



## Multiple Means to an End: A Reexamination of President Kennedy's Decision to Go to the Moon

By Stephen J. Garber

On May 25, 1961, in his famously special "Urgent National Needs" speech to a joint session of Congress, President John F. Kennedy made a dramatic call to send Americans to the Moon "before this decade is out."<sup>1</sup> After this resulted in the highly successful and publicized *Apollo* Program that indeed safely flew humans to the Moon from 1969-1972, historians and space aficionados have looked back at Kennedy's decision in varying ways.

Since 1970,<sup>2</sup> most social scientists have believed that Kennedy made a single, rational, pragmatic choice to compete with the Soviet Union in the arena of space exploration as a way to achieve world prestige during the height of the Cold War. As such, the drama of space exploration served simply as a means to an end, not as an goal for its own sake.

Contrary to this approach, some space enthusiasts have argued in hindsight that Kennedy pushed the U.S. to explore boldly into space because he was a visionary who saw space exploration as a noble, worthy goal itself. While important to consider, this argument is seriously flawed because there is no solid evidence to show that Kennedy was a space visionary.

New historical evidence of cooperation with the Soviet Union has come to light recently that adds further dimensions to the "rational choice" model. In the weeks preceding May 25, 1961, Robert F. Kennedy was quietly assessing the Soviet leadership's inclinations toward taking a cooperative approach to human space exploration. Although this "back channel" did not produce any space agreements, the fact that President Kennedy pursued this track while simultaneously considering a competitive approach signifies a newly appreciated depth to Kennedy's political acumen. Kennedy publicly spoke about cooperating in space with the Soviets several times before May 1961, and afterward he pursued various forms of space cooperation, culminating several months before his death, in a call for a joint lunar mission. While at least one other author has discussed the notion that President Kennedy simultaneously pursued cooperative and competitive tracks,<sup>3</sup> this paper discusses some largely new details that flesh out this important argument.

Finally, a revisionist historical approach that analyzes President Kennedy's background and personal characteristics has appeared in the past few years. Kennedy's person-

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ality unquestionably affected his decision making, so examining Kennedy's personal qualities may add some nuance.

These four analytical paradigms (rational choice, space visionary, cooperation, and personality) are not meant to be mutually exclusive. Rather, viewing Kennedy's decision-making through different analytical lenses can help the historian put Kennedy's words and actions into a richer context and lead to greater understanding.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will argue that Kennedy did indeed use space as a tool for his larger political purposes in the Cold War battle for prestige and that space exploration was never a goal in itself for Kennedy. With the appearance of new historical materials, the story becomes more complicated, however. New details about Kennedy's personality provide a richer understanding of his decision making. Overall, the key point is that Kennedy did not make a single choice but tried to prevail over the Soviet Union by following multiple paths in space, sometimes simultaneously.

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING

President Kennedy began his administration in January 1961 with an ambivalence towards space policy. While a large part of his early campaign had been based on the supposed "missile gap" that

had the United States lagging behind the Soviet Union that President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon had allegedly allowed, this "gap" turned out to be false. Kennedy, however, didn't know this until after the election because Eisenhower refused to let him have a national security briefing. During the transition period, Kennedy had retained Eisenhower's science advisor, Jerome Wiesner, to head up a study on spaceflight, which concluded that human spaceflight was too expensive and yielded little scientifically beyond what robotic spacecraft could discover. Wiesner stayed on as Kennedy's science advisor and at the time, Wiesner's reluctance to endorse a strong human spaceflight program was thought to be balanced somewhat by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who had been a strong advocate for space exploration in the Senate. Ted Sorenson, Kennedy's influential young advisor, agreed with the Eisenhower plan to eliminate the White House's National Aeronautics and Space Council (NASC), but after Kennedy and Johnson discussed the issue during the transition, Kennedy overturned this decision and put Johnson in charge of the NASC.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the military-civilian bureaucratic turf fights over space did not help clarify matters for Kennedy.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most significant illustration of Kennedy's ambivalence on space was the fact that he waited until the end of January 1961 to appoint a new Administrator for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), James Webb.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this initial lack of political direction, NASA officials had been making ambitious plans involving human spaceflight for some time. In 1959, NASA planners had targeted a human landing on the Moon as a goal to follow Project *Mercury*, the first program to put Americans in space.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, one high official publicly called for a lunar landing goal as early as January 1958.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Kennedy's ambivalence on space or perhaps because of it, NASA lobbied hard in March 1961 for an additional thirty percent for its next fiscal year budget to finance the *Saturn* rocket and what had become known as the *Apollo* Lunar Program. The Bureau of the Budget, under David Bell, rejected NASA's plan as too expensive. Bell preferred to let the president delay a decision on the matter until later in the spring when Kennedy could come up to speed on the relevant space issues. In a comment that later

proved prophetic, NASA's Hugh Dryden told Bell: "You may not feel he (President Kennedy) has the time, but whether he likes it or not he is going to have to consider it. Events will force this."<sup>10</sup> NASA officials appealed for a direct meeting with the President, which was scheduled for March 22.

At this same time, however, Kennedy was increasingly preoccupied with political and military problems stemming from the Cold War. In late March, Kennedy had seriously considered sending a large contingent of troops to contend with an unstable political-military situation in Laos. On April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit the Earth, a severe blow to U.S. prestige that came less than four



President Kennedy with Robert Kennedy, his brother, close advisor and Attorney General.

Photo courtesy of NASA

years after the American hysteria to the *Sputnik* launches of October 1958. Then on April 17-19, came the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba.

