

Moon landing cemented democracy's lofty ideals in the eyes of an awakening world

The Australian · 18 Jul 2019 · DANIEL FINKELSTEIN

Just after 11pm US time on July 20, 1969, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong unveiled a plaque attached to the ladder on the landing gear strut of the Apollo 11 lunar module.

Armstrong read its message to the watching television audience: "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the Moon. July 1969 AD. We came in peace for all mankind."

What do we celebrate when we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the moon landing? Obviously a very great scientific achievement, but not one that could be justified by its contribution to science alone.

It was president John F. Kennedy who, in a speech to a joint session of congress on May 25, 1961, announced "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 Earth".

Yet while consulting before making this commitment, he had to provide Jerome Wiesner, chairman of the president's scientific advisory committee, with a promise. In exchange for the committee's acquiescence, he would never justify the lunar mission in terms of its scientific payoffs.

It wasn't an achievement that could be supported by its military contribution alone, either. There was a public concern that the Soviet Union would somehow conquer the moon and control mankind.

Yet Kennedy's defence secretary, Robert McNamara, was always very cool about the idea of a moon landing. He could see the advantages of space technology in missile development, communication satellites and control of space near Earth, but the extra spending of a manned lunar landing, especially one done rapidly, didn't seem to him or many defence experts to be warranted on a purely military basis.

So what did justify it? I'm rather drawn to one explanation provided by the actor Tom Hanks, someone who has devoted a good part of his film career to celebrating the Apollo project. "Going to the moon was not just a technological endeavour, but an artistic one, like Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The same kind of imagination that allowed Michelangelo to produce the crowning achievement of his era helped NASA's engineers build their moonships.

"Above all, Apollo was a voyage of inspiration."

Lest this seems an actor's conceit, it isn't too far away in spirit from the explanation provided by JFK in his most expansive speech on the moon mission. In September 1962 at Rice University, the institution that provided the land for the Houston space centre, the president said: "Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, 'Because it is there.' Well space is there, and we're going to climb it."

It was, Kennedy added, the "greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked".

However, there is another meaning, and another triumph, hidden in a careful reading of the plaque left behind by Armstrong and Aldrin with the US flag. The American astronauts did come in peace and on behalf of all mankind. That is because they believed it to be profoundly in the interests of peace and of all mankind that the US be first to reach the moon.

The decision to land a manned craft on the lunar surface was the product of a very particular period in world history: a handful of years in the late 1950s and early 60s in which the West came to believe that it was being outpaced economically, technologically and politically by the Soviet bloc. And this was of particular concern to leaders in the free world, because this belief came at a time when empires were dissolving. Former colonies, newly independent, were choosing their economic models. There was a fear that the lights of Soviet civilisation would dazzle these nations and the world would tip decisively towards communism.

British prime minister Harold Wilson's promise in 1963 to forge a new Britain in the white heat of technology came from his belief the British were also-rans to the Soviets. Kennedy's emphasis on a missile gap with Russia was central to his 1960 election campaign.

The commitment to the moon landing was, similarly, a product of this worry. When JFK first took office, he was so unconcerned and unsure about space policy that he allowed Dwight Eisenhower's head of NASA to leave office on inauguration day without anyone from the administration having contacted him or identified a replacement. Then came news in April 1961 that the USSR had sent Yuri Gagarin into space and he had completed an orbit of the Earth.

The atmosphere in the Kennedy White House changed completely. The Soviet Union could not be allowed to win the space race. It would validate those who thought that messy capitalist democracies could not achieve the heights scaled by socialist command economies. It would indicate that, by contrast, open societies lacked will and imagination.

Kennedy could see that taking small steps in space might yield military or scientific dividends in proportion to the money it would cost. But only a huge step, a lunar landing, held out the prospect of beating the USSR to it. This would demonstrate the will, efficiency and creativity of free nations. The idea that the Soviet Union was ever overtaking the Western economies now seems ludicrous. There was no missile gap and JFK started the space race on his own, since his power rivals lacked the know-how and resources to seriously challenge the US. When we celebrate the 50th anniversary, we are celebrating the achievements of a generation that took seriously its duty to protect the liberal democratic capitalist system and make it a beacon of the world. We are celebrating its belief in science and progress in a free society and its confidence that, with enough will, there is nothing possible that we can give up as impossible.

The cliché is right. If we can send a man to the moon, we can do anything: defeat poverty, conquer disease, find a technological solution to climate change. And, with confidence, liberal democracy need not retreat.