

Nelson's book is a vehicle for space, politics

By Chris Reidy

SENTINEL WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — *Mission: An American Congressman's Voyage To Space* is a new book about Bill Nelson's close encounter with The Right Stuff.

With the help of his pastor and of former Yale classmate Bob Woodward, Nelson chronicles his 1986 flight aboard the shuttle Columbia and America's history of space flight.

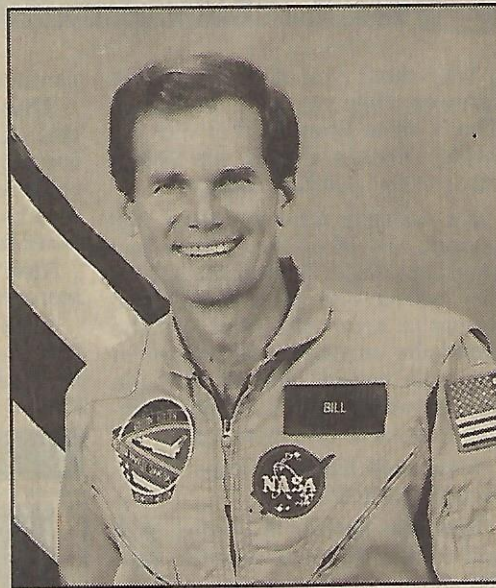
Nelson's book concentrates on the high ground, on America's achievements, on the space agency's giant leap for mankind.

But it may also represent a small step to the governor's mansion.

Nelson, a Democrat from Melbourne who is up for re-election to Congress in November, is thinking of running for governor in 1990.

His scheduled statewide book tour, which will be financed by his publisher, Orlando's Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., seems to converge with his political agenda.

A candidate would be hard pressed to devise a more appealing image than that of



PHOTO/NASA

Nelson describes his 1986 trip aboard the space shuttle Columbia in his book.

Nelson's pious astronaut.

Nelson writes: "Yury Gagarin, the first Russian cosmonaut, proudly proclaimed when he returned to Earth that he had looked for God and had not found him. I looked and could see nothing else."

Nelson insists that publication and politics are simple coincidence. He emphasizes

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that the \$25,000 advance and any royalties the book generates will be donated to charity.

"The dedication page is the basic thrust of this book," Nelson said.

The page reads, "A report to the American people and their representatives in Congress."

Said Nelson: "I felt I had an obligation to write this book. I wrote it as fast as I could."

He said later, "My hope for the book is that at a time when we are now coming out of a major space tragedy, this will give people a reason for optimism in the vision I paint for the future of space."

When he was selected for a shuttle mission as the chairman of the House space subcommittee, Nelson promised to record his experiences. He redoubled his commitment to this project when the shuttle Challenger exploded, he said.

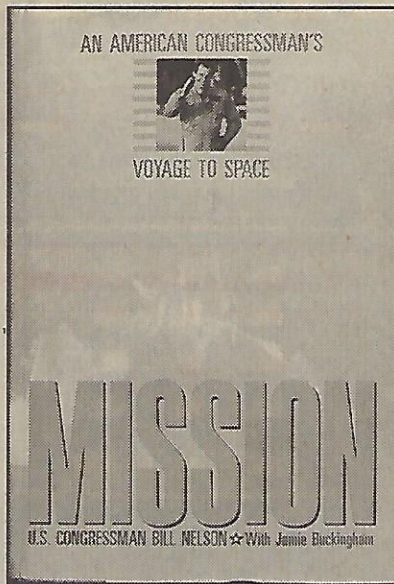
Nelson's crew trained with the Challenger astronauts, and their deaths were a personal emotional tragedy, Nelson said.

The book is divided into two parts, the first devoted to Nelson's experience as an astronaut, the second to his recommendations for the space program as space subcommittee chairman.

In the course of the book, Nelson writes that NASA should not allow any more congressmen on shuttle flights, only professional astronauts. He chides the space agency for the arrogance and sloppiness that contributed to the Challenger accident. And he waxes poetic about the crystal experiment he performed in space for cancer research.

When he learned that a similar experiment is on the manifest for the shuttle mission set for a late summer flight, Nelson said, "Literally the hair stood up all over me and the goosebumps, too."

From a literary standpoint, Nelson's book is the culmination of a long evolutionary process. During his training, he dictated into a tape recorder and typed out notes. He also was working on his local



SENTINEL PHOTO

Jamie Buckingham, a friend of Nelson's, co-wrote 'Mission.'

television show and on a series of newspaper columns for *Florida Today*.

After the Challenger exploded, Nelson was approached by his friend Woodward to write an article for *The Washington Post* about the first 73 seconds of shuttle flight.

This was the impetus, Nelson said, for starting on his book.

At the time, Nelson was being informally advised by Jamie Buckingham, who is the author of 38 books, five of which have sold more than a million copies, according to *Mission's* dust jacket. Most of these books are of a religious character.

"Jamie is my friend, my confidante and my pastor," Nelson said.

As Nelson pressed on, he became convinced that he needed the assistance of a professional writer; Buckingham signed on as Nelson's co-author.

"Jamie made my words sizzle on the page," Nelson said. "I give him the credit for this book."

Buckingham's share of the advance and royalties will be donated to Buckingham's personal foundation, Nelson said.

Attempts to reach Buckingham by telephone were unsuccessful.

Buckingham put Nelson in contact with a book agent who solicited several publishing houses. The initial response was "lukewarm," Nelson said.

Then Nelson had a bit of luck. Bruce Starling, a top political associate of former Gov. Reubin Askew, had just taken a job with Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, whose headquarters are in Nelson's congressional district.

"I've known Bill Nelson for a long time," Starling said. "I knew he was writing a book, and I told him I'd like to see the manuscript. I told him I'd get it to the right people."

Starling said HBJ has a long tradition of publishing books by politicians. Former Sen. Eugene McCarthy, D-Minn., is a member of the board, Starling said, and HBJ has recently published books by Rep. Claude Pepper, D-Miami, and Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y.

William Jovanovich, the company's president, personally edited Nelson's book outline.

A month after HBJ made Nelson a formal contract proposal, Nelson issued a statement from his congressional office condemning a hostile takeover attempt of HBJ by a foreign company.

Nelson said then: "I am outraged . . . We have a moral obligation to our children to ensure America's educational textbook publishing industry is not threatened by foreign interests."

Thanks to House Speaker Jim Wright, D-Texas, books written by congressmen have become the subject of recent controversy. Wright has been criticized for accepting unusually large royalties and for delegating a member of his staff to do some of the research and writing.

Mission, said Nelson, is more Right Stuff than Wright Stuff. The authors' shares of *Mission* will go to charity, Nelson repeated. Because *Mission* is in part a report to Congress and because Nelson was flying in his capacity as subcommittee chairman, the minimal assistance he received from his congressional staff is justified, he said.