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KENNEDY, NIXON, AND 21ST CENTURY SPACE EXPLORATION

Abstract

The space policy decisions made by U.S. presidents John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in the 1961-1972 period have largely defined the content and character of U.S. space exploration activities since. Kennedy, of course, set the challenging goal of landing Americans on the Moon and returning them safely to Earth “before this decade is out.” By mobilizing the human and financial resources to achieve that goal, he both created a lasting image of the appropriate approach to space exploration and transformed NASA into a large, ambitious organization centered on human spaceflight and large engineering projects. In considering what to do in space after the initial lunar landings, Richard Nixon rejected continuing an Apollo-like approach and instead in 1970 called for making “space activities . . . part of our lives for the rest of time,” not as “a series of separate leaps.”

President Kennedy and his decision to go to the Moon are usually seen as the exemplar of the kind of leadership required for a productive space exploration program. Space advocates since 1961 have yearned for another “Kennedy moment.” This paper will argue that in fact the path suggested by Richard Nixon is a more prudent and sustainable approach to 21st century space exploration, and that a dramatic leadership announcement of a specific space goal is both unlikely and not needed for such an effort.

President Nixon suggested in 1970 that “what we do in space from here on in must become a regular and normal part of our national life.” This was in fact wise advice, and an approach that can lead to humans continuing to explore and develop space for years to come.