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Lunar Narratives: Landing on the Moon, Politics and the Cold War

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Global Research, July 21, 2019

Region: Russia and FSU, USA
Theme: History

Anniversaries are occasions to distort records. The intoxicated recounting of the past faces a record in need of correction. Couples long married hide their differences before guests. Creases are covered; the make-up is applied generously. Defects become virtues, if, indeed they were ever there to begin with. In historical commemoration, the same is true. The moon landing anniversary his weekend was given a vigorous clean-up, with the Cold War finding a back seat when it was, in fact, the main driver.

The moon project was a fundamental political poke, soaked by competitive drives. The science was the instrumental ballast and has come to provide the heavy cosmetics to romanticise what is, at best, an effigy. When **President John F. Kennedy** proclaimed his wish for the United States to land a man on the moon and safely return him by the end of the 1960s, he was google-eyed by Cold War syndrome. The Soviets had been making advances in the space race, and paranoia at Red exploits was catching. A godless state had launched the nerve wracking Sputnik in 1957 and in 1961 put **Yuri Gagarin** into space.

While the Soviet Union is only mentioned once in his speech at Rice University, the competitive dig, the putdown, did come. Balance had to be restored. "Within these last 19 months at least 45 satellites have circled the earth. Some 40 of them were 'made in the United States of America' and they were far more sophisticated and supplied far more knowledge to the people of the world than those of the Soviet Union." When he mentions being "behind for some time in manned flight", there is little doubt who the bogeyman to beat is. We do not, he said reassuringly to his audience, "intend to stay behind, and in this decade, we shall make up and move ahead."

Combating the Soviet Union, and communism more broadly, was simply one aspect of an aggrandised fist fight, to be fought on the ground, the seas, and in space. While it has become a charming conceit to suggest that JFK had intended to take the brakes off US commitments to stemming the Communist contagion in Vietnam, his administration saw a spike in the deployment of resources and advisors to the South. He had to be seen to be aggressive in all theatres of endeavour.

Domestically, selling the moon mission was not popular, and the post-landing effort to scrub away voices of opposition in the historical record has been vigorous. Space historian **Roger Launius** notes the sentiment at the time.

> "Consistently throughout the 1960s a majority of Americans did not believe Apollo was worth the cost, with the one exception to this poll taken at the time of the Apollo 11 lunar landing in July 1969."

In 1964, the sociologist Amitai Etzioni published the despairing, blistering work that deserves a good dive into. *The Moon-Doggle: Domestic and International Implications of the Space Race* notes scientific opposition to the space program, at least in so far as it was not balanced. The space race, with its immortalisation of gadgets, glorified "rocket-powered jumps" and "extrovert activism", had been "used as an escape". The obsession with the moon delayed "facing ourselves, as Americans and citizens of the earth."

Earthly concerns were considered more pressing. Civil rights leaders in the United States feared a loss of focus. While a million people gathered along Florida's Space Coast to watch the launch of Apollo 11 on July 16, 1969, some 500 protestors, mostly African-American and led by **Rev. Ralph Abernathy**, paid a visit to the Kennedy Space Centre. He had in tow a wooden wagon and two mules, a deliciously confronting contrast between the Saturn V rocket and the impecunious life.

> "$12 a day to feed an astronaut, we could feed a child for $8," read the protest signs.

NASA administrator **Thomas Paine** ventured out to meet Abernathy, subsequently recounting the concerns of the reverend.

> "The money for the space program, he stated, should be spent to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, and house the shelterless."

Behind the project lay other dark forces whose roles have been obscured by propagandists of a romantic lunar narrative. The amoral genius that was **Wernher von Braun**, given the moniker of Missileman, was an illustration that science might well lack an ethical compass, even if it worked. Tom Lehrer's lines from 1967 were hitting in their aptness:

> "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? / That's not my department, says Wernher von Braun."

Kennedy was himself keen to justify the reason for going to the moon not because it made sense for humans to do so but because it was hard. His Rice University address couples banalities, the human urge to engage and achieve the impossible expounded. "Why climb the highest mountain?" he rhetorically poses. Or fly the Atlantic? "Why does Rice play Texas?" Going to the moon was a goal that would "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 which we intend to win, and the others, too."

What mattered was getting the job done with a kind of mechanistic fanaticism: working labourers to death in Mittelbau-Dora in making V-2 rockets to target civilians during the Second World War was as worthy as beating the Soviets in the space game. In Disney's 1955 television production *Man and the Moon*, von Braun, the then director of development at the US Army Ballistic Missile Agency, spoke of a nuclear-powered space station that would propel Americans to the moon.

A decade before, von Braun was part of a scooping operation conducted by US personnel to nab the best and brightest of German science, a process that did much to ensure a good

deal of whitewashing of industrialised murder. In the gathering were the signs of the Cold War to come; the Soviets conducted their own version of Operation Paperclip, plundering the brainboxes of Teutonic engineering. To the victors went the corrupted spoils.

Von Braun was treated and feted, plied with generous budgets and resources. The missiles duly came. He led a team that developed Redstone, the first US ballistic missile capable of propelling a nuclear warhead to distances of 250 miles. Then came the Jupiter-C in 1958, which shot the first US satellite, Explorer 1, into space. The famed Saturn V rocket was created while von Braun was director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Centre. The line between concentration camp and the moon landing was established, as was the role of the smooth scientist communicator trading on human wonder.

Colossal human stupidity, and moral shakiness, tend to find ways into the grandiose and the grand. As a species, hubris has proven a common trait. Technological mastery comes torrentially more easily than luminous ethical insight. France's courtly Charles De Gaulle was reflective on this point: humans might well have mastered the way of getting to the moon but it could hardly be said to be far. "The greatest distance we have to cover still lies within us." Humankind has yet to master its more terrestrial problems. Any future exploration and colonisation is bound to see humans bringing their own complement of problems to the frontiers of space. Facing ourselves continues to be a delayed enterprise of arrested development.

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