

### III. JFK's Vision: U.S.-USSR Space Cooperation

# The Untold Story of the U.S.-Soviet Manned Mission to the Moon

by William Jones

Sept. 4—The name of John F. Kennedy will always be associated with the commitment made by the President in 1961 for the United States to send a man to the Moon and bring him back within the decade. This is rightly seen as the highpoint in the development of U.S. technology and a major event of the 20th Century—man's first venture on another planet. While the planting of an American flag on the Moon is often regarded as the iconic symbol of that mission, people don't realize that this might well have been an American astronaut *and* a Russian cosmonaut, with both planting flags on the Moon, indicating major reconciliation here on Earth between peoples. For Kennedy, in fact, a planned mission to the Moon was not merely an effort to exhibit American prowess in space, but a possible means of establishing his main goal—peace here on Earth—by achieving a reconciliation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In one sense, the issue of space had been with Kennedy ever since his election as president. One of the key factors that may well have secured his victory (which was a close one) was his accusations against the previous Eisenhower Administration (and its Vice President Richard Nixon, his Republican opponent), for allowing a missile gap between the United States and the Soviet Union to develop. Some pundits claim that the accusation was something of a hoax. The U.S. was not really at a disadvantage to the Soviet Union in overall military terms. But the Soviets did have an ad-

vantage in rocket development. When both the United States and Russia developed nuclear weapons, the U.S. prioritized its bomber fleet for delivery of such weapons, as they had done at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Soviets prioritized delivery by the much more effective missile delivery systems.

#### Undoing the Cold War Agenda

The major problem facing the new president was



*By the time John F. Kennedy became President, the Soviets had the advantage over the U.S. in rocket development, prioritizing delivery of nuclear weapons by missile systems rather than bombers. Shown: Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles.*

the relationship with the Soviet Union, a World War II ally, which, with the onset of the Cold War, had become our primary military rival. Kennedy wished to chart a path back toward the sort of cooperation that existed during the war years, in spite of the obvious ideological differences.

Already in his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961, Kennedy gives an inkling of what he had in mind

with regard to this issue. Referring to the conflict with the Soviet Union, Kennedy said:

Together, let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depth, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Even during his pre-campaign for President and earlier as Senator, in 1959, Kennedy had indicated the possibility of collaboration with the Soviet Union in space exploration.

One week after the Inaugural Address, in his State of the Union message on January 30, Kennedy was much more specific on the matter.

Finally this Administration intends to explore promptly all possible areas of cooperation with the Soviet Union and other nations “to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors.” Specifically, I invite all nations—including the Soviet Union—to join with us in developing a weather prediction program, in a new communications satellite program, and in preparation for probing the distant planets of Mars and Venus, probes which may some day unlock the secrets of the universe.

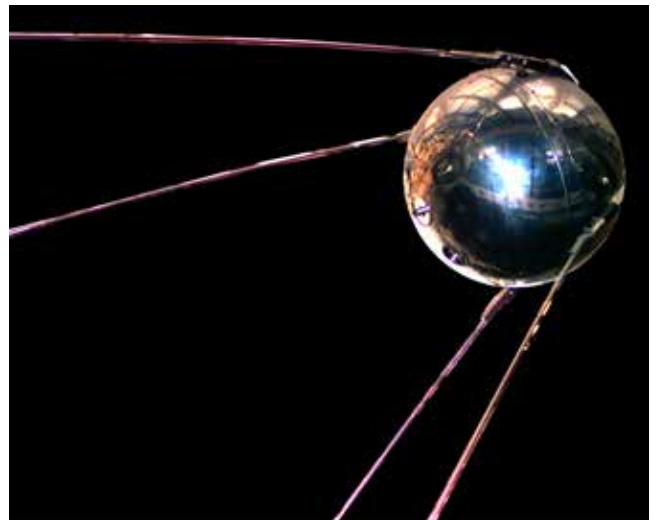
Today, this country is ahead in the science and technology of space while the Soviet Union is ahead in the capacity to lift large vehicles into orbit. Both nations would help themselves as well as other nations by removing these endeavors from the bitter and wasteful competition of the Cold War. The United States would be willing to join with the Soviet Union and the scientists of all nations in a greater effort to make the fruits of this knowledge available to all ... to make our own laboratories available to technicians of other lands who lack the facilities to pursue their own work.