On the afternoon of Gagarin's flight, a weary Kennedy answered the press' questions about the Soviets' achievement by saying "We are, I hope, going to go in other areas where we can be first and which will bring perhaps more long-range benefits to mankind. But here we are behind."<sup>11</sup> Two nights later, Kennedy met with Wiesner, Sorenson, Bell, Webb, and Dryden to discuss the situation. Clearly concerned, Kennedy said to the assembled team "If somebody could just tell me how to catch up. ... Nothing is more important."<sup>12</sup> After the Bay of Pigs debacle, Kennedy sent a memo to Johnson asking "Is there any... space program which promises dramatic results in which we could win?"<sup>13</sup> Johnson moved quickly and turned to NASA and Department of Defense people for some answers.

On May 5, the U.S. bounced back with Alan Shepard's successful suborbital flight. Three days later, Webb and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recommended to Johnson that the United States' best chance of beating the Soviets in the space race was for NASA to plan a human

lunar landing. Johnson immediately forwarded this recommendation to Kennedy and departed on a previously planned two week trip abroad.

On May 10, Kennedy met with his team of advisors minus Johnson. At that point, according to his national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, the president basically had made up his mind to try to beat the Soviets to the Moon.<sup>14</sup> While Kennedy approved the Webb-McNamara memo that laid out a competitive approach to the space race at that meeting, the story was more complicated, as this paper will demonstrate. Although Kennedy originally intended to send a written message to Congress, he changed his mind and decided to combine the *Apollo* bid with other matters in a special address to Congress that took place on May 25.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile during May, Kennedy was mulling over how to handle his upcoming June summit in Vienna with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. In particular, he directed Bundy's and Wiesner's staffs to draft memos outlining possible avenues of scientific cooperation with the Soviets, including space.

#### THE RATIONAL CHOICE MODEL: COMPETITION

The rational choice argument begins with John Logsdon's assertion that space was a political tool that Kennedy chose to win one battle of the Cold War, that of international prestige. From a political scientist's view, this case is a clear one of power politics at a time when the world's two superpowers competed not only militarily and politically, but also psychologically to win the "minds of men" through international scientific and technological prestige.<sup>16</sup> According to the rational choice model, this battle for prestige was political; while the *Apollo* Program indirectly produced technological advances, it was of no direct value in terms of the military balance of power.<sup>17</sup> Some analysts have even argued that the *Apollo* Program substituted space competition for military competition.<sup>18</sup>

In an interview by Logsdon after the fact, Wiesner noted that Kennedy and he discussed various options to score international politi-

cal prestige points, but nothing else seemed as feasible as the *Apollo* option. According to Wiesner, if there was another potential scientific or technological coup that the U.S. could have achieved, Kennedy might have opted out of an expensive space program. Besides, Kennedy supposedly felt that space was symbolic of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

A year after his decision, Kennedy explained it by saying that he saw three main ways that the U.S. could compete with the U.S.S.R.: militarily; economically; and technologically. He eliminated the first option because nobody wanted a nuclear war. The second option was not highly attractive because it would take a long time for a clear economic winner to emerge. But space exploration was the best option because the winner would be readily apparent to all the world.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Logsdon argues that Kennedy wanted to be reasonably assured of success and it is often easier to assess the feasibility of a technological option, as opposed to a "softer," social program.<sup>21</sup> Engineers and scientists were reasonably confident that if enough personnel and financial resources were devoted to the task, it could be achieved. Indeed, the *Apollo* Program proved easier to achieve than military victory in Vietnam, for example.<sup>22</sup>

According to the rational choice model, even some people directly involved in the *Apollo* Program clearly saw it as a vehicle for larger purposes, rather than a program that would likely produce much valuable scientific knowledge. Webb, for example, made a distinction between the scientific objectives and the lunar landing commitment, attaching much more significance to the latter. Because Webb was a skilled bureaucrat, he understood that Congress nevertheless would justify the *Apollo* Program's large expenditures on scientific grounds.<sup>23</sup> Webb was disappointed that the Soviets were winning the space race and disagreed strongly

with the Eisenhower Administration's seemingly passive approach to space. Thus he criticized the Eisenhower Administration for apparently failing to recognize that "There is such a thing as national pride in accomplishment."<sup>24</sup> In their May 8 memo, Webb and McNamara explicitly recognized the national prestige aspect of *Apollo*: "It is man, not merely machines, in space that captures the imagination of the world."<sup>25</sup>

Another facet of the "rational choice"



President Kennedy touring Cape Canaveral. Left to right, Mr. G. Low (NASA), President Kennedy, Astronauts Gordon Cooper and Gus Grissom, and G.M. Preston (NASA-Manned Space Flight Center).  
Photo courtesy of NASA

model is that Kennedy may have artificially created a crisis atmosphere to enhance his own decision making authority.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Eisenhower, who refused to submit to the public hysteria after the *Sputnik* launches, Kennedy may well have seen this as a opportunity to rally support behind his decision. In a broader context, one scholar argues that "Kennedy continually evoked the image of unparalleled crisis to justify his policies," believing that "crisis combined with presidential charisma becomes a way for the chief executive to *connect* with the public, and create support for presidential policies."<sup>27</sup> This argument is in keeping with Kennedy's calculated fear-mongering about the supposed "missile gap" during the 1960 campaign against Richard Nixon and the Eisenhower Administration.

