

*‘To see earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful
in that eternal silence where it floats’*

ARCHIBALD McLEISH, POET



“Earthrise,” a photograph taken by Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders, is an iconic image. Apollo 8, with crew members James Lovell, Frank Borman and Anders, orbited the moon on Dec. 24, 1968.

One small step: A sense of national pride

CONTINUED FROM COVER

The impacts of Apollo went beyond scientific discovery. The Apollo 8 “Earthrise” photograph helped create a heightened awareness, as the poet Archibald McLeish put it at the time, of “earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence in which it floats.” Then, on July 20, 1969, Apollo 11’s Neil Armstrong made his historic “giant leap for mankind.” The image of Buzz Aldrin standing next to the U.S. flag planted on the lunar surface remains an iconic symbol of American achievement.

The first steps on the moon were viewed by a global audience, and helped create a sense that the United States was a nation capable of achieving great things, with people deserving of respect and admiration. Apollo also provided a sense of national pride; It was a bright spot for American citizens, coming at the end of a decade characterized by assassinations, urban riots and a seemingly endless conflict in Southeast Asia.

While Apollo will stand as a milestone in the history of human exploration, more Earthbound reasons prompted President John F. Kennedy’s decision to send Americans to the moon. Kennedy, stung by the Soviet Union being the first to orbit a human, on April 20, 1961, asked his advisers to identify “a space program which promises dramatic results in which we could win?”

The answers came quickly. Rocket engineer Wernher von Braun told the White House, “We have an excellent chance of beating the Soviets to the first landing of a crew on the moon.” NASA chief James Webb and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara added that winning a race to the moon was “part of the battle along the fluid front of the Cold War.”

Kennedy accepted this advice, and on May 25, 1961, he told a joint session of Congress, “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the



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goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth.” The Congress and the country accepted that challenge, and the United States began what Kennedy called “a great new American enterprise.”

There is thus little question of why we went to the moon in the first place; Apollo was an effort driven by Cold War geopolitical competition, not by an exploratory imperative or a quest for military or economic power. Kennedy backed up his words with action, mobilizing in a war-like but peaceful fashion the human and financial resources needed for what he characterized as “a great new American enterprise.”

NASA in 1973 estimated that the cost of Apollo was \$25.4 billion; that equates to over \$150 billion in today’s dollars. The set of judgments that led Kennedy to decide to spend the resources to send Americans to the moon combined lasting characteristics of the American people; a conviction of American exceptionalism and a mission derived from that conviction; the geopolitical situation of early 1961; and the individual values and style that Kennedy brought to the White House.

After Apollo 11, five more missions to the lunar surface followed between November 1969 and December 1972. Then we stopped. As Apollo 17 lifted off of the

PICTURED ON THE COVER: Astronaut Edwin E. “Buzz” Aldrin Jr. walks on the surface of the moon during the Apollo 11 mission. Mission commander Neil Armstrong took this photograph with a 70mm lunar surface camera while the two astronauts explored the Sea of Tranquility.

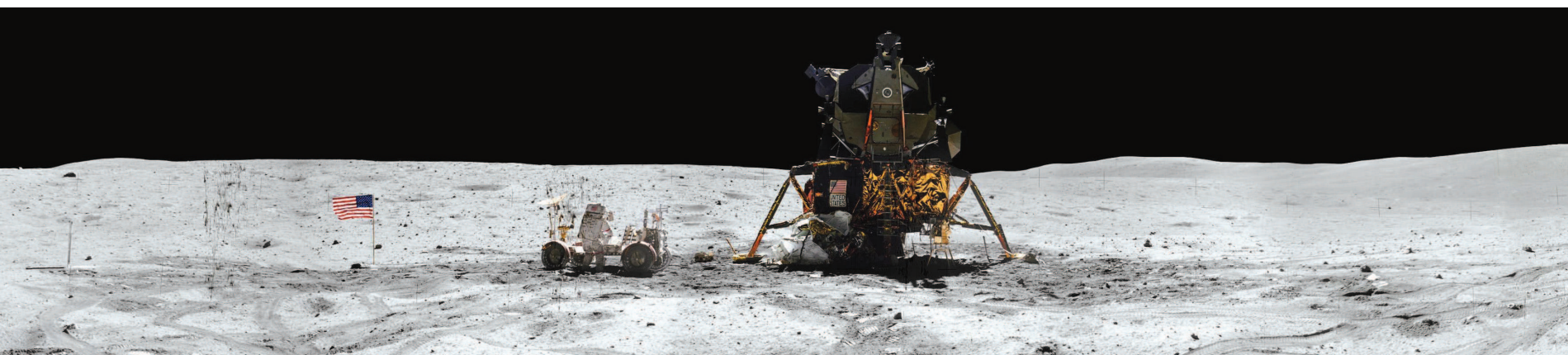
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moon on December 24, 1972, President Richard Nixon stated, “This may be the last time in this century that men may walk on the moon.” By his post-Apollo decisions, Nixon turned that forecast into reality.

Apollo had been defined by President Kennedy as a race, and once the United States won that competition Nixon saw no reason to keep racing. As one of his aides commented as decisions were being made on what to do after Apollo, “No compelling reason to push space [after Apollo] was ever presented to the White House by NASA or anyone else.” There was in 1972, and since, no public or political will to provide to the post-Apollo NASA anywhere near the resources that had been needed to carry out the moon program. In a space program sense, Apollo was a dead end; NASA in 1972 started over in human spaceflight with the space shuttle and space station programs.



Could Apollo happen again? Certainly not in the same way. But resuming exploration has been NASA’s guiding goal since 2004, and the hardware to restart travel beyond Earth’s orbit is well along in development. How that hardware – or equivalents developed by the private sector – will be used in the coming decade is still not clear. But I do hope that the United States once again takes the lead role in human exploration, and that the 60th anniversary of Apollo finds Americans living and working on the lunar surface.



A panoramic photograph taken April 23, 1972, by Charles Duke shows the Apollo 16 landing site in the lunar highlands.

ABOUT THE SECTION

Space exploration in the late 1960s captivated the world’s attention. Fifty years later, relive Apollo and the six lunar landings with this special report and watch for Apollo 50th anniversary events near you in 2019.

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CREDITS

NASA photos in this section represent a fraction of Apollo-related visuals and content available online. You can discover more historical and current mission information at nasa.gov and images of the moon at roc.asu.edu.