On February 15, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev responded to a telegram of congratulations which Kennedy had sent him on the successful launch of a Russian probe to the planet Venus. In his telegram, Khrushchev wrote,

In your speech of inauguration to the office of President, and likewise in the message to Congress of January 30, you, Mr. President, said that you would like for the Soviet Union and the

United States of America to unite their efforts in such areas as the struggle against disease, mastering the cosmos, development of culture and trade. Such an approach to these problems impresses us and we welcome these utterances of yours.

On the U.S. side, a future U.S. lunar mission was already being discussed within NASA, but no decisions regarding such had been made. Then on April 12, the Soviets became the first to send a man, Yuri Gagarin, into orbit around the Earth. The successful launch sent official Washington into a tailspin. Kennedy sent a congratulatory letter to Khrushchev on the successful flight, again noting that the two sides could work together in space. At the same time, with the U.S. again



Soyuz235

*A replica of the famous Soviet Sputnik 1, the first man-made object to successfully achieve Earth orbit on Oct. 4, 1957.*

upstaged by the Soviet Union, as it had been with Sputnik, he was desperately looking for some project that could restore U.S. leadership in space exploration. The idea of a lunar mission then suddenly went from back-room discussions in NASA offices to the Oval Office.

On April 14, Kennedy called in Hugh Sidey, a friendly Time/Life journalist, to attend an unusual powwow between Kennedy and his closest advisers on space, to discuss how the U.S. could respond to the Gagarin flight. The meeting included White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, Presidential Science Adviser James Wiesner, NASA Chief James Webb, and NASA Assistant Administrator Hugh Dryden. Sidey wrote about the meeting, noting Kennedy’s interest in probing the possibility of a Moon landing, thereby let-

ting the public know that the President was focused on the matter. Then on April 20, Kennedy formed a Space Council and appointed Vice President Johnson to head it.

### Seeking Rapport with Khrushchev

Meanwhile, Kennedy was also looking for a way to engage Moscow in a collaborative approach to space exploration. He was still reeling from the Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961 where he had been hoodwinked by the intelligence community into committing to an invasion of Cuba by a band of anti-Castro militants supported by the CIA, which was a total fiasco from the get-go. The failure of the invasion was being played up by the Soviet press as American bumbling. In addition, a critical insurgency involving the hand of Moscow was also developing in Laos, and there was the continual problem of the status of Berlin, surrounded by Soviet-occupied eastern Germany, a condition which had remained unsettled since the end of the Second World War. Kennedy was eager to arrange a summit to personally discuss matters with the Soviet leader and he made this known in his discussions with associates.

On May 12, 1961, a letter from Khrushchev was delivered to Kennedy in which Khrushchev said he had heard rumors about talks of a summit and would be glad to accept any such proposal. The summit was subsequently arranged, to be held in Vienna in June 1961, and was announced on May 20 in both Washington and Moscow.

Unbeknownst to the world, Kennedy had already set up a secret “back-channel” to Khrushchev through former TASS correspondent, Georgi Bolshakov, now information secretary for the Soviet Embassy and a GRU officer. His U.S. interlocutor was the President’s brother, Robert Kennedy. Through this channel, Kennedy also hoped to get a sense of the attitude of the Soviet leader going into the summit.

Seeking to bolster his own position before the meeting, Kennedy decided to deliver an unusual second speech before a joint session of Congress May 25. In this speech, Kennedy announced his intentions.



Look magazine/Stanley Tretick

*President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, meeting in Vienna, Austria, discussed Berlin and Laos, but made little progress on space collaboration and on banning nuclear weapons testing. June 4, 1961.*

I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space.



Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation  
*GRU Col. Georgi Bolshakov, who served as the secret back-channel between Kennedy and Khrushchev.*

With this speech behind him, Kennedy felt more confident in meeting the Soviet Premier in Vienna. But in spite of Bolshakov’s assurances that the Premier would be open to cooperation on a number of issues, the June 4 summit developed quite differently. Kennedy was hoping to get an agreement on a nuclear test ban treaty and make some progress on Berlin and other issues facing the two nations.

