

Man and Space: Nothing Spectacular in Lunar Space Probe by Russians

BY ALVIN B. WEBB

Cape Canaveral - 47 - The Soviet Union doubtless could send a man to the moon today. The sticky part of the problem is in figuring out a way to get him back to earth, preferably alive and healthy.

On this score the U.S. and Soviet man-to-moon projects are probably in the same boat—the accommodations for lunar-bound astronauts must be roundtrip. In the opinion of many experts, this makes a Russian manned lunar landing unlikely for at least another two years, maybe longer.

Russia may or may not have a lower regard for the lives of its "cosmonauts" — that can be left to the theories of moralists. Certainly there is yet no concrete evidence of wanton expenditure of lives in space by the Soviets, although there are opinions aplenty.

But the Russians are politically quite astute. This alone, it would seem, probably rules out the possibility that a Soviet cosmonaut might be sent on a one-way trip to the moon.

Sending a man off into space with no chance of getting back alive could be a difficult thing to explain, even by the masterful Soviet propaganda machine. People and nations tend to frown upon such things.

Speculation about a Russian manned one-way flight into space is as old as the space age itself. It flared anew when the Soviet Union sent its Lunik-4 probe soaring toward the moon April 2. Some experts in this country interpreted it as meaning Russia was on the verge of shooting a man to that near-

est of heavenly neighbors.

For some reason, an agonizing appraisal of the U.S. space program by experts and non-experts alike always follows a Soviet space spectacular. This one was no exception — particularly coming, as it did, in the midst of sundry congressional hearings.

And there always has been a tendency toward somewhat exaggerated interpretations or guesses — of just what the Russians might be up to. This one, again, was no exception.

Cape Canaveral has long been criticized for accepting Russian space accomplishments with a shrug of the shoulders while the rest of the country jumps up and down. But the Cape is well stocked with brains that can separate technical soundness from spectacular headlines.

Which is another way of saying that Cape Canaveral generally gets upset about such things when there is something technically worth getting upset about. With Lunik-4, there wasn't.

The Russian moon probe weighed 3,130 pounds. It was a sizable piece of machinery. But from another standpoint, that is just a shade over the weight of the bell-shaped Mercury capsule that the United States has used in putting its first astronauts into orbit.

No Return Rockets

The Mercury program's sardine can qualities have been dwelt upon at length. An astronaut would find it mighty tough going indeed if he had to spend several days in a spaceship this size going to the moon.

He could make it to the moon in a spaceship as big or as small — as Lunik-4 — or one even smaller, for that matter, if he were willing to go light on food, water and breathing. But there just would not be enough room to cart along rockets for a return trip.

The vehicle that will carry the first U.S. astronauts to the moon will weigh about 80,000 pounds. Conceivably, the Soviet Union might be able to chop a little off that. But not 80,000 pounds.

If Lunik-4 generated any surprises at Cape Canaveral, it was one of finding the Russians this little this late. The probe's size indicated it probably was launched with the same booster that the Soviet Union has been using for three years — one certainly not nearly big enough to propel men on a roundtrip lunar flight.

And the result is that the moon probably is going to remain a beautiful, virginal wilderness in the sky for sometime to come. Both the United States and Russia, it would seem, have a long way to go.

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