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The Dark Side of the Moon: Unpacking Civil Rights and Student Antiwar Criticism of the Apollo Program

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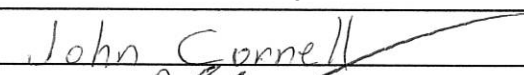

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**The Dark Side of the Moon: Unpacking Civil Rights and Student
Antiwar Criticism of the Apollo Program**

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Victoria Combs

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Proving to the World America's Can-Do Spirit: Fifty Years Since Apollo 11

July 20, 2019 signified a landmark anniversary in American history. On this day fifty years prior, Neil Armstrong accomplished the legendary feat of being the first man to step foot on the moon. To celebrate the anniversary of the historic Apollo 11 mission, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) hosted a Launch Reflection with the two surviving Apollo 11 astronauts, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins at Cape Canaveral. The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum hosted the Apollo 50 Festival featuring exhibits from the LEGO Group and Boeing, talks from NASA scientists and museum experts, and even projected footage of the Saturn V rocket's ascent into space onto the Washington Monument. In addition to this festival, the United States Postal Service held a dedication ceremony for two Apollo 11 Forever stamps featuring photographs of the moon and the iconic image of Buzz Aldrin taken by Neil Armstrong on the surface of the moon. Many other organizations held celebrations and festivals commemorating the achievements of the Apollo 11 mission.¹

Beyond these events, documentaries, such as *Apollo 11* and *Apollo's New Moon*, and movies, like *First Man*, lauded the achievements of the Apollo crew and program and painted a very specific picture of what the moonshot looked like to and signified for the American people at the time.² Buzz Aldrin, one of the

¹ Sean Potter, "NASA Celebrates 50th Anniversary of Historic Moon Landing." NASA. *NASA*, July 2, 2019. <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-celebrates-50th-anniversary-of-historic-moon-landing-with-live-tv-broadcast/>.

² Noel Murray, "Stream These 11 Movies for the Apollo 11 Anniversary." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jul 19, 2019.

three astronauts on the Apollo 11 mission, reflected on the anniversary by reminiscing, “Looking back, landing on the moon wasn’t just our job, it was a historic opportunity to prove to the world America’s can-do spirit. I’m proud to serve the country that gave me this historic opportunity. Today belongs to you. We must hold the memory of Apollo 11 close.”³ Through these events, movies, interviews, and documentaries, a clear narrative has emerged that reinforces the nationalistic spirit surrounding the moon landing and creates a specific popular memory of this feat that is rooted primarily in overwhelming national pride above all else. its pioneering and American spirit.

In contrast to the sentiment of global and American unity the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing celebrates, revisiting that historic date fifty years ago reveals that not all Americans were settled around their television sets watching the historic events unfold and feeling exceptionally proud of the country’s accomplishments. In a *New York Times* article published shortly after moon landing on July 27, 1969, titled “Blacks and Apollo: Most Couldn’t Have Cared Less,” journalist Thomas Johnson described that, “Many black Americans found ways in recent days to ignore the Apollo 11 moonshot, an effort, they say, that ignored them.”⁴ Many African American communities strategically played other television or radio programs in their homes and restaurants.⁵ They intentionally chose to discuss anything other than the Apollo 11 mission, and they

³ Buzz Aldrin, Twitter post, July 2019. 9:54 a.m., <https://twitter.com/TheRealBuzz>.

⁴ Thomas A. Johnson, "Blacks and Apollo: Most Couldn't have Cared Less." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jul 27, 1969. 6.

⁵ Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: the Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 37.

hosted music festivals in both Harlem and Chicago to embrace black culture and music and draw attention away from the moon landing.

However, the pushback to this historic event in black communities drew minimal media coverage at that time, and it certainly does not appear in contemporary discussions of the moon landing, especially in the anniversary commemorations of July 2019. In that same *New York Times* article, Sylvia Drew, a NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund attorney, explained how many African Americans were feeling about governmental priorities at the time and shared, “If America fails to end discrimination, hunger and malnutrition then we must conclude that America is not committed to ending discrimination, hunger and malnutrition. Walking on the moon proves that we do what we want to do as a nation.”⁶ Drew’s sentiments were echoed by many civil rights leaders and activists at the time of the moon landing. But discussions of these sentiments and beliefs were absent at the time and did not appear in the Smithsonian’s Moon Festival and in the fiftieth anniversary documentaries.

Further, African American communities were not the only Americans disappointed in the government and frustrated by the moonshot. Student antiwar activists also found the Apollo 11 mission to be wasteful of resources that could be going to other efforts, especially while the United States was engaged, from their perspective, in a senseless war with Vietnam.⁷ One student-published article by Don Kaufman, a student at Berkley, gathered reactions from fellow student

⁶ Johnson, “Blacks and Apollo,” 6.