Khrushchev, on the other hand, was somewhat bullyish at this summit, obviously testing the young and inexperienced President. Kennedy asked Khrushchev if the U.S. and the Soviets might not go to the Moon together.

Khrushchev said that one must be cautious, as space could be used for military advantage, but then off-handedly commented, “Why not?”

The question came up again on the second day of the summit, but now Khrushchev was much more negative in his response. Khrushchev said that he “was plac-

ing certain restraints on projects for a flight to the Moon,” noting that such a project would be “very expensive.” He also indicated that cooperation would be impossible without disarmament since “rockets are used for both military and scientific purposes.”

In the course of the three meetings they held in Vienna, Khrushchev was generally recalcitrant and even arrogant, and little progress was made on any of the major issues. Ultimately, Khrushchev also rejected the proposal for cooperation on going to the Moon. Kennedy’s private comments on the summit days later was: “He just beat the hell out of me.”

### Setting the Stage for Space Cooperation

Already in February 1961, after Kennedy’s proposal for joint space collaboration in his State of the Union address, the White House had set up an International Task Force on Cooperation in Space to determine what concrete areas of cooperation might be established. The Task Force was chaired by Dr. Bruno Rossi, a professor of physics at MIT, and was composed of non-governmental people, particularly members of, or consultants to the President’s Science Advisory Committee, as well as officials from NASA and the Department of State.

The task force wrote a draft report April 4, 1961, which began,

The objectives are to confirm concretely the U.S. preference for a cooperative rather than competitive approach to space exploration, to contribute to reduction of Cold War tensions by demonstrating the possibility of cooperative enterprise between the U.S. and the USSR in a field of major public concern, and to achieve the substantive advantages of cooperation that in major projects would impose more of a strain on economic and manpower resources if carried out unilaterally.

The report was not released, however, until April 13, the day after the Gagarin flight, and probably as a result, it appeared without this initial paragraph. It did however say,

The areas of cooperation that were outlined included: cooperative use of ground facilities for orbital missions, coordination of independently launched satellite experiments, and coordination of, or cooperation in, ambitious projects for the



MIT

*MIT professor Dr. Bruno Rossi chaired the White House International Task Force on Cooperation in Space, set up Feb. 1961.*

manned exploration of the Moon and the unmanned exploration of the planets.

When Alan Shepherd briefly reached space for the first time on a U.S. spacecraft May 5, 1961, Khrushchev responded with a congratulatory letter to the President. In it he wrote,

We believe that the peaceful exploration of space is a venture undertaken on behalf of mankind as a whole. In that spirit each new step in the conquest and understanding of space, wherever made, will be an achievement in which all of us share.

The period following the contentious June summit was, however, not the most propitious for discussing space cooperation. The Berlin crisis worsened, with the Soviets threatening to cut off access to the city from the Western corridor and beginning to build a wall around the Soviet occupied sector of city. Kennedy finally sent troops into the city through the Western corridor and there was, fortunately, no attempt by the Soviets to stop them. Then on Aug. 28, the Soviet Union conducted a nuclear test, breaking with the voluntary moratorium on testing which both sides had observed since 1958.

Tensions ran high during this period. Kennedy gave a radio and television report on the Berlin crisis, preparing the American people for the worst. The crisis extended until September 1961 when Kennedy was scheduled to give his first address to the UN General Assembly in



which he was to present a program for resolving the Berlin crisis. A few days prior to his speech, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger received a call from Bolshakov noting that an emissary from Khrushchev, Foreign Ministry Press Chief Mikhail Kharlamov, had arrived, saying “The storm in Berlin is over,” and that Khrushchev would be willing to talk about the U.S. proposals.

Kennedy then gave his address to the General Assembly Sept. 2, saying:

I come here today to look across this world of threats to a world of peace. In that search we cannot expect any final triumph—for new problems will always arise. We cannot expect that all nations will adopt like systems—for conformity is the jailor of freedom, and the enemy of growth. Nor can we expect to reach our goal by contrivance, by fiat or even by wishes of all.

