

Review - John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon

Written by Guilhem Penent

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As the product of a noted political scientist and longtime space policy specialist at George Washington University, John Logsdon's *John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon* has been long awaited [1]. It brings new insight into the history of the most spectacular U.S. and human space commitment ever accomplished. Certainly "to create as historically complete a record as possible of that [Kennedy] involvement" was needed (p. 3). Hence Logsdon tries to fill that gap and "details the full range of JFK's actions that carried Americans to the Moon." (p. 2) In doing so, the book recalls Graham Allison's famous *Essence of Decision* both in its first and second versions of 1971 and 1999 [2].

John Logsdon's effort is a re-visitation upon a previous study written in 1970 when the first landing on the Moon was still fresh and Project Apollo was still underway [3]. Nevertheless, some nine years after Kennedy's decision, Apollo was already a very emotive issue [4]. Without historical perspective, Logsdon's original 1970 study was somewhat incomplete.

As with Allison's text, Logsdon's 1970 book was based on interviews with participants in the decision process. And again, as with Allison, Logsdon has taken the opportunity to incorporate new perspectives, including declassified archives. For example, according to the author, one of the main issues which was not covered in his first version was Kennedy's perceptions over competition in space. Kennedy's goal regarding space was first (perhaps surprisingly) to engage with the Soviets through cooperation and joint venture projects. This revelation is one of the most interesting facets of the book. For Logsdon, despite Kennedy's preferences, he was forced into a more competitive stance after the launch of Yuri Gagarin into space on April 12 (p. 160).

"It was an approach that Kennedy was to use with respect to space in all his days in office – preferring to cooperate but being willing to compete if that was the better path to advancing U.S. interests." (p. 37) [5]

The Moon, Rationality and President Kennedy

The concluding chapter entitled "John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon" provides the most relevant perspective concerning how Apollo can yield some useful lessons. Why go to the Moon? According to Logsdon, *down there* was a problem – i.e. world perceptions regarding USSR as superior to the US – and *up there* was the solution. In other words: "a decision-maker identifies a desirable goal to be achieved or a problem to be addressed, assesses various options for achieving that objective, and selects the option with the best ratio of benefits to costs." (p. 226-7)

As a result, Kennedy must not be seen as a space visionary. Rather, he was a pragmatic decision-maker who took a political decision. Kennedy's interest in space was indeed many-fold. For Logsdon, "How much Kennedy's emotional state and competitive character determined or merely reinforced his resolve to proceed rapidly in space cannot be definitively known." (p. 79)

To cap it all, even for Kennedy, "space remained a relatively low priority item." (p. 39) According to the President himself:

"I am not that interested in space. I think it's good, I think we ought to know about it, we're ready to spend reasonable amounts of money. But we're talking about these fantastic expenditures which wreck our budget and all these other domestic programs and the only justification for it in my opinion to do it in this time or fashion is because we hope to beat them and demonstrate that starting behind, as we did by a couple of years, by God, we passed them." (quoted p. 156)

Kennedy's thought on space were above all symbolic (p. 8). As a relative and scarce good in a context of tremendous competition, prestige was important and the U.S. needed to present "a positive image [...] to the countries of the third world" (p. 7) before those states turned to the USSR. That point is certainly interesting. First, it is good to notice that the prestige motive can be integrated as an element of rationality. Certainly, outer space and prestige have a long history of mutual dependence [6]. However, second, NASA has a strong commitment to go *faster, higher, stronger* in order to be taken seriously and push for more budget. For example, the decision to go to the Moon was taken by President Kennedy but NASA had imagined the full adventure in 1959 [7].

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Kennedy's Legacy to Today's U.S. Space Program

In his 1970 book, Logsdon argued that the triumph of Apollo could serve as a model for other ambitious future large-scale projects. Obviously, that conclusion had turned out to be too optimistic, as witnessed by George H. Bush's stillborn "Space Exploration Initiative" (SEI) and George W. Bush's "Vision for Space Exploration" (VSE).

Forty years later, Logsdon now believes that all Apollo efforts

"were unique occurrences, a once-in-a generation, or much longer, phenomenon in which a heterogeneous mixture of factors almost coincidentally converged to create a national commitment and enough momentum to support that commitment through to its fulfillment." (p. 237)

As a result, conditions that made Apollo possible "were unique and will not reoccur." (p. 242) Worse, considering the impact on the U.S. space program, Apollo turned out to be a dead end as no human has left Earth orbit 1972.

