. The early Shuttle hardware was not theatrical. The pressure suit was not wardrobe.

But Challenger’s local geometry was filthy, its timing was vicious, and its crew layout was morally asymmetrical. The cockpit’s knowledge, if it arrived, may have arrived almost at the edge of uselessness.

Rogers was right to reject ejection seats as Shuttle safety architecture. Rogers did not prove that two men under retained seats had zero chance.

Both facts stand. Letting either erase the other is bad engineering and worse history.

THE BLADE

The Challenger ejection counterfactual is not finally about whether Armstrong or Engle had fast enough hands. They probably did.

It is about whether any human commander could receive signal,

convert it to knowledge, convert knowledge to action, and acquire moral permission before the escape path closed.

The signal may have arrived as “Uh-oh.” The knowledge may have arrived one second later. One second may have been the difference between an escape trajectory and a debris field. After certainty, no path. Before certainty, no moral permission.

That is the cold equation of ejection. Not that escape was impossible. That would be simple. The crueler answer is that escape may have been possible only while it still looked premature, and morally available only after it was too late.

A right answer that arrives late is wrong.

In Challenger’s cockpit, the right answer may have arrived exactly that way. But there was no handle, no seats, no path out.

MY SCREAM AND LEAP

The Challenger accident occurred on January 28, 1986. In summer 1986 a friend talked me into jumping out of a perfectly good airplane at 4,000 feet over the California coast at Watsonville, with a parachute on my back and a reserve chute tucked to my belly. I still have the logbook.

I crawled out of the open door and held a wing spar, my legs pulled by the slipstream almost horizontal. I paused, then, looking down at the coast and the breaking surf, and remembered the morning I learned of the Challenger disaster in Palo Alto. I took a deep breath, opened my mouth, screamed, and let go.

I did not see the parachute open, when the static line reached its limit. My consciousness jumped forward to seeing the parafoil shape above me, holding me in the sky. I looked down, between my feet, and saw sea birds turn to the wind like lost words, and fly.

I pulled the control lines, and steered it like a wing, diving down

and into the birds.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This piece extends a frame from an earlier essay, “Cold-Eyed Rocket Man” (https://www.tauzero.com/Rob_Tow/essays/cold-eyed-rocket-man.html): Tom Godwin’s cold equation, John Aaron’s diagnostic calm under failure, and the rule that a right answer arriving late is merely another way of being wrong.

The escape-system history is drawn from the public record. Bill Weaver survived the disintegration of an SR-71 at Mach three over New Mexico in January 1966, when an inlet unstart tore the aircraft apart around him; his reconnaissance systems officer, Jim Zwyer, was killed. In the M-21/D-21 accident of July 1966, the drone struck its mother ship after launch off the California coast; the pilot, Bill Park, survived, while the launch-control officer, Ray Torick, ejected but drowned. Neil Armstrong’s two decisions under closing margins are likewise matters of record: the stuck thruster and emergency abort of Gemini VIII in March 1966, and his ejection from the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle at roughly two hundred feet in 1968. Joe Engle flew the X-15 above fifty miles to earn astronaut wings, and on STS-2 in 1981 hand-flew Columbia through atmospheric entry; he is often described as the only astronaut to have flown the Shuttle manually through that regime. The X-15 ejection seat’s design envelope, and the Rogers Commission’s findings on Shuttle crew escape, are in the published literature.

The closing image paraphrases a lyric from “Cassidy”; the words are John Perry Barlow’s, set to Bob Weir’s music for the Grateful Dead in 1972. Barlow, who went on to help found the Electronic Frontier Foundation, was a friend; he died in 2018. The seabirds are his; the leap was mine.