[see full text of the speech, which follows this article]

After the speech, Salinger gave Kharlamov Kennedy’s reply to Khrushchev. He said that if the Soviet Union was ready to honor its commitments on Laos, a summit on the more difficult question of Germany would more likely produce an agreement.

### The Kennedy-Khrushchev Secret Correspondence

On Sept. 5, 1961, Khrushchev had met with Cyrus L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, who sometimes functioned as an “asset” of the intelligence community, and during an off-the-record conversation with him said that Sulzberger should let President Kennedy know that he would like to establish informal contact with the President. On hearing this, Kennedy let Khrushchev know that he would be happy to establish this informal contact with him. In what became over 120 personal letters, kept secret until 2000, Kennedy and Khrushchev found a means of discussing and resolving some of the most important conflicts that would arise between the two nations during Kennedy’s short tenure as president.

Then on September 30, 1961, Bolshakov delivered a lengthy letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy, the first of this secret correspondence. In the letter, he went over the gamut of contentions with which the United States and the Soviet Union had to deal—Laos, Berlin, Vietnam—written in a very personal and friendly tone. He also expressed satisfaction with what Kennedy had said in his UN speech.

Many issues would be broached in these letters in

the following months, but it would not be until February 1962 that they began to focus on space cooperation. On February 21, 1962, Khrushchev sent a letter to Kennedy congratulating him on the first successful U.S. orbital flight of John Glenn. In the letter, Khrushchev himself took up the issue of cooperation.

If our countries pooled their efforts—scientific, technical and material—to master the universe, this would be very beneficial for the advance of science and would be joyfully acclaimed by all peoples who would like to see scientific achievements benefit man and not be used for “Cold War” purposes and the arms race.

This is exactly what Kennedy was waiting to hear. He



NASA

First American to orbit Earth, Astronaut John Glenn, Jr., aboard the Friendship-7 Mercury spacecraft, Feb. 20, 1962.

immediately shot off a telegram to Khrushchev, thanking him for his warm congratulations on the Glenn flight.

I welcome your statement that our countries should cooperate in the exploration of space. I have long held this belief and indeed put it forth strongly in my first State of the Union message

Kennedy let Khrushchev know:

[I am] instructing the appropriate officers of this Government to prepare new and concrete proposals for immediate projects of common action, and I hope that at a very early date our representatives may meet to discuss our ideas and yours in a spirit of practical cooperation.

On February 23, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, on Kennedy's command, issued National Security Action Memorandum [No. 129](#) to the Secretary of State, directing him to cooperate with the NASA Administrator and the Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology to "promptly develop" the new proposals called for in the President's telegram, "together with recommendations as to the best way of opening discussion with Soviet representatives on these matters."

Bundy also sent a message to the NASA Administrator, James Webb, noting the important role Webb had in this endeavor, but also assuring him that this should not lead to any slowdown in what the agency was already doing.

There is real political advantage for us if we can make clear that we are forthcoming and energetic in plans for peaceful cooperation in this sphere. It is even conceivable that progress on this front would have an automatic dampening effect on the Berlin crisis.

It was also obvious that there were concerns at NASA, and perhaps at State, about how far this cooperation should actually go.

On March 6, Secretary of State Dean Rusk forwarded a draft letter to Khrushchev which listed a number of projects on which the two countries might cooperate. These included work on a joint weather satellite, cooperation in space tracking, research on the Earth's magnetic field, satellite communications experiments, and space medicine. Kennedy approved the proposed draft, but in the letter, added his own [comments](#):

Beyond these specific projects we are prepared now to discuss broader cooperation in the still more challenging projects which must be undertaken in the exploration of outer space.... Leaders of the United States space program have developed detailed plans for an orderly sequence of manned and unmanned flights for exploration of space and the planets. Some possibilities are not yet precisely identifiable, but should become clear as the space programs of our two countries proceed. In the case of others, it may be possible to start planning together now. For example, we might cooperate in unmanned exploitation of the lunar surface, or we might commence now the mutual definition of steps to be taken in sequence

for an exhaustive scientific investigation of the planets Mars or Venus, including consideration of the possible utility of manned flight in such programs. When a proper sequence for experiments has been determined, we might share responsibility for the necessary projects.