In sum, John Logsdon's analysis of Kennedy's decision rests on four key points. He argues that Kennedy made sure to choose an arena in which political success was reasonably feasible. In addition, there already had been political debate on the space race, airing some of the political and technical issues. Third, debate had reached almost a crisis proportion, which meant that decisive action was easier for Kennedy to take. Leadership was the final factor: Kennedy capitalized on the three other factors and used his personal charisma to take the country in a bold new direction.<sup>28</sup>

While Michael Beschloss sees Kennedy's desire for a quick political victory as paramount to his decision, he also identifies some other factors that converged to solidify Kennedy's choice for a competitive approach to space. One such factor was Johnson's desire to stake out his own significant turf in space. Since his days in the Senate, Johnson had pushed for an aggressive space program. In addition, McNamara had his own reasons for supporting a large, expensive *Apollo* Program: namely, it would alleviate the hardships for aerospace and defense contractors that he anticipated would otherwise result from his planned cutbacks in defense spending. Finally, *Apollo* seemed to fit in well with what Sorenson called the "New Frontier spirit" of the Kennedy administration. Overall, however, "as Kennedy conceded, his decision for an accelerated Moon landing was ultimately a political decision made in terms of Cold War strategy."<sup>29</sup>

The main strength of the rational choice model is its emphasis on Kennedy's decision as a politically pragmatic one. In the context of events such as Gagarin's flight and the Bay of Pigs fiasco, it is hard to refute that Kennedy was

looking for a quick political victory. It is also clear that he consulted with space experts in the government so he could make an informed decision. Treating Kennedy's *Apollo* decision as the single, most logical choice is not telling the full story, however. The rational choice model does not account for the other space options Kennedy was simultaneously pursuing, nor does it factor in his personality and decision making style.

## THE VISIONARY SPACE LEADER MODEL

In contrast to the rational choice model, a number of space enthusiasts have looked back fondly at Kennedy's decision to go to the Moon as a landmark in promoting space exploration for its own sake. These enthusiasts believe he took a personal interest in space.

Lawrence Suid, for example, argues that "Kennedy nurtured within himself an innate sense of adventure and curiosity about the unknown."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Kennedy supposedly "had a genuine fascination with space."<sup>31</sup> Suid cites sources such as Robert Kennedy, Sorenson, and Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, in observing that Kennedy had a "romantic" view of space and saw himself as a latter-day Columbus or Lewis and Clark.<sup>32</sup>

Several problems exist with Suid's overall view. Most of the available evidence points to a total ambivalence on Kennedy's part regarding space exploration before 1961; he was neither pro nor con, he just didn't think about it much beyond

the supposed "missile gap." For example, legendary aerospace pioneer Charles Stark "Doc" Draper had more than one dinner conversation before the 1960 election with both John and Robert Kennedy about the merits of rockets in which the Kennedy brothers expressed to Draper that they thought rockets to be a waste of money and were negative in general on this subject.<sup>33</sup> Journalist Hugh Sidey noted that on assuming the presidency, Kennedy "seemed to know less" and to be "less interested in" space than in virtually any other major policy issue.<sup>34</sup> Finally, if Kennedy had really been such a strong supporter of space exploration all along, why had he not



President John F. Kennedy is briefed by Astronaut Walter Schirra at Complex 14. The full MA-8 configuration that Schirra is scheduled to fly, a six-orbit mission, was displayed to the President, Vice President and National Aeronautics and Space Council.  
Photo courtesy of NASA

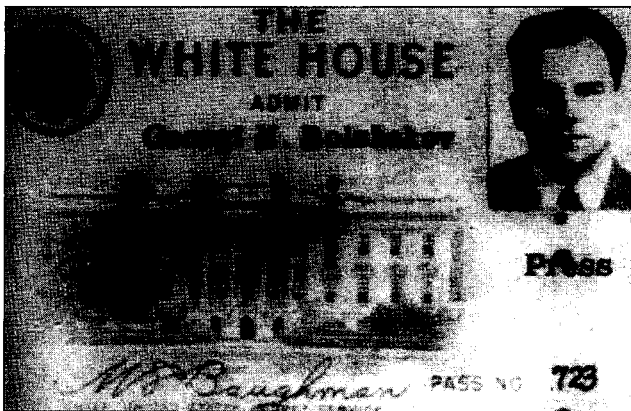
approved NASA's request for an increased budget for *Apollo* back in March 1961?<sup>35</sup>

Suid even argues that the Bay of Pigs debacle was irrelevant to the *Apollo* decision because Kennedy had supposedly made up his mind at his April 14 meeting.<sup>36</sup> The genesis of this faulty argument is that Sidey, who had waited inside the White House during this meeting, asked Sorenson what the upshot of the meeting was. After ducking inside to speak with Kennedy again, Sorenson dramatically told Sidey, "We're going to the Moon."<sup>37</sup> While this remark may be accurate, the problem with this interpretation is that on April 14, Kennedy had not even sent his well-known memo to Johnson asking how the U.S. could beat the U.S.S.R. in space, nor obviously had Johnson forwarded this inquiry to Webb and McNamara. Johnson, Kennedy's designated point man on space, hadn't even attended the April 14 meeting, for whatever reason. Clearly, in mid-April Kennedy was still evaluating his options.

In short, Kennedy knew little and cared little about space until events forced him to pay it heed. Because Kennedy's call for a lunar mission captured the public's imagination so vividly, some space enthusiasts have convinced themselves that Kennedy was a space supporter all along. This totally neglects the context of his decision, as well the fact that politicians rarely, if ever, make such high-profile decisions on merit alone; there are usually political reasons for major policy decisions.

