

40th anniversary of Challenger accident

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) Families of the astronauts lost in the space shuttle Challenger accident gathered back at the launch site Thursday to mark that tragic day 40 years ago.

All seven on board were killed when Challenger broke apart following liftoff on Jan. 28, 1986.

At the Kennedy Space Center memorial ceremony, Challenger pilot Michael Smith's daughter, Alison Smith Balch, said through tears that her life forever changed that frigid morning, as did many other lives. "In that sense," she told the hundreds of mourners, "we are all part of this story."

"Every day I miss Mike," added his widow, Jane Smith-Holcott, "every day's the same."

The bitter cold weakened the O-ring seals in Challenger's right solid rocket booster, causing the shuttle to rupture 73 seconds after liftoff. A dysfunctional culture at NASA contributed to that disaster and, 17 years later, shuttle Columbia's.

Kennedy Space Center's dep-



AP PHOTO

Jane Smith-Wolcott, center, widow of Challenger pilot Michael Smith puts a flower on a memorial during NASA's Day of Remembrance for the 40th Anniversary of the Challenger tragedy at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Thursday.

uty director Kelvin Manning said those humble and painful lessons require constant vigilance "now more than ever" with rockets soaring almost every day and the next astronaut moonshot just weeks away.

Challenger's crew included

schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe, who was selected from more than 100 teachers representing every state. Two of her fellow teacher-in-space contenders — both retired now — attended the memorial.

"We were so close together,"

said Bob Veilleux, a retired astronomy high school teacher from New Hampshire, McAuliffe's home state.

Bob Foerster, a sixth-grade math and science teacher from Indiana, who was among the 10 finalists, said he's grateful that

space education blossomed after the accident and that it didn't just leave Challenger's final crew as "martyrs."

"It was a hard reality," Foerster noted at the Space Mirror Memorial at Kennedy's visitor complex.

Twenty-five names are carved into the black mirror-finished granite: the Challenger seven, the seven who perished in the Columbia disaster on Feb. 1, 2003, the three killed in the Apollo 1 fire on Jan. 27, 1967, and all those lost in plane and other on-the-job accidents.

Relatives of the fallen Columbia and Apollo crews also attended NASA's Day of Remembrance, held each year on the fourth Thursday of January. The space agency also held ceremonies at Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery and Houston's Johnson Space Center.

"You always wonder what they could have accomplished" had they lived longer, Lowell Grissom, brother of Apollo 1 commander Gus Grissom, said at Kennedy. "There was a lot of talent there."

Smith defends his Trump investigations at a House hearing

WASHINGTON (AP) Former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith defended his investigations of President Donald Trump at a congressional hearing Thursday in which he insisted that he had acted without regard to politics and had no second thoughts about the criminal charges he brought.

"No one should be above the law in our country, and the law required that he be held to account. So that is what I did," Smith said of Trump.

Smith testified behind closed doors last month but returned to the House Judiciary Committee for a public hearing that provided the prosecutor with a forum to address Congress and the country more generally about the breadth of evidence he collected during investigations that shadowed Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign and resulted in indictments. The hours-long hearing immediately split along partisan lines as Republican lawmakers sought to undermine the former Justice Department official while Democrats tried to elicit damaging testimony about Trump's conduct and accused their GOP counterparts of attempting to rewrite history.

"It was always about politics," said Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, the committee's Republican



AP PHOTO

Former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith takes an oath before the House Judiciary Committee at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday.

chairman.

"Maybe for them," retorted Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin, referring to Republicans. "But, for us, it's all about the rule of law."

The hearing was on the mind of Trump himself as he traveled back from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, with the president posting on his Truth Social account that "Deranged Jack Smith should be prosecuted for his actions" and asserting without any evidence that the prosecutor had committed perjury.

Smith told lawmakers that he stood behind his decisions as special counsel to bring charges against Trump in separate cases that accused the Republican of conspiring to overturn the 2020 presidential election

after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden and hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, after he left the White House.