### **U.S.-Soviet Talks on Space Begin**

On March 27–30, 1962, on the sidelines of a meeting of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, there was a first round of discussions in New York between a U.S. delegation led by NASA Deputy Administrator Hugh Dryden and a Soviet delegation led by Soviet Academician Anatoly Blagonravov. Blagonravov indicated what the Soviets were and were not prepared to do. Blagonravov also made clear that the Soviets would prefer case-by-case cooperation rather than establishing an overall governmental agreement on the cooperation.

A second meeting was held between the two delegations in Geneva at the end of June in which the proposed projects were elaborated. It was not as extensive as Kennedy had hoped for, but it was a beginning. They agreed on three projects: (1) exchange of weather data from satellites and the eventual coordinated launching of meteorological satellites, (2) a joint effort to map the magnetic field of the Earth by means of coordinated launchings of geomagnetic satellites and related ground observations, and (3) cooperation in the experimental relay of communications via the Echo satellite.

In October 1962, an official letter was sent by Academician M.V. Keldysh, President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, confirming the agreement on these projects. The White House now had to brief the House and the Senate Committees. While Kennedy was eager to pursue the issue, Congress could throw up major roadblocks to the project. Up until this point, however, there had been no problem. McGeorge Bundy had noted to the President,

I know that you have been concerned lest Dryden make agreements that might come under political attack. I believe that these projects are quite safe. They have been reviewed with a beady eye by CIA and Defense, and they have been reported in detail to determined and watchful Congressmen like Tiger Teague (R-TX), with no criticism.

But the biggest hurdle the President had to overcome for a joint Moon landing came, at this point, not from

Congress or the Defense Department, or elements of NASA, but rather from the Soviets, who were still reticent in moving closer to the United States in space cooperation. For the next half year, the Moon proposal remained in abeyance. When Kennedy was asked about U.S.-Soviet cooperation on a lunar mission at his press conferences, he always replied that up to that point, the Soviets had not shown much inclination to accept his offer.

Then on October 15, 1962, photographs from a U.S. U-2 spy plane showed Russian missile bases being built in Cuba. Discussion of space cooperation was off the table for the moment as a major crisis was erupting that took the world to the brink of nuclear war. While Kennedy made it clear that he was not going to allow the missiles to be placed in Cuba, and established a naval blockade to prevent Soviet vessels carrying them from docking in Cuba, he also assured Moscow privately that the U.S. would remove the missiles it had placed in Turkey, a provocative factor for the Soviets since their deployment in 1961. The Soviet vessels carrying the missiles were called back and the crisis ended after a few nail-biting days.

In addition to his successful crisis management, Kennedy was also anxious to show that the United States was not taking a back seat to the Soviet Union in the conquest of space. He was therefore keen to make a showing in space that would outshine what the Russians had accomplished, placing a manned lunar mission at the top of the U.S. agenda.

In this matter, he also had domestic opposition to deal with. The growing costs of the Apollo program were coming under fire from Congress. The costs for the U.S. had always been a big question for the President as well, and part of the rationale behind his proposal on cooperating with the Soviets was to try to share the costs. So



NARA

U.S. aerial reconnaissance photo showing early stage of removal of Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles from a launch site in San Cristobal, Cuba, Nov. 1, 1962.

it was necessary for him to justify the mounting costs of the U.S. program to Congress and to the general public. Already in September 1962, he had gone on the campaign trail to rally support for the lunar program. He made very public visits to the launch site at Cape Canaveral and to the Space Center in Houston. His Houston visit culminated in a major [speech](#) Sept. 12 at Rice University which, together with his [second](#) Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union in 1963, is most prominently recognized as an expression of Kennedy's commitment to the space program.



NASA

President Kennedy: "We choose to go the Moon in this decade and do other things, not because it is easy, but because it is 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 which we intend to win, and the others, too." Rice University, Houston, TX, Sept. 12, 1962.