### THE COOPERATIVE TRACK MODEL

Recently uncovered evidence of Kennedy's quietly trying to assess the Soviets' interest in space cooperation, particularly in May 1961, points to a more nuanced political evolution of Kennedy's *Apollo* decision than either of the two previous models. In addition to White House staff memos on potential areas of scientific cooperation in space with the Soviets, President Kennedy instructed Robert



Georgi Bolshakov's press pass from the book *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958-1964* by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali.

Courtesy of Aleksandr Fursenko's Collection

Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk to sound out the possibilities for cooperating, instead of competing, with the Soviets.

This cooperative track story begins in earnest on May 9, 1961, when Robert F. Kennedy first met Georgi Bolshakov in Washington. In addition to being the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy was the president's brother and one of his closest advisors.<sup>38</sup> Bolshakov was a Soviet military intelligence officer who was stationed at the embassy in Washington and had been introduced to Kennedy by a journalist who happened to know both men. While Bolshakov was a relatively low-level officer, he was friends with Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law, presumably a good link to the Kremlin. The Attorney General privately met with Bolshakov to discuss the general state of superpower relations and such topics as Cuba, Southeast Asia, a nuclear weapons test ban, and the upcoming Vienna summit. Although no substantive agreements came out of this initial meeting, Robert Kennedy had established a secret back channel for communicating with the Soviet leadership.<sup>39</sup>

To try to straighten out some mutual misunderstandings and frustrations on strategic superpower issues, on May 17 President Kennedy decided to go ahead with the June summit meeting and also instructed Rusk and Robert Kennedy to make entreaties on space cooperation to the Soviets. Three days later, Rusk discussed the possibility of a joint space program with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at the United Nations in New York. Gromyko, who some Americans nicknamed "Mr. Nyet," was less than enthusiastic. On May 21, the Attorney General again met privately with Bolshakov and indicated that the president wanted to conclude an agreement on space cooperation at the Vienna summit.<sup>40</sup>

At this point, time was running short. The Vienna summit was scheduled for early June. Kennedy had promised to deliver a special message to Congress in a few days and he wasn't sure what tone to take regarding Soviet relations.<sup>41</sup> As it turned out, nothing came of Robert Kennedy's proposal to Bolshakov on space cooperation.

Yet, many years afterward, Sorenson remarked: "It is no secret that (President) Kennedy would have preferred to cooperate with the Soviets on space exploration."<sup>42</sup>

Significantly, the timing of Robert Kennedy's and Rusk's entreaties also indicates that even though President Kennedy had signed off on the Webb-McNamara *Apollo* plan earlier in May, he was still considering other options until almost immediately before May 25.

Even without knowledge of the Robert Kennedy-Bolshakov back channel, other analysts in the cooperative track mode have argued that space exploration was never quite the "either-or" dichotomy of competition versus cooperation that conventional wisdom might dictate. According to Arnold Frutkin, NASA's former head of international relations, this parallel pursuit was certainly conscious and Webb even publicly compared space policy to Janus, looking in

two directions.<sup>43</sup>

Also supporting this cooperative track model, there had been other, perhaps more minor, efforts at space cooperation since NASA's inception in October 1958. Indeed, NASA's charter, the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958, called for the space agency to pursue international cooperative efforts when appropriate. In 1959, NASA Deputy Administrator Dryden began an ongoing series of talks with Soviet academician A. Blagonravov.<sup>44</sup> The next year, NASA officials offered to share their spacecraft tracking services with the Soviets and also proposed using a U.S. satellite, *Echo I*, to exchange messages between the American and Soviet peoples.<sup>45</sup>

Kennedy's remarks during the first month of his presidency lend further credence to the cooperative track model. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, President Kennedy referred to U.S.-U.S.S.R. cooperation in space when he said, "Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars..."<sup>46</sup> Ten days later, in his first State of the Union address to Congress, he invoked this thought again and elaborated: "Specifically, I now invite all nations—including the Soviet Union—to join with us in developing a weather prediction program, in a new communications satellite program and in preparation for probing the distant planets of Mars and Venus..."<sup>47</sup> What was the significance of those words? While opinions differ, one viewpoint is that while Kennedy was critical of the Eisenhower Administration for letting the U.S.S.R. surpass the U.S. in space and a variety of other fields, he also felt that Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had failed to explore imaginative opportunities for agreements between the two countries that could have alleviated superpower tensions.<sup>48</sup>

In any event, Kennedy quickly instructed his White House staff to look into concrete ways to cooperate with the Soviets. Wiesner followed up by convening a panel with representatives from NASA, the President's Science Advisory Committee, and the State Department. This panel came up with a variety of ideas, including setting up an international lunar base.<sup>49</sup> During spring 1961, Wiesner's and Bundy's staffs produced at least half a dozen similar memos on possible scientific projects for international cooperation in preparation for Kennedy's summit meeting with Khrushchev. In a memo ironically dated May 25, 1961, Eugene Skolnikoff, who was on Wiesner's staff, proposed:

"We should offer the Soviets a range of choice as to the degree and scope of cooperation (on various scientific and space projects)."<sup>50</sup>

At the top level of government, in February 1961 Kennedy had sent Khrushchev a telegram congratulating him on the Soviet launch of a robotic spacecraft to Venus. Khrushchev replied to this telegram and responded to the



President Kennedy receives a briefing from Gordon Cooper during a tour of Cape Canaveral facilities.

