Man on the moon: Kennedy speech ignited the dream

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CNN

(CNN) -- Forty years ago this month, President John F. Kennedy presented a bold challenge before a joint session of Congress: Send a man to the moon by the end of the decade.

Some called his dream lunacy. Others viewed it as just another strategic move in the Cold War chess match between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Kennedy had just been humiliated in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, a failed invasion of Cuba -- a communist ally of Moscow. The invasion was backed financially by the United States and carried out by Cuban exiles.

> "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."
>
> — Pres. Kennedy, May 25, 1961

In his speech, Kennedy called for many measures to combat communism, requesting billions, for example, to stop communist activity in Southeast Asia.

But in his address, Kennedy chose space as the main Cold War battleground on which to marshal his forces. The Soviet Union opened the final frontier when it sent the Sputnik satellite into orbit in 1957.

Four years later, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space. The Soviets were beating the Americans to every milestone off the planet.

Feeling a sense of urgency in finding a way to overtake the Soviets in the space race, Kennedy had huddled with Vice President Lyndon Johnson and his science advisers to come up with a plan.

The president determined that safely landing a man on the moon would be technologically daunting, but it was a goal that the United States could reach before the Soviet Union.
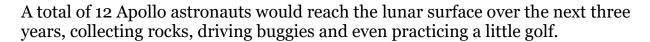
"No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish," Kennedy said.

The president cautioned Congress that the cost would be significant, more than $9 billion in 1960s dollars. Congress accepted the challenge.

Human space flight program takes off

Kennedy's vision guided NASA's human space flight program from the beginning. Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions were designed with his plan in mind.

Despite skeptics who thought it could not be accomplished, Kennedy's dream became a reality on July 20, 1969, when the spacecraft Apollo 11's commander Neil Armstrong took a small step for himself and a giant step for humanity, leaving a dusty trail of footprints on the moon.

A total of 12 Apollo astronauts would reach the lunar surface over the next three years, collecting rocks, driving buggies and even practicing a little golf.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union scrapped its lunar manned mission program before one cosmonaut reached the moon.

<u>While steeped in Cold War rhetoric, Kennedy's address also noted that the push to explore space transcended national rivalries.</u>

<u>"But this is not merely a race. Space is open to us now; and our eagerness to share its meaning is not governed by the efforts of others. We go into space because whatever mankind must undertake, free men must fully share."</u>

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Comprehension Questions:
1.) The article begins with the line, "Forty years ago this month, …" Now, look at the date that the article was published. How long ago was it that President John F. Kennedy gave this speech?
2.) At the beginning of the Space Race, it appeared that the Soviet Union was winning. Why?
3.) What happened to the Soviet Union lunar manned mission program?
4.) Look at the underlined lines. What did Kennedy mean?