

## 57. Full Throttle

Following the termination of the Space Shuttle program in 2011, the U.S. found itself unable to independently send humans to space, relying instead on Russian spacecraft for astronaut transport to the International Space Station (ISS). This situation persisted until 2020, when SpaceX made a monumental shift by successfully launching NASA astronauts to the ISS using their Falcon 9 rocket topped with a Crew Dragon capsule. The event, attended by President Trump and Vice President Pence at Cape Canaveral, was a significant milestone, marking the first time a private company had achieved human orbital spaceflight. Over ten million observers witnessed the event live, showcasing the widespread excitement for a renewed era of American space exploration.

Elon Musk's involvement was deeply personal. Beyond the public attention, Musk shared his anxious anticipation for the mission's success, portraying a moment of hopeful prayer that balanced his usual non-religious outlook. The launch not only represented SpaceX's triumph over a nearly decade-long national hiatus in manned space missions but also underscored an aggressive pursuit of innovation and efficiency within the space industry. SpaceX's completion of this mission was particularly notable against the backdrop of Boeing's struggles, as the latter had received a more substantial contract from NASA for a similar objective yet failed to achieve comparably significant milestones.

In the aftermath of the launch, SpaceX continued its ambitious activities, executing a series of unmanned satellite launches. Musk, however, remained vigilantly opposed to complacency. His management style, characterized by intense demands and personal oversight, was highlighted during a particularly rigorous work binge. This period underscored Musk's commitment to maintaining a high-performance culture within SpaceX, a philosophy that permeated his approach to leadership and project management across his enterprises.

Reflecting on this chapter of SpaceX's journey reveals a narrative of relentless ambition, innovative breakthroughs, and a stark contrast with industry norms represented by traditional entities like Boeing. The successful crewed launch acted as both a vindication of SpaceX's aggressive development strategy and a celebration of renewed American leadership in space exploration. The detailed experiences of individuals like Kiko Dontchev woven throughout the narrative further illustrated the cultural and operational distinctions that have enabled SpaceX to redefine what is achievable in the modern space industry.