Photo courtesy of NASA

public calls that Kennedy had made in January for space cooperation by linking this issue to progress on mutual disarmament. Not prepared to pursue the disarmament link, Kennedy tried to ignore it. After Yuri Gagarin's flight on April 12, Kennedy again sent the Soviet leader a congratulatory telegram calling for space cooperation.<sup>51</sup>

Lending additional support to the cooperative track model is the fact that even after Kennedy's May 25th speech, he periodically

continued to broach the topic of space cooperation. At the Vienna summit, Kennedy proposed a joint lunar mission to Khrushchev. The Soviet leader reportedly first said no, then replied, "Why not?" and then changed his mind again, saying that disarmament was a prerequisite for U.S.-U.S.S.R. cooperation in space.<sup>52</sup> Despite Kennedy's earlier entreaties, Khrushchev was not prepared to deal seriously with this proposal then. The Soviet military generals, who ran their country's space efforts, were against this cooperation because they were afraid of showing their weakness in Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).<sup>53</sup> Additionally, at this time, the Soviet leadership was focused on problems in Berlin, while the American public had already quickly seized on the competitive approach.<sup>54</sup>

After John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth in February 1962, Khrushchev seemed to reconsider. He sent Kennedy a congratulatory telegram suggesting perhaps there were some areas of space where the two countries could cooperate. Kennedy responded back and Dryden and Blagonravov began holding serious talks again.<sup>55</sup>

Kennedy's words and actions shortly before his death provide key support to the cooperative track model. In late August 1963, Kennedy again broached the topic of a joint lunar mission with the Soviets, this time with the Soviet ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Dobrynin.<sup>56</sup> On September 20, 1963, Kennedy made a well-known speech before the United Nations in New York, in which he urged the two superpowers to do the "big things" together and specifically proposed a joint human mission to the Moon.<sup>57</sup> After this

speech, in response to pointed questions from Congress, Kennedy echoed Frutkin's dismissal of the "either-or" argument, writing "This great national effort (we have underway for space) and this steadily stated readiness to cooperate with others are not in conflict. They are mutually supporting elements of a single policy."<sup>58</sup>

By this time, Khrushchev was favorably inclined to support such a joint effort for several reasons: he felt that he had less to hide in terms of ICBM development; he trusted Kennedy more after the political climate of the Cuban missile crisis had improved; and there was a potentially great cost savings.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963 and as president, Johnson did not follow through as actively on increasing cooperation in space. To some degree, however, President Johnson did carry forward the idea of dual tracks, noting that the U.S. intended to carry out its manned lunar landing program, with or without the Soviets.<sup>60</sup>

Overall, Kennedy had maintained an interest in cooperating with the Soviets in space since he had begun contemplating space policy. Both before and after he made what became a large commitment to a competitive approach, Kennedy also tried other approaches to achieving his political goal of increasing U.S. international prestige through scientific and technological achievements. Specifically, he was not afraid to try simultaneously both competitive and cooperative approaches to an issue. Thus Kennedy was a more complex, calculating politician than either the rational choice or visionary space leader model suggests.

## THE PERSONALITY MODEL

Another perspective to consider is a recently developed revisionist historical approach to Kennedy's presidency that focuses on his personal attributes and character traits as ways to understand his policy decisions. Seymour Hersh, for example, portrays the Kennedy brothers' extensive use of the Bolshakov back channel for communication on many U.S.-U.S.S.R. issues as reckless, since it bypassed many knowledgeable Soviet experts in the U.S. government.<sup>61</sup> But there is more to the personality model than simply recklessness.

Richard Reeves characterizes Kennedy as a consummate politician who was ambitious and calculating. For example, after Kennedy surprised and angered some of his closest supporters by picking Lyndon Johnson as his running mate in 1960 (which he did out of a sober political calculus, judging that Johnson was the man who could help him most as a candidate), Kennedy deliberately spread various rumors that he never wanted or expected Johnson to accept.<sup>62</sup> Hersh also tells some familiar stories about the competitive spirit that Joseph P. Kennedy inculcated in his sons.<sup>63</sup>

An important part of the "Camelot mystique" was President Kennedy's self-confidence and style. In addition to growing up in a wealthy family and having success come relatively easily to him, Kennedy also took medication for Addison's disease and back pain that sometimes produced side effects of an adrenaline-like rush of exaggerated power.<sup>64</sup> Kennedy, according to Reeves, was decisive, but tended to procrastinate until he felt he had to make a decision. Reeves also describes Kennedy as being pragmatic on most political issues, although he was ideologically opposed to Communism.<sup>65</sup> If one accepts these premises, the implications for Kennedy's decision to go to the Moon are rather clear: he was willing to try various options and to put stock in his leadership abilities once he made a move.<sup>66</sup>

Reeves also argues that Kennedy liked to keep some of his advisors on edge with an informal style of obtaining information from various sources.<sup>67</sup> This also makes sense in the *Apollo* context, as he pursued multiple paths to the same objective. According to this personality model, his reputation as a quick study on various complicated policy issues meant that he was willing to go out on a limb with a bold proposal to send Americans to the Moon when the U.S. had not even sent an astronaut in orbit yet.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps ultimately, the *Apollo* decision was a tough one for Kennedy because he felt he needed to make a fast decision in the spring of 1961. As the historical record shows, he uncharacteristically continued to revisit his May 25, 1961, choice.