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....



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.

This was then followed by those most memorable words associated with the President's commitment:

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 which we intend to win, and the others, too.

The program for Kennedy was, however, not limited to a simple flight to the Moon and back, but rather represented the beginning of man's entry into the exploration of space and the galaxy. At a press conference in December 1962, in response to a question about the NERVA [Nuclear Engine for Rocket Vehicle Application] program to develop nuclear engines for rockets, Kennedy noted, "This will not come into play until 1970 or '71. It would be useful for further trips to the Moon or trips to Mars."

The successful resolution of the Cuba crisis in October also led Kennedy to seek ways of lessening tensions with Moscow. He began to seriously push for his long-desired test ban treaty in order to bring down those tensions. But by the middle of 1963 there seemed to be little progress in negotiations concerning such a treaty. This was when he took the advice of his friend Norman Cousins, the Editor of the *Saturday Review*, who had met with Khrushchev twice as Kennedy's unofficial intermediary, that Kennedy should make a broad proposal to Moscow to see if they would react.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in JFK's famous "Peace Speech" at The American University on June 10,

1. Osgood, Carl, "JFK's Road from His 'Peace Speech' to the Limited Test Ban Treaty," *EIR*, Vol. 50. No. 29, June 28, 2023, pp.8-15.

1963, a game changer in U.S. policy and attitude, and a clear attempt by the President to end the Cold War.

In that speech, while directing his attention to the need for a test ban treaty, Kennedy said nothing directly with regard to space cooperation. But he indicated clearly that he was intent on ending the Cold War, broaching the possibility of "world peace."

What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a *Pax Americana* enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on Earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children.



NASA

*President Kennedy, addressing a joint session of Congress, commits the nation to land a man on the Moon and return him safely to Earth, within the decade. May 25, 1961.*

Khrushchev's response to Kennedy's speech was that it was the best speech given by any American president since Franklin Roosevelt, ordering its full Russian translation published in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, thereby providing the basis for another approach to Khrushchev on the question of the Moon.

But it was still unclear whether the Soviets really wanted to go to the Moon at all. CIA reports had indicated

that they were not intent on a lunar mission. On July 17, 1963, there had been press accounts that Sir Bernard Lovell, Director of the Jodrell Bank Radio Observatory in England had spoken with physicist Mstislav Keldysh, the President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow, who indicated that there was no manned project being planned for the next few years, and was insisting that such a project should be planned on an international basis. Observers in the U.S. were still skeptical about these statements, however, since the Academy of Sciences may not have been entirely privy to what was happening in the Kremlin.

On Aug. 21, Hugh Dryden sent a letter to Keldysh, offering again to meet with Blagonravov "to discuss further proposals for cooperation." Meeting with Blagonravov Sept. 11, and referring to this discussion about Soviet intentions in space, Dryden reports,



I gained the impression, that there is a temporary hold in the manned lunar program pending the attainment of soft landing of instruments on the Moon. Blagonravov stated that “Lovell’s statement might be true as of today.”

## **Kennedy Announces His New Strategy for Peace**

Kennedy had sent Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, to Moscow to meet with Khrushchev in early August. Kennedy asked Rusk to raise the issue of space cooperation with him, which he did. “Sure, I’ll send a man to the Moon,” Khrushchev quipped. “You bring him back.”

Discussing with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin Aug. 26, Kennedy himself raised the question of space cooperation. Dobrynin indicated that he knew Khrushchev was interested in more cooperation in outer space. Kennedy asked Dobrynin to raise the issue with Khrushchev:

If each knew the other’s ambitions and plans, it might be easier to avoid all-out competition. If Mr. Khrushchev thought that a cooperative effort was possible, he would be interested.”<sup>2</sup>

