

## This Day in History... May 25, 1961

# JFK Calls to Put a Man on the Moon

On May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy delivered a speech to Congress announcing his plan to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

In October 1957, the Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik 1, the first human-made satellite. Alarmed by the potential threat the Soviet technology could pose, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) launched its first artificial satellite, Explorer 1, in January 1958. Later that year, President Dwight D. Eisenhower created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). NASA's first undertaking, Project Mercury, sought to discover if humans could survive in space.



*Issued for Kennedy's 50th birthday.*

During his 1961 State of the Union address, President John F. Kennedy offered to cooperate with the Russians in pursuit of space flight, but the premier refused the request. Within months, the reason became evident when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person in space on April 12. His 108-minute trip made him a hero in the Soviet Union and internationally. Though the US performed a similar feat just three weeks later, it proved the Soviet Union was ahead in the Space Race.

President Kennedy felt the pressure. America was losing the space race and the implications of Soviet space superiority would mean disaster for the Cold War. After weighing his options and meeting with Vice President Lyndon Johnson and NASA administrator James Webb, Kennedy believed that while landing a man on the moon would be difficult, it was also possible.

So on May 25, 1961, president Kennedy addressed a special joint issue of Congress to announce his ambitious goal. He stated that, "Now it is time to take longer strides – time for a great new American enterprise – time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth."

Kennedy went on to say that while America may not be the first to reach the moon, if we didn't try, we would be the last. Then he spoke one of the speech's most famous lines, "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; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."

In addition to landing a man on the moon, Kennedy announced that we needed to develop new fuel boosters, to discern what would work best. He also asked Congress for additional funding for the Rover rocket to explore space beyond the moon as well as space



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## This Day in History... May 25, 1961 continued



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satellites for both communication and weather observation.

Despite the high costs, Congress agreed with Kennedy's stance and work began immediately on making his vision a reality. Following the success of the Mercury Project, NASA then initiated Project Gemini, to perform experiments and resolve issues involved in moon exploration. The Gemini project proved that not only was it possible for humans to endure long space flights, but also that ships could dock together in space. Project Gemini also yielded extensive medical results on how the weightlessness experienced in space affects humans. Additionally, Project Gemini sent the world's first space probe to another planet, Venus, in 1962.

In addition to exploring space beyond our planet, many advancements and discoveries were made at this time involving satellite transmission. In July 1963, the US launched Syncom-2, a satellite orbiting the earth that showed ordinary citizens could receive satellite transmissions for television broadcasts after a one-time setup.

With one achievement after another, the United States and the Soviet Union continued competing to try to prove who was the world's leading "space power." After the success of the Gemini missions, the United States then introduced the Apollo program, aimed at landing a man on the moon. In the interest of ending any hostilities, President Kennedy had proposed in 1963 that the US and USSR create joint programs, sending their astronauts to the moon together. However, the Russian government feared this was simply an attempt to steal Russian space technology, and refused to cooperate. In December 1968, America gained substantial ground in the space race when three of its astronauts successfully became



*Stamps issued for the 50th anniversary of the Moon landing in 2019.*

the first to orbit the moon. Following the failed first Soyuz flight in 1967 and the deaths of several top Soviet astronauts, their plans for a moon landing soon fell apart and the program was canceled in 1969.

On July 20, 1969, the US craft Apollo 11 landed the world's first humans on the moon – Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. Armstrong's famous words, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind," were witnessed by a worldwide audience of about 500 million – the largest television audience for a live broadcast up to that time.

With this success, the US considered themselves the victors in the space race, although the USSR claimed they "won" when they sent the first person into space years earlier.



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