

Commentary... A giant leap

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

“That’s one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.”

— Neil Armstrong,
Commander, Apollo 11

July 20 marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most remarkable moments in human history. Astronaut Neil Armstrong opened the hatch of the lunar landing module, Eagle, and stepped out onto the surface of the Moon.

The moon landing, given the mission code of Apollo 11, was an extraordinary feat of engineering, science and aviation, a breathtakingly risky undertaking that grew out of Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, which had its own aggressive space program.

Exploration has been part of the American makeup since the days when fur trade companies sought a Northwest Passage to China and since captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led an expedition across the continent to determine just what President Thomas Jefferson had purchased from the French.

President John F. Kennedy consciously evoked the American frontier spirit in his acceptance speech for the 1960 Democratic nomination for President of the United States:

“We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier — the frontier of the 1960s, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats. ... Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.”

The New Frontier of space beckoned as his administration stepped into a space race that had been hot since the Soviets sent up a successful satellite called Sputnik in 1957. In 1962, Kennedy set the goal of landing a man on the Moon by the end of the decade:

“We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people. For space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own. Whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only

if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war. I do not say that we should or will go unprotected against the hostile misuse of space any more than we go unprotected against the hostile use of land or sea, but I do say that space can be explored and mastered without feeding the fires of war, without repeating the mistakes that man has made in extending his writ around this globe of ours.

“There is no strife, no prejudice, no national conflict in outer space as yet. Its hazards are hostile to us all. Its conquest deserves the best of all mankind, and its opportunity for peaceful cooperation may never come again. But why, some say, the Moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?”

“We choose to go to the Moon! We choose to go to the Moon... We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win, and the others, too.”

Kennedy, of course, did not live to see the fulfillment of this vow; his slaying in November 1963 was a harbinger of a tumultuous decade that would divide American society and culture in ways that still affect us today.

But through all of the turmoil of the Civil Rights era, Vietnam and tensions with China and the Soviet Union that seemed to threaten nuclear annihilation, the NASA space program soldiered on. Through deadly setbacks, the Apollo program moved steadily toward its goal and on July 16, the Apollo 11 crew of Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins sat in a capsule atop a giant ballistic missile and were blasted into space.

1969 was a wild, weird and terrible year — but for a few days in July, just about everyone could stand for a moment in awe at mankind’s ability to achieve great things. A giant leap, indeed.

We don’t send astronauts to the moon anymore. There

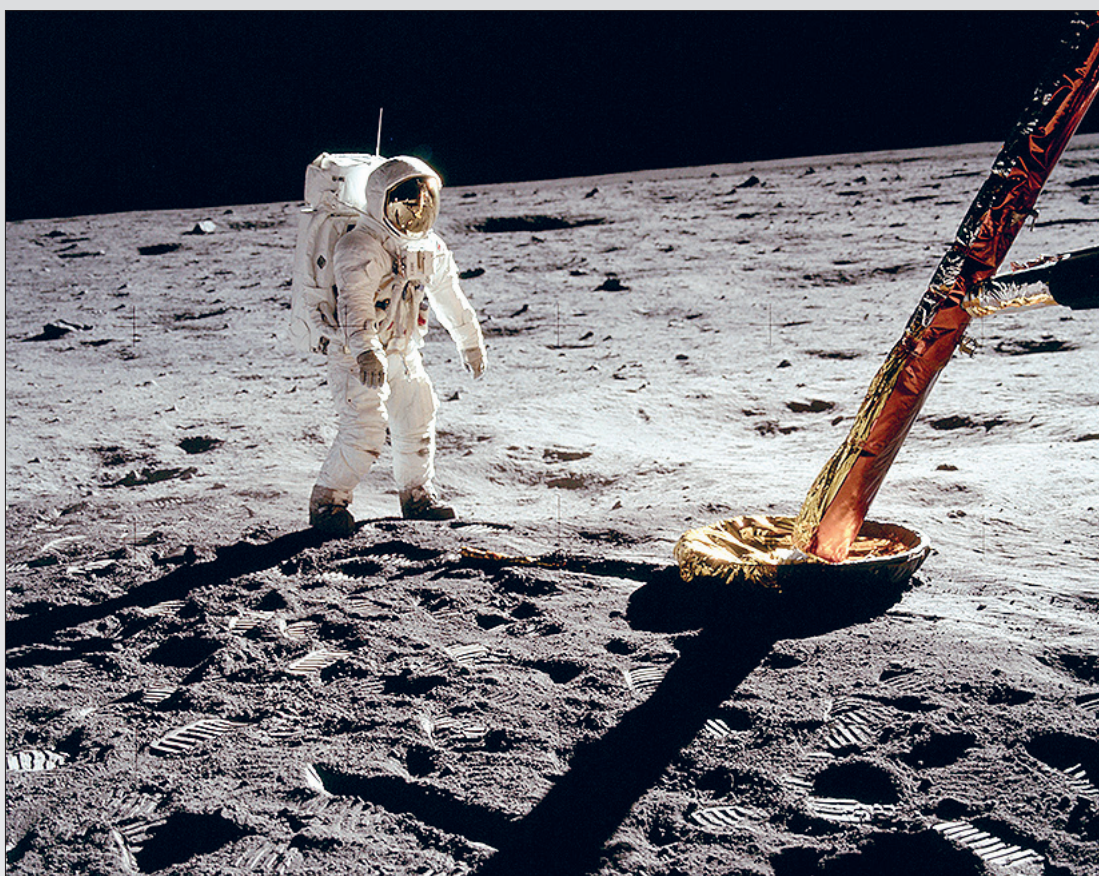


PHOTO COURTESY NASA

Apollo 11 Commander Neil Armstrong took this photograph of Buzz Aldrin on the surface of the Moon.

are a lot of reasons for that, but the cost and a lack of any unifying purpose in doing so probably top the list. As Clara Moskowitz reported a decade ago at space.com:

“During the Apollo years NASA’s budget was almost five percent of the federal budget. Now, it’s less than one percent.

“We understand the technologies that will be necessary, but it’s going to take an investment to do that,” said Roger Launius, space history curator at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space

Museum. ‘That’s the rub.’

“During the 1960s, many Americans felt the expense of Apollo was justified because of its importance to national security during the Cold War. Today, some people question whether human space exploration is as valuable.

“There are not compelling publicly held reasons for doing this,” Launius said. “Without a rationale that everybody understands and can buy into, it’s a very hard sell to get the resources to do it.”

It’s hard to say whether

taking another shot at the Moon or landing people on Mars is worth the massive expenditure of resources. Maybe we’ve got enough to do right here on Earth. But it’s hard not to view the footage of that signal moment 50 years ago and not feel an ache for a grand goal and effort “that will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win.”

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