

52nd IAA HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)

“Can you believe they put a man on the moon?” (3)

Author: Dr. David Baker
United Kingdom, dbakeraero@aol.com

NASA’S STRUGGLE TO FIND A FOCUS IN 1958, THE ORIGIN OF THE 1961 MOON LANDING GOAL AND THE FIGHT FOR ITS ACCEPTANCE WITHIN THE SCIENTIFIC AND ENGINEERING FRATERNITY 1957-1962.

Abstract

The fight for a national focus for US space activity was wide open when Russia launched Sputnik 1 in October 1957. During the next 12 months three polarized interpretations of what that focus should be emerged among a wide range of opinion-shapers across the United States. They were: (1) national defense and security, (2) scientific investigation through “observatory”-class satellites and planetary exploration, and (3) national prestige supporting ideological imperatives in the Cold War. Vested interests sought priority for their respective points of focus and a secondary struggle broke out in which government agencies sought to command the “high ground” of space. Among these were the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the US Air Force and the US Army.

This paper will define the magnitude of that struggle, express the supporting evidence for each one brought by their respective supporters, and map the trajectory of changes brought about by a third element: the United States Congress. In establishing NASA out of the NACA, Congress subsumed that struggle to within a single organization, which had to redefine itself to present a coherent set of directions on which to set its limited resources. The paper will show how, having focused space activity in general into a single entity, Congress failed to give that agency direction and that it only exacerbated the multiplicity of possible options by focusing the three platforms into one agency - NASA

The paper will argue that this lack of direction applied to that focus (the establishment of NASA) exposed the agency to groups intent on influencing future programs. And that by absorbing the Army and Air Force elements which had fought for their own priorities, NASA became vulnerable to political interference, manifest through back-door lobbying by some elements within NASA for a grand and visionary objective. That became the Moon landing to which President Kennedy was recruited when seeking a means of exploiting space capabilities for demonstrating technological virility to uncommitted nations.

The paper will also examine the many several different paths that NASA could have taken had it not be (a) for the lobby group within NASA that wanted a grand-standing gesture as a launch platform to a truly space-faring culture and (b) the use of NASA by the political establishment as a means of achieving national political goals. It will also relate this background to the direction of future NASA program policies through the present.