"Our investigation developed proof beyond a reasonable doubt that President Trump engaged in criminal activity," Smith said. "If asked whether to prosecute a former president based on the same facts today, I would do so regardless of whether that president was a Republican or a Democrat."

Republicans and Smith spar over phone records

Republicans from the outset sought to portray Smith as an overly aggressive, hard-charging prosecutor who had to be "reined in" by higher-ups and the courts as he investigated Trump. They seized on revelations that the Smith team had subpoenaed the phone records of a group of Republican lawmakers on and around Jan. 6, 2021, the day Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol.

The records revealed the incoming and outgoing phone numbers as well as the duration of the calls but not the content of the communications, but Rep. Brandon Gill, a

Texas Republican, said the episode showed how Smith had "walked all over the Constitution."

Smith has repeatedly justified the move as necessary to document any contact that Trump or surrogates may have had with lawmakers as he was pressing them to delay the certification of his 2020 election loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

"My office didn't spy on anyone," Smith said, explaining that collecting phone records is a common prosecutorial tactic and essential in this instance to help prosecutors understand the scope of the conspiracy.

Smith describes a wide-ranging conspiracy on 2020

Under questioning, Smith described what he said was a wide-ranging conspiracy to overturn the results of the election and recounted how the Republican refused to listen to advisers who told him that the contest had in fact not been stolen.

After he was charged, Smith said, Trump tried to silence and intimidate potential witnesses against him.

Smith said one reason he felt confident in the strength of the case that prosecutors had prepared to take to trial was

the extent to which it relied on Republican supporters of Trump.

"Some of the most powerful witnesses were witnesses who, in fact, were fellow Republicans who had voted for Donald Trump, who had campaigned for him and who wanted him to win the election," Smith said.

Smith was appointed in 2022 by Biden's Justice Department to oversee investigations into Trump, who has denied any wrongdoing. Both investigations produced indictments against Trump, but the cases were abandoned by Smith and his team after Trump won back the White House because of longstanding Justice Department legal opinions that say sitting presidents cannot be indicted.

The hearing unfolded against the backdrop of an ongoing Trump administration retribution campaign targeting the investigators who scrutinized the Republican president and amid mounting alarm that the Justice Department's institutional independence is eroding under the sway of the president.

In a nod to those concerns, Smith said: "I believe that if we don't call people to account when they commit crimes in this context, it can endanger our election process, it can endanger election workers and, ultimately, our democracy."

Rep. Becca Balint, a Vermont Democrat, also asked Smith at one point if he was concerned the Trump administration would try to prosecute him.

Smith responded: "I believe they will do everything in their power to do that because they've been ordered to by the president."

GOP says Smith wanted to wreck Trump's White

House bid

Republicans, for their part, repeatedly denounced Smith, with Rep. Kevin Kiley of California accusing him of seeking "maximum litigation advantage at every turn" and "circumventing constitutional limitations to the point that you had to be reined in again and again throughout the process."

Another Republican lawmaker, Rep. Ben Cline of Virginia, challenged Smith on his team's requested court order to restrict Trump from making incendiary comments about prosecutors, potential witnesses and other people involved in the case.

Smith said the order was necessary because of

Trump's efforts to intimidate witnesses, but Cline asserted that it was meant to silence Trump in the heat of the presidential campaign.

And Jordan, the committee chairman, advanced a frequent Trump talking point that the investigation was driven by a desire to derail Trump's candidacy.

"We should never forget what took place, what they did to the guy we, the people, elected twice," Jordan said.

Smith vigorously rejected those suggestions and said the evidence placed Trump's actions squarely at the heart of a criminal conspiracy to undo the 2020 election.

"The evidence here made clear that President Trump was by a large measure the most culpable and most responsible person in this conspiracy," Smith said. "These crimes were committed for his benefit. The attack that happened at the Capitol, part of this case, does not happen without him. The other co-conspirators were doing this for his benefit."

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