⁷ Gerd-Rainer Horn. *The spirit of '68: rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

activists on that historic day and relayed pieces of his interactions in an underground newspaper. When asked how they felt about the moon landing, one student replied, “I have more important things to think about,” and another said, “It would be nice if people weren’t starving on earth.” A final student explained, “I think they should have stayed here because they will probably damage the moon just like they’ve damaged the earth,” and all of these statements reflect differing components of the bitter feelings that student antiwar activists held about the moon landing.⁸ From Kaufman’s article and other students accounts, one can view similarities between the criticism of civil rights activists and student antiwar activists and see how these perspectives diverge from the contemporary narrative about the moon landing present in the fiftieth anniversary commemorative media and celebrations.

Popular memory of the Apollo 11 mission glorifies the technological achievement and innovation of the United States; however, this romanticism of the Apollo program silences the critical perspectives of many Americans. While at this time some Americans saw the Apollo program as a glorious depiction of American superiority and progress, others found these efforts in space to be an example of wasteful government spending and indicative of government officials’ discriminatory priorities at a time when many Black Americans were facing racism and poverty. Additionally, others viewed government officials and media outlets’ treatment of the Apollo program as hypocritical given the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and saw the moonshot as evidence of further American

⁸ Don Kaufman, “Moon Views,” In *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

imperialism. This research seeks to complicate popular memory of the Apollo program by bringing to light these critical voices.

Cold War Politics and the Beginnings of the Space Race

In order to understand these criticisms more deeply and what motivated that US space program, it is necessary to discuss the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. From its beginning, the American space program came as a direct response to the Soviet Union's advances in space and the pressure to appear powerful on a global scale. Following the end of World War II, the United States and the USSR were both working to establish themselves as global superpowers, which they attempted to do this through both technical advances and also visible demonstrations of power.⁹ Since the space race demonstrated serious technological advancement and could be widely covered in the media, it provided the perfect avenue by which both countries could demonstrate their respective capabilities.¹⁰ Further, through these public displays of authority and power, both governments also hoped to demonstrate why their chosen political ideology was the most effective.

While the nuances and varying components of the Cold War are deeply complex in their reach and goals, in terms of the space race, the technology being developed by both countries were designing space technology with nuclear weapons advancement also in mind. The space age is of course characterized by the space race, but this era of innovation would not have occurred in the same

⁹ Neil M. Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*. Harvard University Press, 2017. 28.

¹⁰ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: the Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*. 40.

way without the Cold War driving the technological advancements.¹¹ However, these darker, more war-oriented components are often underacknowledged in reflections of this period of American history. Further, at this time, government officials privileged American success in space and over the Soviet Union above all else. Popular media painted space exploration as a symbol of progress, and at times, international unity; however, both governments used these technological advancements to increase nuclear capabilities and advance weapon technology.

Another instance of this prioritization of space success over ethical concerns can be seen. Specifically, the scientists behind the revolutionary rocketry technology were the very scientists who researched how missiles, rockets, and other forms of this technology could be used for mass devastation in Nazi Germany.¹² President Truman's Operation Paperclip suggests how the United States was willing to use all means possible to assert itself as a dominant global superpower, even if it meant using intellectual capital from Nazi Germany. He developed this operation for two primary reasons: to use German scientists for American research purposes and to deny the USSR intellectual resources.¹³ This ethically-questionable operation likely violated policies that the United States had about bringing Nazis into the country; some of these scientists were implicated in war crimes associated with the Holocaust. Furthermore, these

¹¹ David Reynolds. "Science, Technology, and the Cold War." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, 3:378–99. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 383.

¹² Linda Hunt, "Secret Agenda: The United States Government, Nazi Scientists, and Project Paperclip, 1945 to 1990." (1991). 40.

¹³ Robert Huddleston, "Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America/The Nazis Next Door: How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler's Men." *Air Power History* 62, no. 1 (2015): 52.

1,600 scientists and engineers did significantly contribute to the United States' development of rocket technology.¹⁴ Although the directive creating Operation Paperclip specified that U.S. intelligence officials should avoid recruiting "ardent Nazis" into the project, the United States' purported main objective was to deprive the USSR of the brain power needed to develop rocket and space technology.¹⁵

Wernher von Braun, who has been idolized in popular culture since the Apollo program, is one such scientist that the U.S. brought to back to the country during the end of World War II as a part of Operation Paperclip. Despite the media's depiction of von Braun as erudite rocket engineer, his past work of designing missiles for the Nazi regime remains in the background. Specifically, the Nazi regime used his particular design, the V-2 ballistic missile, during World War II, and concentration camp labor was responsible for the assembly of the V-2s.¹⁶ Von Braun's specific involvement in the concentration camps and his allegiance to the Nazi regime remains unclear; however, the absence of this side of von Braun's story was clear during the excitement of the Apollo program in the 1960s. This further complicates the United States' aims during the 1950s and 1960s, especially when one considers that a goal of the space race was to establish American democracy as the gold standard for political ideology. The use of Nazi

¹⁴ Hunt, "Secret Agenda: The United States Government, Nazi Scientists, and Project Paperclip, 1945 to 1990." 54.