In general, analyses of Kennedy's background and personal characteristics provide a deeper understanding of his decision-making style. Kennedy certainly was competitive, ambitious, and reckless, but the most important of these characteristics for the purposes of this paper is his political ambition. The Kennedy brothers did recklessly bypass most Soviet experts within the U.S. government by secretly using the Bolshakov back channel to the Kremlin on a host of U.S.-U.S.S.R. issues, but on the lunar program, President Kennedy had already solicited the advice of his Administration's top space officials. Since authors such as Hersh and Reeves have not focused directly on his *Apollo* decision, their analyses are limited to applying Kennedy's general personal characteristics to a specific policy decision. As such, adherents of the personality model are relegated to speculating, instead of directly analyzing evidence.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is still clear that when Kennedy felt political pressure to respond to the Soviets' initial successes in space, he made a calculated, initial decision to adopt a publicly competitive posture. There is little doubt that he opted for this approach because his advisors told him that the U.S. had a decent chance at beating the Soviets on

this particular playing field, and he needed a positive, future-oriented announcement for public consumption after the Gagarin and Bay of Pigs embarrassments.

Providing a sharp contrast to this rational choice analysis, those who view Kennedy as a visionary space leader read into his decision a motivation that was not present. In short, there is no conclusive evidence to support the claim that Kennedy ramped up the space program because he believed that it warranted a larger budget on its own merits.

The most enlightening recent evidence about Kennedy's lunar decision relates to efforts at cooperation. While his numerous statements before and after May 25, 1961, on space cooperation have been public knowledge, only recently have historians fully realized that Kennedy simultaneously pursued cooperative and competitive efforts. This fact is significant because it indicates a much greater level of political calculation on Kennedy's part than was previously realized. In particular, Robert Kennedy's back channel with Georgi Bolshakov demonstrates John Kennedy's predilections for assessing political situations through multiple information sources and for relying on personal contacts, rather than official government channels. In retrospect, whether it was because of his relative ignorance on space issues or some other reason, President Kennedy seemed unsure of his decision at the time and continued to revisit it. Because of his uncertainty, he employed multiple approaches to achieve his political goal of national supremacy in the Cold War.

Policy decisions are made by humans; thus personal characteristics of leaders are obviously important but need to be put in perspective. In this case, it is certainly worth considering how Kennedy's tremendous self-confidence, political ambition and competitive streak may have affected his decision making. But while Kennedy was also very reckless in many ways, it is a stretch to characterize his *Apollo* decision as reckless. It may have been bold and even ill-advised in hindsight, but he did get the best advice he could before making his decision.

As might be expected, Kennedy's decision was more complicated than it first appeared. Instead of making a single political calculation, Kennedy tried to give himself multiple options by exploring various ways to cooperate with the Soviets, particularly through the Robert Kennedy-Georgi Bolshakov back channel. Beyond saving a very significant amount of federal expenditures, such a cooperative venture could have yielded Kennedy just as great popular support as his *Apollo* decision did receive. Kennedy was a fierce Cold Warrior and thus he presumably calculated that if he could coopt the United States' socialist opponent, he would be likely to receive a tremendous political gain because none of his domestic opponents could reasonably accuse him of being weak in dealing with the Soviets. Such a political gambit might have succeeded even more than President Nixon's famous trip to China two presidential administrations later.

Ultimately, this story of Kennedy's decision-making on

*Apollo* indicates that space was a tool for his political purposes. At the presidential level, this should not be surprising since presidents usually have only a limited amount of political capital to spend on a potentially vast array of their favorite programs. Kennedy was an astute politician who had few deeply-held political convictions and space exploration was not one of them. Thus it is ironic that Kennedy is often remembered as a champion of space exploration.

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#### CHAT SESSION INSTRUCTIONS

To participate in a chat session, you must have access to the World Wide Web, often called the "Internet." Once you have that, then you will need a browser such as Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Explorer to download (load onto your computer) chat software. To do this, go to the following site:

<http://www.space.edu/public/IRC/>

This page will give you options for downloading software. Download chat software; we normally use Globalchat. The address you will give to Globalchat when you join a chat session will be "irc.space.edu". Once linked to this site, then "list chat rooms," and then select the "Quest" chat room. This is the location of the discussion session.



**CHRONOLOGY:**

December 1960: Eisenhower rejects NASA's lunar landing plans because of cost.

January 1961: President Kennedy's inauguration and State of Union addresses both mention space cooperation.

March 22: NASA asks for meeting with Kennedy to approve *Apollo* plans after Bureau of the Budget rejects them.

Late March: Kennedy almost sends troops to Laos.

April 12: Yuri Gagarin's flight; in late afternoon press conference, weary Kennedy hopes to find "other areas where we can be first."

April 14 (evening): Kennedy meets with Wiesner, Sorenson, Bell, Webb, and Dryden: "If somebody could just tell me how to catch up...nothing is more important."

April 17-19: Bay of Pigs incident.

April 20: Kennedy memo to Johnson: "Do we have a chance of beating Soviets by...?"

April 21: Kennedy press conference: "If we could reach the Moon before the Soviets, we should."

May 5: Johnson asks NASA, DoD to meet to hash out detailed recommendations; Shepard completes suborbital flight.

May 6: Webb and McNamara conclude lunar landing project is US' best shot.

May 8: Johnson gets their recommendation memo, forwards it to Kennedy; leaves for Asia for over two weeks.

May 9: Robert Kennedy first meets with Georgi Bolshakov, establishing a back channel to discuss US-USSR relations.

May 10: President Kennedy meets with key advisors (minus Johnson) and supposedly makes up his mind to go to Moon.

May 12: Khrushchev writes letter to Kennedy expressing concern over international tensions related to Cuba and suggesting a general dialogue.

May 16: Wiesner memo to Kennedy on possible scientific cooperative ventures.