Kennedy also spoke with U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Foy Kohler, who had spoken with Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko on September 10 at the UN, referring to Kennedy’s discussion with Dobrynin. Kohler told the President he thought “the Soviets were both intrigued and puzzled” by what the president had in mind. Gromyko had found the suggestion “interesting” and asked the U.S. “to come up with some concrete suggestions.” Kennedy replied that, while this was not an idea that he had considered in detail, he continued to be interested in developing it and thought it would in fact be useful. Kohler replied that he thought “there might be some real interest in developing cooperation in this field since Khrushchev had a problem of allocation of extremely limited resources” and that would make carrying out Kennedy’s proposal “relatively simple.”<sup>3</sup>

This probably settled the matter in the mind of the President in making such a proposal. Both Bundy and Webb were in favor of it. Kennedy inquired of Webb if

he were “in sufficient control in NASA” to prevent his proposal from “being undercut in NASA.” Not everyone there would be happy about bringing in the Soviets into this prestigious mission. Few people had been informed about the speech and not even Vice President Johnson or the Space Council knew what the President had in mind.

In his speech on Sept. 20, Kennedy lauded the signing of the Test Ban Treaty as a major step forward in relations, noting that the world had become much more peaceful as a result, but that differences between the Soviet Union and the United States remained, and more had to be done to relieve the tensions and create a greater sense of harmony.

But if we can stretch this pause [in the Cold War] into a period of cooperation, if both sides can now gain new confidence and experience in concrete collaborations for peace—if we can now be as bold and farsighted in the control of deadly weapons as we have been in their creation—then surely this first small step can be the start of a long and fruitful journey.

Finally, in a field where the United States and the Soviet Union have a special capacity—in the field of space—there is room for new cooperation, for further joint efforts in the regulation and exploration of space. I include among these possibilities a joint expedition to the Moon. Space offers no problems of sovereignty; by resolution of this Assembly, the members of the United Nations have foresworn any claim to territorial rights in outer space or on celestial bodies, and declared that international law and the United Nations Charter will apply. Why, therefore, should man’s first flight to the Moon be a matter of national competition? Why should the United States and the Soviet Union, in preparing for such expeditions, become involved in immense duplications of research, construction, and expenditure? Surely we should explore whether the scientists and astronauts of our two countries—indeed of all the world—cannot work together in the conquest of space, sending someday in this decade to the Moon not the representatives of a single nation, but the representatives of all of our countries.

The die was now cast, and the Soviets had only to

2. Logsdon, John M., *John F. Kennedy and The Race to The Moon*, p.182.

3. Logsdon, John M. *op. cit.*, p.182.

respond. Initially, the proposal was met with deafening silence. When Soviet cosmonauts, Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Terashkovo, the first woman in space, visited the UN in the next few days, there was nary a mention of the President's proposal.

At a press conference Oct. 9, when Kennedy was asked if he would be "talking to Gromyko about the proposal," He replied:

We have had no indication, in short, that the Soviet Union is disposed to enter into the kind of relationship which would make a joint exploration of space or of the Moon possible. But I think it is important that the United States continue to emphasize its peaceful interest and its preparation to go quite far in attempting to end the barrier which has existed between the Communist world and the West and to attempt to bring, as much as we can, the Communist world into the free world of diversity which we seek.

On Oct. 25, Nikita Khrushchev, responding to a reporter's question about whether the Soviet Union had a planned lunar landing program in the near future, said laconically,

It would be very interesting to take a trip to the Moon. But I cannot at present say when this will be done. We are not at the present planning flight by cosmonauts to the Moon. . . . We do not want to compete with the sending of men to the Moon without careful preparation. It is clear that no benefits would be derived from such a competition.

Khrushchev's comments then fed into the arguments of the opponents of the space program with Kennedy facing questions as to why the U.S. was continuing its expensive lunar project when the U.S. was no longer competing with the Soviet Union in a "space race." Asked about this at a news conference at the State Department Oct. 31, Kennedy replied,

The fact of the matter is that the Soviets have made an intensive effort in space, and there is every indication that they are continuing and that they have the potential to continue. I would read Mr. Khrushchev's remarks very carefully.

Kennedy's science adviser Jerome Wiesner had

written a memo to the President Oct. 29 saying that Khrushchev's statement should add momentum to a plan for cooperation. He suggested that the Soviets could provide unmanned exploratory and logistical support to the U.S. Moon landing:

It will give the USSR the opportunity of sharing in the credit for a successful lunar mission without incurring major expenditures beyond those they probably plan to undertake as a part of their present space program.

