

NASA pioneer honored; says he regrets shuttle end (Update)

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Christopher C. Kraft speaks at the dedication ceremony naming Mission Control after him at the Johnson Space Center in Houston Thursday, April 14, 2011. Kraft, 87, was NASA's first director for human spaceflight and helped create Mission Control. He also directed the Mercury and Gemini flights and helped put men on the moon during the Apollo program. (AP Photo/NASA, James Blair)

(AP) -- One of the giants of American space exploration said Thursday he regrets the coming end of the shuttle program and believes NASA's workhorses for the past three decades could be modernized to allow them to carry the load for three more.

Christopher C. Kraft Jr., who was NASA's first flight director and helped guide U.S. space flights from the earliest days of the Mercury and Gemini programs, said rather than ending the shuttle program after a

final planned flight in June, NASA should make its shuttles more efficient and less expensive to operate so they might one day take astronauts to Mars or beyond.

"It still has the potential of carrying out a very good space program," he said of NASA. "Yet the space shuttle, which knows how to come and go from space, is going. That's a shame," said Kraft, who also helped put men on the moon with the Apollo program.

NASA honored Kraft, 87, at a ceremony Thursday at the Johnson Space Center in Houston by naming Mission Control after him. It was a fitting tribute for a man who served as the space center's director from 1972 until 1982 and who helped design Mission Control, a familiar sight during space missions with its rows of consoles and workers. It currently acts as the control rooms for the shuttle program and the international space station.

After a nearly two-hour ceremony outside the nondescript building during which Kraft entertained the crowd with anecdotes about the early days of the U.S. space program, he reflected on the end of the space shuttle program,

"I think the space shuttle is by far the greatest space ship we have ever built in this country. I think it is the safest vehicle we have ever built. It's too bad we're not taking advantage of it for the next 30 years," said Kraft, who retired with the start of shuttle flights, which began 30 years ago this week.

"It could take us not only back to the moon but probably to Mars with the right kind of design, the right kind of people and support from Johnson Space Center. It's too bad we're not going there," he said.

Only two shuttle missions, both to the space station, remain. Endeavour

is due to blast off on April 29, and Atlantis on June 28.

The shuttles are being retired in favor of interplanetary travel; the goal is to send astronauts to an asteroid and then Mars.

During the ceremony, various NASA officials and other space program pioneers, including former flight director Gene Kranz, did not specifically mention the shuttle program but talked about their hope that the work they've done in the space program will continue in the future.

"I pray that our nation will someday soon find the courage to accept the risk and challenge to finish the work we started," said Kranz, who is best known as the flight director on the Apollo 13 mission, the failed moon mission that was dramatized in the 1995 film starring Tom Hanks.

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