May 17: White House decides to go ahead with Vienna summit. President Kennedy, undecided about lunar mission, instructs Dean Rusk and Robert Kennedy to broach joint space exploration with Soviet leadership.

May 20: Rusk broaches joint space program with Gromyko.

May 21: Robert Kennedy meets with Bolshakov again and indicates that President Kennedy would like to conclude a space agreement in Vienna.

May 25: President Kennedy's "urgent needs" speech to Congress; Skolnikoff memo for upcoming Vienna summit on scientific cooperation.

June 4 (Vienna meeting): Kennedy broaches cooperation to Moon with Khrushchev, who rejects this, linking issue to disarmament.

February 20, 1962: John Glenn becomes first U.S. astronaut in orbit. Renewed contacts between Kennedy and Khrushchev on space cooperation begin.

August 1963: Kennedy talks to Dobrynin about a joint lunar mission.

September 20, 1963: Kennedy makes a speech before the United Nations, proposing a joint US-USSR human mission to the Moon.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> John M. Logsdon, editor, with Linda J. Lear, Janelle Warren-Findley, Ray A. Williamson, and Dwayne A. Day, *Exploring the Unknown: Selected Documents in the History of the U.S. Civil Space Program, Volume I: Organizing for Exploration* (Washington: Government Printing Office, NASA SP-4407, 1995), (hereafter referred to as Logsdon, et al., Volume I), pp. 453-454. This version of the relevant portion of Kennedy's speech includes what Kennedy actually said and his prepared speech, as he departed from his prepared text.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Logsdon's seminal study, *The Decision To Go To The Moon: Project Apollo and the National Interest* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970) was published that year. Hereafter this book is referred to simply as Logsdon.

<sup>3</sup> W.D. Kay, "John F. Kennedy and the Two Faces of the U.S. Space Program, 1961-1963" (undated draft paper) available from the Historical Reference Collection, NASA History Office, Washington, D.C. This paper was later published with the same title in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Summer 1998.

<sup>4</sup> The classic text by Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York and elsewhere: Longman Publishers, second edition, 1999) provides three excellent, similar frameworks for political scientists: rational actor; organizational behavior; and bureaucratic politics. This volume provides a strong framework to understand how policymakers make complex political decisions generally, and also obviously is useful in understanding President Kennedy's actions.

<sup>5</sup> Logsdon, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Logsdon, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this period of uncertain political direction within NASA see, for example, Logsdon, p. 64, or Robert C. Seamans, *Aiming at Targets: The Autobiography of Robert C. Seamans* (Washington, Government Printing Office, NASA SP-4106, 1996), pp. 74-78.

<sup>8</sup> Logsdon, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Logsdon, p. 119. Hugh Dryden, who became the deputy administrator of NASA, made this speech on January 27, 1958, several days before the U.S. had even lofted into Earth orbit its first satellite, *Explorer I*.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Holmes, *America on the Moon: The Enterprise of the Sixties* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1962), p. 194, and interview with former NASA associate adminis-

trator Robert Seamans, cited in Logsdon, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Susan Miller, compiler, *Statements of John F. Kennedy on Space Exploration, 1952-1963* (NASA Historical Note No. 26, Draft, August 29, 1963) available in the Historical Reference Collection, NASA History Office, Washington, D.C.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Sidey, *John F. Kennedy, President* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1964) pp. 122-123.

<sup>13</sup> Logsdon, et al., Volume I, pp. 423-424.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Bundy cited in Logsdon, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> Logsdon, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, fourth edition, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Logsdon, p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Chapter 9, "The Space Substitute for War," pp. 150-174, Frank B. Gibney and George J. Feldman, *The Reluctant Space-Farers: The Political and Economic Consequences of America's Space Effort* (New York: New American Library, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> Logsdon, pp. 110-111.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Baker, *The Johnson Eclipse: A President's Vice Presidency* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 131 and Logsdon, p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> Logsdon, p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Logsdon, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Vernon Van Dyke, *Pride and Power: The Rationale of the Space Program* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 176. Indeed, the Congressional committees that appropriated the funds were the science committees since Congress did not have a committee on national pride or prestige.

<sup>24</sup> Webb letter to James Killian, Eisenhower's first science advisor, March 28, 1961, Webb Papers, Truman Library, cited in W. Henry Lambright, *Powering Apollo: James E. Webb of NASA* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 93.

<sup>25</sup> Logsdon, et al., Volume I, pp. 439-452.

<sup>26</sup> Theodore J. Lowi, "Making Democracy Safe for the World:

National Politics and Foreign Policy," in James Rosenau, ed., *Domestic Source of Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 320. Lowi argues that modern presidents have needed to oversell the crisis proportion of many situations to establish the "moral equivalent of war."

<sup>27</sup> Michael Meagher, "In An Atmosphere of National Peril': The Development of John F. Kennedy's World View," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, summer 1997, pp. 475-476. Meagher points out that in his first State of the Union address, Kennedy told Congress that "I speak today in an atmosphere of national peril." See p. 471.

<sup>28</sup> Logsdon, pp. 179-181 and especially p. 181.

<sup>29</sup> This overall theme and its three subthemes are identified in Michael Beschloss, "Kennedy and the Decision to Go to the Moon," in Roger D. Launius and Howard E. McCurdy, editors, *Spaceflight and the Myth of Presidential Leadership* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), pp. 51-67. Sorenson's "New Frontier spirit" is identified in Theodore C. Sorenson, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 525. The final quote in this paragraph is from Beschloss, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Suid, "Kennedy, *Apollo* and the Columbus Factor," *Spaceflight*, July 1994, p. 229.

