

Twenty-five years in space

Smithsonian News Service

The year was 1957. A popular president named Ike waved at television viewers from the Golf Links. Perry Como crooned "Dream Along With Me" and Elvis Presley was King. Gasoline cost 23 cents a gallon.

America was modern, fashionable and self-confident. There were tensions, of course—the Cold War, backyard bomb shelters and Civil Defense drills dominated the news—but a decade after the end of World War II, the United States had become the unchallenged leader of the Free World. American science, technology and a thriving free enterprise system, the U.S. public believed, were the best anywhere, the keystone of Western society.

On Oct. 4, 1957, American confidence was shaken abruptly. Without warning, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the world's first Earth-orbiting satellite. The Space Age—and race—had begun.

Sputnik sent shock waves through this country. The United States had been edged out by a dangerous rival and the issues were hotly debated in Congress and the media. Thus galvanized by considerations of national security and political preeminence, the nation embarked on an ambitious program of space exploration that has taken man to the moon, explored the solar system and beyond and witnessed the spectacular success of the space shuttle, the world's first reusable spacecraft.

Today, a quarter of a century after Sputnik, visitors to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., can vividly relive the past frustrations and ebates while cheering the heroes and technological triumphs at a new exhibit commemorating 25 years of space exploration. Featuring TV film clips, newspaper headlines, photographs, Space Age artifacts and memorabilia of the times, the exhibit is a nostalgic journey through the golden age of space exploration.

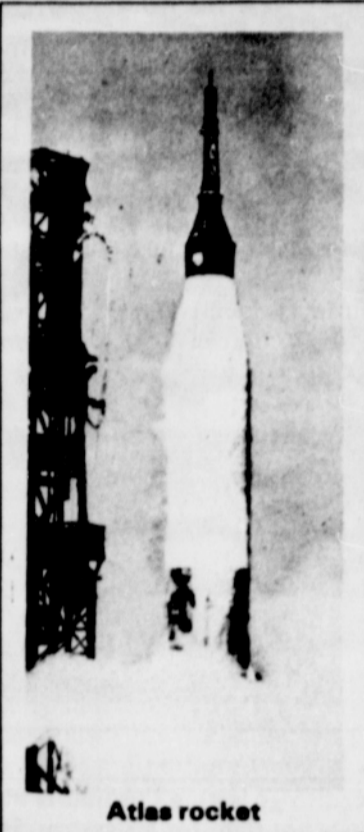
"Anniversaries are an excellent excuse to stop and take stock of where we've been and get some much needed perspective," says assistant curator Allan A. Needell, who sought to place the Space Age in a social and cultural context. "The triumphs of the Space Age did not happen in a vacuum, but were strongly influenced by events happening elsewhere in society."

Consider, for instance, the climate in the immediate wake of Sputnik. The United States was forced to play catch-up with the Soviets, who quickly launched Sputnik 2 on Nov. 3. Pressure mounted on the scientists and engineers from the Naval Research Laboratory who had been assigned the task of launching an Earth-orbiting satellite. In contrast to the Soviet program, which was largely conducted in secrecy, the American space effort was publicly conducted. And so it was that, on Dec. 6, before a television viewing audience of millions, the Vanguard rocket carrying a small test satellite exploded a few seconds after ignition. It was Jan. 31, 1958, before the United States successfully orbited Explorer 1.

Against this backdrop, Congress passed the National Aeronautics and Space Act, establishing NASA and setting overall policy for a civilian space program. Sputnik also spurred a critical review of the U.S. education system; many of today's science curricula and education grant and loan programs owe their existence to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which at-



Space shuttle Columbia takes off and lands (above, left).



Atlas rocket



Alan B. Shepard, first American in space



John h. Glenn, first American in orbit

tracted thousands of young Americans into scientific and engineering careers.

The decade of the 1960s saw a high-stakes, one-upmanship space race as the Soviet Union and the United States vied with each other to be first. Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space on Feb. 12, 1961, followed on May 5 by Astronaut Alan Shepard. Less than three weeks after Shepard's successful flight, President Kennedy committed the nation to landing a man on the moon before the end of the decade.

Project Apollo, which was preceded by the successful Mercury and Gemini programs, reached its spectacular culmination on July 20, 1969, as a breathless nation watched two men walk on the moon. Once again, American science and technology had become the focal point for world admiration. And increasingly, the American consumer found Space Age technology a part of everyday life.

Paradoxically, Needell notes, "The great space triumphs of the '60s took place amidst the backdrop of upheaval. The enterprise of science seemed to provide us with some constructive foundations during a period when everything else seemed to be falling apart."

The national prestige gained from Apollo continued long after the event, but success led to some complacency. "Many people soon lost interest in space," Needell says. In the 1970s, space became commonplace—yet orbiting laboratories like Skylab provided a wealth of scientific knowledge; people around the world thrilled to images of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn beamed to Earth by the Viking and Voyager spacecraft cameras.

Still, the average American was more concerned with environmental pollution, long lines at gasoline stations and Watergate than with outer space. Social and political problems were paramount; when solutions were not forthcoming, the question was raised, "If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we...?"

Looking back over the past 25 years, Needell says, "There's no question that many things about our society have changed—our tastes in music, literature, fashion, even food, for instance, and especially our science and technology."

Unsurprisingly, one thing that has not changed is the tone of the political debates. In 1957, for example, many people blamed America's lack of success in space on Eisenhower and his administration's perceived failure to develop a high-priority space program. Eisenhower sought to assure Americans that the United States was not behind, and television film clips from the era show him as a fatherly, calming influence, while opposition politicians seized the issue and tried to make the most of it.

Today, administration space policies are once again the subject of controversy. The issues are different than they were 25 years ago, but there are striking similarities in the

debates. In July, President Reagan issued his long-awaited statement on national space policy in which he reaffirmed the national commitment to the exploration and use of space "in support of our national well-being." Nonetheless, some politicians found fault in his emphasis on national security and military uses of space.

There are also echoes today of the debate heard near the end of the Apollo project; now, as then, some scientists are worried over the future of planetary exploration—long the crowning jewel of the U.S. space program.

What, then, does the future hold? Many are encouraged by the success of the space shuttle; some see it as today's symbol of U.S. intentions to be in space tomorrow.

"There may, in fact, be as great an advance in the next 25 years as in the past," Needell speculates. "One thing is likely: The military will account for larger portions of our space effort. And private industry also will play a greater role in space communications and manufacturing. But whether inspirational accomplishments like the lunar landings and the new views of our planetary neighbors will continue remains to be seen."

"In an age when resources must be carefully managed and priorities set, it is worth recalling what we have learned and what we have gained in space during the past 25 years."

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Apollo 11's Edwin E. Aldrin walks on the moon.

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