big enough: Five percent of Titan IV launches, that it will explode, that when we are talking about the possibility of a disaster that could kill thousands or millions of people, 5 percent odds of a disaster are pretty high odds.

The Cassini mission is like a game of Russian roulette. You put a gun to your head and pull the trigger. The chamber might be empty, you might live, but then again, you might not, especially if you do this over and over again. And Cassini is just one in a continuing series, the biggest so far, the most plutonium, if we are going to do this again and again and again, and when we have 20 such launches and 30 and 40, eventually the chamber is going to be loaded, and there is going to be a catastrophe.

□ 2330

That is not a risk we ought to be willing to take. It does not take a rocket scientist to realize that very real scientific questions have been raised and they must be answered before we permit this and other missions like it to go forward.

That is why I have invited my fellow Members of Congress to join in signing a letter to President Clinton asking him to delay the launch of Cassini, not cancel it but delay it, until a detailed, realistic, real, not propaganda, threat assessment has been conducted.

The time to reconsider this mission is now. As elected officials, we must have the courage to do so. I only pray that the President will have the courage to say, ''Stop this game of Russian roulette and let us take a hard, hard look,'' before we have a *Challenger* disaster that does not put 7 lives at risk, but 7,000, or 7,000,000, or 7 million.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from California [Ms. WOOLSEY].

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for having this special order and starting this conversation on the House floor about the Cassini mission.

Mr. Speaker, I am a strong supporter of space exploration and a strong supporter of NASA. NASA has made many exciting and valuable discoveries over the years, discoveries that have been important to all of us in one way or another, worldwide. The motto for NASA, which is supposed to be better, faster, cheaper, not risky, hazardous, and expensive, actually is not what we had hoped to have in this country. We want the better, faster, cheaper. We do not want the risky, hazardous, and expensive. The Cassini mission does not live up to this better, faster, cheaper motto, and NASA should delay and redesign the Cassini project.

Mr. Speaker, the Cassini spacecraft, which is scheduled to launch from Cape Canaveral next month, carries an unprecedented amount of plutonium, 72.3 pounds of plutonium. That poses a danger to all of us. An accident at launch or in space during a swing-by around the earth could send the craft and its plutonium-powered batteries crashing down upon us.

If an accident occurs during launch, it is possible that individuals may be exposed to radiation. If an accident occurs during the swing-by, the spacecraft may burn up during reentry, scattering over 70 pounds of plutonium throughout our atmosphere.

Some argue that the chances of such an accident are slim, as my colleague said, and that even if one did occur, the health impact from exposure would be small. Prominent scientists and safety experts have questioned both of these assumptions, however. The Challenger disaster proved that NASA can still suffer catastrophic failures. In fact, three of the 24 U.S. space missions and six of the 29 Russian missions using nuclear power met with accidents.

Given this track record, Mr. Speaker, it is understandable that notable scientists and even a former NASA safety expert, Alan Kohn, believe that risks in this mission are simply too high. Several scientists have also stated that the health impact from exposure to plutonium following an accident would be much higher than what NASA has claimed. Since plutonium is one of the most toxic substances we know of, these assertions deserve further scrutiny. We do not want to find out after an accident that these critics were right.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, alternatives do exist. An advanced solar-powered craft, while not available now, could be ready within a few years. Other alternatives are viable right now. NASA's discovery program has shown that the United States can launch a planetary probe without relying on vast amounts of plutonium, and they do not rely on it as part of their primary power source.

For example, Mr. Speaker, instead of sending one large plutonium-powered spacecraft to Mars, NASA launched the Mars Pathfinder using a fraction of the plutonium Cassini is planning to carry. Over the next 10 years, NASA is planning to send six additional spacecraft to study the red planet using electrical energy obtained through solar panel technology. Not only are these planetary probes safer, they are also much cheaper.

Considering that most discovery projects cost less than $200 million, NASA could launch several planetary probes to Saturn without using large amounts of plutonium. Even the old Voyager and Pioneer programs used much less plutonium for their deep space travel. It is just bad policy for the United States to rely on such large quantities when NASA can design missions at a lower risk and cost to the public.

I would also note that in such controversial missions, public concern must play an important role. We must also note that experts have given us disasters like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, so possibly they are making a mistake with Cassini, too.

However, NASA's predisposition to the use of plutonium as a power source has led the agency to simply reaffirm their position, rather than consider the concerns of the public. That is why I support the establishment of a neutral review panel, to provide a voice for both the public and scientific dissenters.

Finally, we cannot ignore a tear in Cassini's heat insulation that has now delayed the launch. As a result, the window of opportunity for a successful launch is now much smaller. Quite frankly, NASA does not have the luxury of running into any new problems, because the agency is now scrambling to launch Cassini in time. Because of that, this rush could create additional safety risks.

If NASA does not succeed in launching before November 4, this delay could cost taxpayers over $100 million, and the spacecraft will be required to travel 2 years longer than originally planned. In other words, for a lot more money, we will get much less data.

In a little more than 2 years another launch window will open for a mission to Saturn. NASA should postpone the planned Cassini launch in October and use the time wisely to redesign the mission so it carries a safer power source. Even if it takes longer than 2 years to make this project safer, Saturn and its moons will still be there, waiting for exploration. They have been there a long time, Mr. Speaker. A few more years for the safety of our Nation and our world and our planet will make very little difference in the long run.

Space exploration is vitally important, not only to the practical and theoretical sciences, but to humankind's very destiny. It is too important to squander the public's trust on a risky mission. Americans will support a NASA that instills hope for the future, but not fear of tragedy.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

By unanimous consent, leave of absence was granted to:

Mr. BONILLA (at the request of Mr. ARMEY), for today and the balance of the week, on account of family illness.

Mr. GONZALEZ (at the request of Mr. GEPHARDT), for today and the balance of the week, on account of medical reasons.

Ms. WOOLSEY (at the request of Mr. GEPHARDT), for today before 7:30 p.m., on account of airline delay.

SPECIAL ORDERS GRANTED

By unanimous consent, permission to address the House, following the legislative program and any special orders heretofore entered, was granted to:

(The following Members (at the request of Mr. MCNULTY) to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material:)

Mr. DAVIS of Illinois, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. GREEN, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. MARTINEZ, for 5 minutes, today.