

Giant leap for mankind: let's live up to neil armstrong's legacy

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We all know the story. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. He uttered the famous words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind". His accomplishment inspired the people who were alive when it happened, and it continues to inspire people today. Putting a man on the moon seemed to prove that there was a vast, unexplored frontier, and that humanity had progressed to the point where we could explore it. That was forty-three years ago.

By now, we all (hopefully) know the story's conclusion. On August 25, 2012, Neil Armstrong passed away, at the age of 82. And although he lived to a ripe old age, and his accomplishments were vast, this story does not have a happy ending. Neil Armstrong never lived to see a manned mission to Mars. He never lived to see a permanent settlement on the Moon.

Instead, five years after Armstrong opened the doors to the cosmos, they were slammed shut by the cancellation of the Apollo program. Armstrong lived to see NASA's funding cut and its projects shelved by a nation that, according to the popularity of news articles on the date of his death, is more interested in the birth of Snooki's son than in the death of the first of our species to walk on our moon. Armstrong lived to see bipartisan gridlock and societal apathy stop his country from continuing the exploration of the final frontier. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U. S. A.

apparently lost its incentive to explore the cosmos. The lack of manned missions to Mars since 1972 tells us that apparently the greatest accomplishment of our people was only funded so we could posture and awe our greatest rival. Now in 2012, the Russians are again catching up to our

space program, and this time they are joined by the Chinese, along with the rest of the world. Now, international cooperation in space is absolutely vital; sharing space technology with allies is an excellent idea. But a little bit of friendly competition never hurt anybody.

America has dominated space technology for decades. I would hate to see us surpassed due to our own apathy. Now yes, there have been many great scientific accomplishments in space since the seventies. These include many probes sent to Mars, and projects closer to home such as the International Space Station. But the majority of notable probes, from Voyager 1 and 2, the probes which will soon become the first objects to leave the solar system, to Pioneer 10 and 11, the probes that explored Jupiter and Saturn respectively, were launched in the seventies.

Plenty of probes have been launched since then, but not nearly enough. And even if more effort was put into unmanned space probes, that would just be a start. The lack of manned voyages makes these robotic missions much less impressive. It's as if a small child was allowed inside a candy store, but once there chose to not go any further than the entrance and just view the candy via video-feed. And then the child decided that even the video feed was a bit too much, and viewed it only through squinting eyes. Many people say the reason there have been no permanent settlements on the Moon or manned missions to Mars is because of the danger and prohibitive cost, or simply because it isn't yet possible.

To that I say, of course! The astronauts of the Apollo missions faced extreme danger, their missions were extraordinarily expensive, and many thought

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what they were trying to do wasn't possible. But they endured. Hundreds of intelligent people worked together to solve problems, and they came up with brilliant solutions that made the impossible possible. Some deaths have happened as part of the space program, but fewer than there could have been, and none on the Moon. As for the cost, the space race ended up paying for itself over and over again.

Such varied inventions as ear thermometers, long-distance telephone calls, smoke detectors, cordless tools, water filters, more lightweight building materials, improved computer technology, cool suits, pacemakers, ultrasound scanners, better planes, and literally thousands of more inventions that Americans use every day trace their origin directly back to NASA. NASA is severely underfunded, its budget is on its way to being cut yet again, and a large portion of its existing budget goes to things which don't directly impact space travel, such as climate change research. Imagine what new wonders would be invented that would improve our everyday lives if NASA was given just a tiny fraction of our bloated military budget. The benefits of spreading humanity off of Earth are far more than just the new technologies that will come from the effort. With threats to life's safety on Earth such as global nuclear warfare, asteroid or comet impact, supervolcano eruption, a deadly new virus, or simply the depletion of our natural resources makes it seem absurd that all of our eggs, so to speak, are still in one basket. As far as we know, humans are the only intelligent life in the entire universe, and despite the universe's many wonders, I believe that we are the most interesting thing going on in this universe.

It is simply irresponsible to not try to spread humanity out as far as we can while we have the opportunity. As it is, one terrible disaster could drive us to extinction. Establishing human population both on space stations and on planets, moons, and asteroids, would remedy this problem. In 2010, at the age of eighty, Neil Armstrong gave a speech in the Netherlands where he said he would serve as commander of a manned mission to Mars if he was asked. Many times towards the end of his life he criticized how little attention the government was paying to the space program, and his disappointment that the next generation had not topped his accomplishments. Let's honor his message now that he is no longer around to tell it.

Let's educate people on why NASA is important, and why sending both probes and manned missions to the far-reaches of the cosmos should be our ultimate goal. Let's explore space for the sheer wonder, adventure, and fascination, not for military gain. Let's retain our status as the greatest country on Earth by putting a man on Mars before anyone else puts a man on the Moon. Let's spread humanity as far as we can. Let's all take one small step for man, but one giant leap for mankind.