

Moon landing: 40 years later

Latest generations need to witness a giant leap

By Joseph Storch | SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

More than three decades ago, when astronauts Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt left behind the surface of the moon for what would be the final time, humanity closed the book on one of its greatest accomplishments. Since then, scientists and engineers have cured diseases, developed the Internet and made mobile phones the size of a credit card.

Research in these fields marches onward, keeping us continually on the verge of life-changing discoveries. Yet we have rendered all of the moonwalks to an increasingly distant past which, for many Americans, might as well be ancient history.

The legacy of the Apollo spacewalks straddles an increasingly growing generational divide. Two factors serve to worsen this generational disconnect. The inability of generations X, Y and Millennial to personalize the goose-bump feelings of those left earthbound as astronauts walked on the moon is only part of the problem.

When the 12 men who walked on the moon have passed on, we will be left with no direct connection to the only humans who have ever touched the face of another world.



Storch

Three, including Alan Shepard of Apollo 14, have already died. The youngest moonwalker, Apollo 16's Charles Duke, is 73 years old. Unless we as a society endeavor to return to the moon, our last human link with those lunar footsteps may soon be gone forever.

Now that we have reached the 40th anniversary of the moments when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first bounced down the steps to the dusty surface of the Earth's moon, it is time to recommit to human travel to the moon and beyond.

Such a task will certainly come at a cost, as we learned last week when the Obama administration asked NASA to look again at the high cost of returning humans to the moon by 2020. This spending, however, might foster key technological advances for society, as our space program has already done in the areas of computing, transportation and even health.

Beyond technological and scientific advances, there is another reason for the United States to return humans to the moon.

According to the Census Bureau, there are as many Americans born after the

last landing module left the moon's surface in 1972 as there are Americans who remember those days. Trips to the moon, Mars and beyond should not take the place of other important scientific research or come at the cost of funding America's other important domestic and international priorities.

But sending Americans on new missions could bring a sense of excitement and imagination.

Pictures and documentaries are no substitute for being there. There are many things we have missed by abandoning the moon. We have yet to witness the first woman or ethnic minority walking on another world. So many possible firsts have been replaced by a fading last.

If engineers working in the 1960s and 1970s with slide rules and graph paper could take us to the moon within a decade of President John F. Kennedy's pledge, we can certainly do so today and need not wait until 2020.

Returning humans to the moon will take funding that is in short supply, especially in this economy. Yet a new Apollo project can lead to incredible scientific advances and bridge the generational divide.

As we celebrate 40 years since the first moon landing, it is time for America to once again "slip the surly bonds of Earth."

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Forgotten frontier: We no longer imagine possibilities

WASHINGTON

Michael Crichton once wrote that if you had told a physicist in 1899 that within 100 years humankind would, among other wonders (nukes, commercial airlines), "travel to the moon, and then lose interest . . . the physicist would almost certainly pronounce you mad."

In 2000, I quoted these lines expressing Crichton's incredulity at America's abandonment of the moon. It is now 2009, and the moon recedes ever further.



Charles Krauthammer Washington Post Writers Group

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the first moon landing. We say we will return in 2020. But that promise was made by a previous president, and this president has defined himself as the anti-matter to George Bush. Moreover, for all Obama's Kennedyesque qualities, he has expressed none of Kennedy's enthusiasm for human space exploration.

So with the Apollo moon program long gone, and with Constellation, its supposed successor, still little more than a hope, we remain in retreat from space. Astonishing. After countless millennia of gazing and dreaming, we finally got off the ground at Kitty Hawk in 1903. Within 66 years, a nanosecond in human history, we'd landed on the moon. Then five more landings, 10 more moonwalkers, and, in the decades since, nothing.

To be more precise: almost 40 years spent in low Earth orbit studying, well, zero-G nausea and sundry cosmic mysteries. We've done it with the most beautiful, intricate, complicated — and ultimately, hopelessly impractical — machine ever built by man: the space shuttle. We turned this magnificent bird into a truck for hauling goods and people to a Tinkertoy we call the international space station, itself created in a fit of post-Cold War internationalist absent-mindedness as a place where people of differing nationality can sing "Kumbaya" while weightless.

The shuttle is now too dangerous, too fragile and too expensive. Seven more flights and then it is retired, going — like the Spruce Goose and the Concorde — into the museum of Things Too Beautiful And Complicated To Survive.

America's manned space program is in shambles. So what, you say? Don't we have problems here on Earth? Oh please. Poverty and disease and social ills will always be with us. If we'd waited for them to be rectified before venturing out, we'd still be living in caves.

Yes, we have a financial crisis. No one's asking for a crash Manhattan Project. All we need is sufficient funding from the hundreds of billions being showered from Washington to build Constellation and get us back to Earth orbit and the moon a half-century after the original landing.

Why do it? It's not for practicality. We didn't go to the moon to spin off cooling suits and freeze-dried fruit. Any technological return is a bonus, not a reason. We go for the wonder and glory of it. Or, to put it less grandly, for its immense possibilities. We choose to do such things, said JFK, "not because they are easy, but because they are hard." And when you do such magnificently hard things you open new human possibility in ways utterly unpredictable.

The greatest example? Who could have predicted that the moon voyages would create the most potent impetus to environmental consciousness here on Earth: Earthrise, the now iconic Blue Planet photograph brought back by Apollo 8?

Ironically, that new consciousness about the uniqueness and fragility of Earth focused contemporary imagination away from space and back to Earth. We are now deep into that hyper-terrestrial phase, the age of iPod and Facebook, of social networking and eco-consciousness.

But look up from your BlackBerry one night. That is the moon. On it are exactly 12 sets of human footprints — untouched, unchanged, abandoned. For the first time in history, the moon is not just a mystery and a muse, but a nightly rebuke. A vigorous young president once summoned us to this new frontier, calling the voyage "the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked." We came, we saw, we retreated.

How could we?

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