<sup>31</sup> Suid, p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> Suid, p. 228. Suid also remarks that Kennedy had "undoubtedly read" Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* while a student at Harvard, although he provides no evidence of this assertion.

<sup>33</sup> Interview of Charles Draper by Eugene Emme and James Grimwood, August 27, 1973, file 13464, Historical Reference Collection, NASA History Office, Washington, D.C.

<sup>34</sup> Sidey, p. 59 cited in Logsdon, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> Dwayne A. Day, George Washington University Space Policy Institute, e-mail to Roger D. Launius, NASA Chief Historian, December 13, 1994, copy available from the Historical Reference Collection, NASA History Office, Washington, D.C.

<sup>36</sup> Suid, p. 226.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Murray and Catherine Bly Cox, *Apollo: The Race to the Moon* (New York: Simon and Schuster), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Allison and Zelikow, p. 383 even contend that after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President Kennedy never made a major foreign policy move without consulting with his brother

Robert.

<sup>39</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), pp. 110-113.

<sup>40</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, pp. 121-122.

<sup>41</sup> Fursenko and Naftali, p. 122.

<sup>42</sup> 1995 interview with Sorenson quoted in Fursenko and Naftali, p. 121.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold Frutkin, *International Cooperation in Space* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 8-9. Webb made this remark in an address before the Institute of Foreign Affairs on January 24, 1963 that Frutkin quotes on p. 8. It is interesting to read Frutkin's explicit discussion of this theme as early as 1965.

<sup>44</sup> Frutkin, p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> Frutkin, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, John F. Kennedy, 1961, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, John F. Kennedy, 1961, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Dodd L. Harvey and Linda C. Ciccoritti, *U.S.-Soviet Cooperation in Space* (Miami: University of Miami Center for Advanced International Studies, 1974), p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Harvey and Ciccoritti, pp. 66-68 and especially p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> These various memos can be found in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, President's Office Files, various boxes. The Skolnikoff memo, "President's Meeting with Khrushchev, Vienna June 3-4, 1961, Reference Paper, Possible US-USSR Cooperative Projects," is from the President's Office Files, Countries: USSR, Vienna Meeting, Background Documents 1953-1961 (G-4), Briefing Material, Reference Papers, Box 126. These memos are now also available in the NASA History Office's Historical Reference Collection.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey and Ciccoritti, pp. 73-74.

<sup>52</sup> Harvey and Ciccoritti, pp. 78-79. A State Department memo covering the two leaders' discussion in Vienna does not mention Khrushchev's fleeting acquiescence, instead focusing on Khrushchev's desire to have progress in disarmament before consenting to a joint lunar landing program. See 6/4/61 Memcon between JFK and Khrushchev, 6/4/61,

Luncheon, Soviet Embassy, Vienna in the Kennedy Presidential Library, Box 126, and the NASA Historical Reference Collection.

<sup>53</sup> Sergei Khrushchev, "October 4th, 1957, the First Earth Satellite: A Retrospective View from the Future," (unpublished paper written in November 1997), copy in NASA Historical Reference Collection, p. 12. Sergei Khrushchev is the former Soviet leader's son, a former aerospace engineer, and now a professor of international relations at Brown University.

<sup>54</sup> Harvey and Ciccoritti, p. 79.

<sup>55</sup> John M. Logsdon, editor, with Dwayne A. Day and Roger D. Launius, *Exploring the Unknown: Selected Documents in the History of the U.S. Civil Space Program, Volume II: External Relationships* (Washington: Government Printing Office, NASA SP-4407, 1996), pp. 147-164.

<sup>56</sup> Khrushchev, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, John F. Kennedy, 1963, p. 695, cited in Harvey and Ciccoritti, p. 123.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to Congressman Albert Thomas, September 23, 1963 cited in Harvey and Ciccoritti, p. x.

<sup>59</sup> Khrushchev, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Johnson's first State of the Union speech to Congress on January 8, 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, volume 1, p. 117.

<sup>61</sup> Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1997), passim and pp. 250-251, 254. Hersh plays up the significance of the Bolshakov connection, quoting a 1964 Schlesinger interview with Robert Kennedy, who casually mentioned that he and Bolshakov discussed most major US-USSR issues and met every two weeks or so for perhaps eighteen months. See p. 248-249.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 14-17. This incident could be seen as another example of Kennedy trying to achieve his political goals via multiple, simultaneous tracks.

<sup>63</sup> Hersh, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> Reeves, p. 243 and Hersh, p. 232. Hersh also describes how Kennedy often took "feel good" amphetamine shots,

including one immediately before meeting with Khrushchev in June 1961. See pp. 5, 236. Additionally, Hersh notes that Kennedy had had venereal disease for many years and that he suffered serious fevers in April and June 1961, significant times for the purposes of this paper. See pp. 5, 231, and 233.

<sup>65</sup> Reeves, p. 19. On p. 137, Reeves also argues that Kennedy and Khrushchev both ironically believed that they could prevail in any one-on-one personal situation.

<sup>66</sup> Interestingly enough, however, Kennedy apparently had been unsure how his May 25th speech would be received domestically and initially thought Congressional reaction had been less than favorable. This point is made in Sorenson, p. 592 and cited by Harvey and Ciccoritti on p. 79.

<sup>67</sup> Reeves, pp. 52-53.

<sup>68</sup> Reeves discusses Kennedy's reputation as a quick study in part by denigrating his legendary reading speed as a short attention span. See p. 66.