### **Khrushchev Takes the Offer**

Then suddenly, the day after Kennedy's Oct. 31 news conference, Khrushchev replied positively to the proposal. He said he had studied it "with great attention."

We consider, with due attention to the proposal of the U.S. President, that it would be useful if the USSR and the U.S. pooled their efforts in exploring space for scientific purposes, specifically for arranging a joint flight to the Moon. Would it not be fine if a Soviet man and an American or Soviet cosmonaut and an American woman flew to the Moon? Of course it would.

Khrushchev's statements led to accelerated planning for such a mission. The White House and State Department sent representatives to NASA to see what might be involved in exploring collaboration. There was not a great deal of enthusiasm in NASA for such cooperation, with their proposals being "procedural rather than substantive in character," as Arthur Schlesinger, who represented the White House in these discussions, put it. Schlesinger recommended that the President issue a directive on the matter and do it before his planned visit to Cape Canaveral Nov. 16 so that Kennedy, in his conversations with Webb during the trip, would "be saying the same things we have put in the directive."<sup>4</sup>

In the memo to Webb, Kennedy wrote:

I would like you to assume personally the initiative and central responsibility with the Government for the development of a program of substantive cooperation with the Soviet Union in the field of outer space, including the development of specific technical proposals. . . . These propos-

4. Logsdon, John M., *op. cit.*, p.192

als should be developed with a view to their possible discussion with the Soviet Union as a direct outcome of my Sept. 20 proposal for broader cooperation between the United States and the USSR in outer space, including cooperation in lunar landing programs.

Kennedy urged that the Dryden-Blagonravov discussions be continued as a means of moving forward in this program.

Kennedy had also marshaled his arguments to meet the objections of those who felt U.S.-Soviet cooperation would denigrate the efforts of the U.S. in space. In a Sept. 23 letter to Rep. Albert Thomas, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Kennedy wrote,

The great national effort and this steadily stated readiness to cooperate with others are not in conflict. They are mutually supporting elements of a single policy. We do not make our space effort with the narrow purpose of national aggrandizement. We make it so that the United States may have a leading and honorable role in mankind's peaceful conquest of space.

## The Light Goes Out

With the assassination of the President Nov. 22, the vision he put forward dimmed considerably, though U.S.-Soviet cooperation in space would be revived later at a different level in 1975 with the Apollo-Soyuz mission and cooperation on the International Space Station. President Lyndon Johnson was prepared to carry forward the general program of cooperation, but under greater constraints than those envisioned by Kennedy, and without including a joint Moon mission. Even James Webb, who continued as NASA Administrator under Johnson, put forward proposals of cooperation, though these were more in line with the step-by-step measures that had been followed earlier, as had

been more the general feeling within NASA.

As much else with the unanswered questions about “what might have been” had President Kennedy not been killed, the beginning of cooperation may well have led to a permanent presence on the Moon in the 1970s and the continuation of space exploration missions to other planets, combining the efforts and the capabilities of these two—and other—space-faring nations involved in the enterprise. Even more importantly, Kennedy's efforts could have been the beginning of a new era of mankind, where those areas of common interest between nations supersede the narrower thinking of the Cold War—egged on by those seeking to sow division amongst potential allies. With his death, a moment of opportunity was lost that has yet to re-emerge.

At the present moment in which the world is moving closer to nuclear disaster than at any time since the Cuba crisis, and when the noble endeavor of space exploration is threatening to become a new arena of political brinkmanship, it is most important to reflect on the outlook and commitment of this courageous president who combined his love for his country with his equally strong love for mankind. His is a legacy that we forget only at our own peril.

—Bill Jones, [cuth@erols.com](mailto:cuth@erols.com)



NASA/Neil Armstrong

*With Kennedy's death, the prospect of a joint U.S.-USSR mission to the Moon also died, and the U.S. went alone. Here: Astronaut Buzz Aldrin on the surface of the Moon, during the Apollo 11 mission, July 20, 1969.*

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