
Off the Beat

The Apollo program: A dissent

On the fifth anniversary of man's landing on the moon, Space Sciences editor Jonathan Eberhart recalled his emotions about the great adventure, which had proceeded inevitably, he said, from "the nature of man" (SN: 7/27/74, p. 51). Science and Society editor John H. Douglas offers a contrasting view.

The Ancient Greeks gave the name Apollo to the spirit (or "god") of light and reason, which still inspires people to search into the unknown with the tools of rationality and experience we call science. Had the space-program "Apollo" really furthered the mainstream of that continuing quest, and I assume most people think it did, I would not be writing this dissent. But I believe that rather than opening new frontiers of science or "lifting the human spirit," as all the swirl of public relations surrounding the event proclaimed, manned exploration of the moon took money and talent away from other, intellectually more daring scientific ventures (including some in space) and diverted the attention of mankind, through good theater, away from facing the challenge of reality.

What theater it was! Like Jonathan, I have strong personal recollections of that period. I was about as far away from Houston as you can get without going into space—a Peace Corps Volunteer in a Conradsesque old pirate's cove on the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia. While my physics students were learning how to calculate escape velocities, the average man-in-the-street shared the excitement through television and radio, and the nation's official language center got busy creating a new Malay word for "astronaut." But I remember particularly a long ride and discussion with an old taxi driver, who carried on at length about the adventure and the sort of technological wizardry involved in attempting it. Reflecting the anxiety I suppose I shared with most Americans at the time, I asked whether he was worried at all about the safety of the astronauts, whom we both agreed were brave men. "No," he replied with sudden resignation, "the spirits of the moon will kill them."

In a way, they have. If NASA was going to name the lunar landing project after some Greek deity, why didn't they pick the goddess of the moon, Diana, who was also the spirit of hunt-

ing and adventure? Male chauvinism, I suppose. Nevertheless the true spirit of manned spaceflight was one of personal adventure more than scientific inquiry and it is precisely this impulse that now sours on the tongue as we speak about the events that have transpired in the five years since the first Apollo mission.

The space age was spawned in an atmosphere of nationalistic competition, the fear that if Russia "got there first" the resulting parade of triumph would somehow suck a worldful of impressionable little countries into its wake. Well, we won; where was *our* victory parade? As with our self-proclaimed victory in Vietnam, by the time the triumph arrived, intervening events had muted any calls for celebration. Anyone who would suggest such a huge project now, just for the sake of adventure and a little science, would be laughed at and reminded about the price of oil and inflation. The little countries we were so afraid would knock on Russia's door begging for a

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little communism are visiting sheiks in Araby, or worried sick over whether they will have enough food to prevent massive famine in the next couple of years. Certainly the Apollo program was not the only waste of money through all those years—at its height, the Vietnam war ate up a space program's worth of resources every year. But if we had to choose one symbolic act to represent our national spirit, why could we not have chosen one that reflected our country's oldest tradition—freedom from want and fear—rather than a continuation of frontier-busting cowboy romanticism.

I simply do not buy the conventional answers to these criticisms. Apollo was *not* the modern incarnation of the spirit of Columbus, who sailed in search of valuable spices, not a trunkful of rocks. We all knew from the beginning there would be no "New World" found on a lunar stroll. Manned spaceflight was *not* necessary to obtain valuable scientific data about our celestial environment. To me, the unmanned Viking probe of Mars, with its possibility of finding life, is infinitely more exciting. Most of all, the missions did *not* introduce us to a radically altered new view of ourselves, the concept of

"spaceship earth"—at least not nearly so poignantly as the down-to-earth crises that suddenly showed us we really *are* choking in our own excretions and wasting away our limited resources.

The argument is made that if the money hadn't been spent on a space program, it would just have been wasted elsewhere. No view could be fraught with more terror, or lead to more pessimism for the future of our species. Certainly we have experienced unforeseen crises, but the underlying problems—the population explosion, limited resources, the danger of military adventurism—have been recognized, detailed and preached interminably by some of the finest minds of our time since long before the Apollo idea was launched. My old taxi driver friend may still believe in animistic spirits inhabiting the moon, but like most around him, he had few illusions about the necessities of life. His simple economics of survival easily encompassed the threat of depleting Malaysia's vital tin resources, he spoke earnestly of the need for easier methods of birth control, he moaned at his folly in taking a second wife because rising food prices were making it harder to support her. I don't know what his reaction was when the astronauts finally did succeed, but it couldn't have been as enthusiastic as to some American program that would have helped *him*. The problems we had at the beginning of the space age are still with us, but they have grown to even more threatening proportions. I only hope some other costly diversion will not be invented to keep us from finally facing up to our problems with all the resources and ingenuity and dedication of which the Apollo program showed we are capable.

—John H. Douglas

Eberhart replies:

I thought we were going to disagree. Not only was the Apollo program outrageously expensive, grotesquely nationalistic and scientifically limp (for the investment), it further enmeshed the United States in self-perpetuating governmental-industrial obligations that demand new, major projects to keep from putting scientists, engineers and whole companies out on the street. The "inevitability," I believe, is not that Apollo would do what it did when it did, but that somehow, *somewhen*, man would take his first step Out. Whether for Apollo's reasons—national goals, beating the Russians—or because the world community might someday decide that it could collectively afford the venture, the step would be taken. Perhaps it needn't have been taken with Apollo's lead-shod boots on, but I'm glad I was there.