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"Can you believe they put a man on the moon?" (3B)

Author: Ms. Jennifer Lauren Napier
Space Generation Advisory Council (SGAC), Austria

Mr. Thomas Cheney
Northumbria University, United Kingdom
Ms. Karina Perez
Space Generation Advisory Council (SGAC), United States

PRESIDENTS AS RATIONAL ACTORS: NASA AND THE MOON

Abstract

Much has been written about the United States Apollo moon missions and the presidents that defined the moon era of NASA. What this paper aims to bring to the discussion is the behavior or rationale as to why Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon decided it was critical that the United States endeavor to fly to — and land on — the moon. In political science, rational choice theory explains why actors behave in a certain way on an individual and societal basis. This theory can also be paired with methodological individualism and behaviorism. This paper will use these political science theories to better explain why United States presidents John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), and Richard Nixon (1969-1974) chose to create and maintain a space policy that included a program aimed at putting American astronauts on the moon. It is known that in the beginning Kennedy was not interested in space exploration. What was the rationale then behind his speech at Rice in May of 1961? Did Johnson only continue the Apollo program to continue the legacy of Kennedy? Why did Nixon decide to continue the Apollo program into the 1970s even though by then going to the moon was seen as “old news”? This paper would like to explore each of these presidents involvement with the Apollo program and their interest in the moon and in turn answer these questions about what their specific rationale was for a US moon program lasting over a decade. Another angle to be explored here is the rationale of having Dwight D. Eisenhower (republican) creating a space policy and space program that was then continued by two democratic presidents (Kennedy and Johnson) and then another republican president (Nixon). The rationale behind opposing parties and their presidents continuing a legacy like the Apollo program is an interesting aspect for political science observation and will also be discussed in this paper. Finally, this paper will conclude with a short comparison on future moon missions/policies that might arise in the United States and what the rationale is for President Trump to return to the moon more than forty years later.