Apollo, then, has more to offer as a "symbol of a great American achievement." (p. 237) The conclusion stated by the great American historian Walter A. McDougal is very similar: "Perhaps Apollo could not be justified, but, by God, we could not *not* do it." [8]

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References

[1] One of the reasons being the rise of a normative anti-Apollo narrative. As a late example, see Gerard J. De Groot, *Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest*, New York, New York University Press, 2007. Gerard De Groot's *Dark Side of the Moon* tries unoriginally to describe "the magnificent madness of the American lunar quest" as a gigantic waste of time and money. According to Roger D. Launius, the book is "a superficial, erroneous, and embarrassing book." He adds, "The Apollo epic deserves responsible consideration and reflective analysis, and responsible criticism; unfortunately Gerard DeGroot accomplishes none of this in "Dark Side of the Moon."" <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1YMU0UK3X3LZL/ref=cm_cr_dp_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0814719953&nodeID=283155&tag=&linkCode About Logsdon's book, for another review see, Jeff Foust, "Review: John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon," *The Space Review*, February 28, 2011 <<http://www.thespacereview.com/article/1786/1>>. See also the video, "John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon," *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, April 21, 2011 <<http://www.c-spanarchives.org/program/Racetot>>

[2] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York, Longman, 1999.

[3] John M. Logsdon, *The Decision to go to the Moon: Project Apollo and the National Interest*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970. Available online <<http://www.gwu.edu/~spi/assets/docs/TheDecisiontogotothemoon.pdf>>

[4] See Roger D. Launius, "Perceptions of Apollo: Myth, nostalgia, memory or all of the above?" *Space Policy*, 21, 2005, pp. 129-139

[5] Even if Logsdon agrees on Kennedy considering alternative paths in order to send Americans to the Moon, either as a unilateral undertaking or cooperatively, I find W. D. Kay's work more convincing. According to him, John F. Kennedy was in fact experimented a dual approach to the Cold War: 1) first, through technological competition as a demonstration of U.S. technological and military superiority; 2) second, through a broader definition of competition as a "conflict among entire political, economic and social systems, not just a contest to see which side could develop the best hardware." Kennedy's apparent willingness to cooperate provided a way of demonstration that the U.S. was trying to look beyond its own narrow national interests and that space exploration was actually a global concern for all

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humanity. In "Problem Definitions and Policy Contradictions: John F. Kennedy and the "Space Race"," *The Policy Studies Journal*, 31 (1), 2003, pp. 53-69. One needs only to remind the statement offered by the crew of Apollo 11 that "we came in peace of all mankind" and attached to all lunar plaques left on the Moon since that first landing.

[6] As quoted by John Logsdon from British diplomatic historian F.S. Oliver, "What prestige is, it would be hard to describe precisely. It may be nothing more substantial than an effect produced upon the international imagination – in other words, an illusion. It is, however, far from being a mere bubble of vanity; for the nation that possesses great prestige is thereby enabled to have its way, and to bring things that pass which it could never hope to achieve by its own forces. Prestige draws material benefits in its train. Political wisdom will never despise it." (p. 238) About prestige and space, see also Guilhem Penent, "The US Space Shuttle Legacy and IR: A Realist Perspective," *e-IR*, July 13, 2011 <<http://www.e-ir.info/?p=10549>>

[7] Other considerations than mere rationality were certainly involved in the decision-making process. Politics and personalities played an obvious part. The Apollo buildup allowed the NASA budget to grow from \$1.1 billion to \$5.7 billion, an increase of over 400 percent in just two years. Meanwhile, the NASA workforce increased from 10,200 civil servants in 1960 to 34,500 by the end of 1965 and the associated contractor workforce totaled 36,500 at the end of 1960 and was 376,000 by the end of 1965 (p. 119-120). All of that offered James Webb, the then administrator of NASA and a New Deal Democrat, "the room needed to put his agenda into practice." (p. 112) As noticed by John Logsdon, Apollo became "This "grand mix of noble vision and pork-barrel politics" [and] went well beyond anything that President Kennedy had in mind as he approved an accelerated space program, primarily as a foreign policy response to Soviet space successes that their political impacts." (p. 112) Regarding James Webb, see also, "Big Operator: James Webb's Space Age America" in Walter A. McDougall, ... *The Heavens and the Earth. A Political History of the Space Age*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, pp. 361-388. The same can be said of Lyndon Johnson who – as Vice-President and head of the Space Council – advised Kennedy on multiple occasions and implemented his vision of "Great Society" when he became President. However, despite the fact that "Project Apollo became the twentieth-century archetype of a successful, large-scale, government-led program" (p. 235), John Logsdon believes that the "rational approach was the predominant influence on policy choice in the 1961-1963." (p. 231)

[8] In McDougall, *op. cit.*, p. 324.