¹⁵ Huddleston, "Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America/The Nazis Next Door: How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler's Men." 57.

¹⁶ A deep exploration of Operation Paperclip and von Braun's personal story lies outside of the scope of this research. However, his particular experiences exemplify an interesting and complex case of ethics and science. More about his backstory can be found in <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/chasing-moon-wernher-von-braun-and-nazis/>.

scientists and technology stands directly in contrast to these alleged goals of democracy.¹⁷

Despite American use of these scientists, the country still faced many initial losses to the Soviet Union. The competition for international power did drive the fast-paced progress of the era, but the United States quickly lost ground to the Soviet Union during the earlier years of the Cold War and space race. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union's launch of the first satellite, Sputnik 1, into space and second satellite less than a month later shocked the United States and the rest of the world. These satellites were particularly worrisome since the launch vehicle, known as an R-7, that sent them into space was primarily known for being the first intercontinental ballistic missile.¹⁸ By launching the Sputnik satellites into space, the USSR not only demonstrated its progress regarding space exploration, but it was also revealed that the country had the capability to launch nuclear warheads that could reach the United States.

Despite growing concerns about Soviet space capabilities, the United States did not officially form the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, until the following October in 1958. Following its creation, NASA began to develop more cohesive, concrete plans for space exploration through Project Mercury, which had the primary task of putting a man into orbit before the Soviet Union. However, in 1962, the Soviet Union had beat the United States to every space success; they had launched the first intercontinental ballistic missile,

¹⁷ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: the Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*. 107.

¹⁸ Robert Stone, and Alan Andres, *Chasing the Moon: An Epic Rivalry, a Monumental Challenge, the Race to Be the First*. London: William Collins, 2019.

the first satellite, and the first animal into Earth's orbit.¹⁹ The major tipping point came on April 12, 1961 when the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to be launched into space, much to the embarrassment of the United States and President Kennedy.²⁰

The consequences of these Soviet triumphs presented President Kennedy with two major dilemmas. First, he understood that if the USSR had already made these landmark space achievements, then their nuclear capabilities must also be rapidly expanding, making the United States both comparatively unprepared and visibly vulnerable on an international scale. International coverage of Soviet successes within the media hampered perceptions of the United States and capitalism more broadly.²¹ The British magazine *New Statesmen* captured this sentiment when reporter Nigel Calder commented, "The over-riding reason why the astronauts have to attempt this hazardous and costly journey is that untold numbers of ordinary people around the world sniggered and cheered when the early Soviet space flights discomfited the Americans."²² Second, paired with the apparent losses to the Soviets in space, reputation on the international stage was also damaged by the failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, which further made the United States appear weaker. President Kennedy felt pressure to take a public and political stand against Soviet communism because

¹⁹ Roger D. Launius, *Apollo's Legacy: Perspectives on the Moon Landings*. Smithsonian Institution, 2019. 19.

²⁰ David Reynolds. "Science, Technology, and the Cold War." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, edited by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, 3:378–99. The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 379.

²¹ Launius, *Apollo's Legacy: Perspectives on the Moon Landings*. 21.

²² Nigel Calder, "Apollo: The Wrong Target." *New Statesman*, Jul 1, 1969, 67,

perceptions of losing to the Soviets in space also meant that the United States was losing hold of the ideas surrounding the “free world.”²³

The Choice to Go to the Moon

In the early 1960s and in the midst of the Cold War, the United States and President Kennedy were fighting to maintain the appearance of the power of American democracy and capitalism. Positive international media coverage that lauded American diplomacy and success was vital to building this particular image of the United States. However, at this time, media coverage of the United States was not only negative across the world because of these losses to Soviet Union but also because of the major civil rights issues being brought to light during this time.²⁴ Promoting narratives of freedom and democracy went in direct contrast with discriminatory Jim Crow laws, Ku Klux Klan rallies and lynchings, and unchecked police brutality. Furthermore, international media outlets regularly reported on these major issues, especially in the wake of highly visible and exceptionally egregious instances of discrimination, like in the case of the Little Rock Nine in Arkansas in 1957.²⁵ Kennedy and other government officials recognized the damaging consequences of the harsh press coverage of racial injustice in the United States. By emphasizing the Apollo program narrative of American excellence, Kennedy and government officials provided a

²³ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 74.

²⁴ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America divided: The civil war of the 1960s*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000. 46.

²⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold war civil rights: Race and the image of American democracy*. Vol. 73. Princeton University Press, 2011.

less problematic international focal point rather that was meant to distract on civil rights issues.

In order to boost American morale and improve and refocus the faltering international perceptions of the United States, President Kennedy recognized that he must drastically improve the United States' space capabilities and rally the United States around the ambitious goal of landing on the moon. In order to garner this enthusiasm and shift public and international focus to American ingenuity, Kennedy delivered his landmark "We Choose to Go to the Moon" address at Rice University on September 12, 1962. He decided that by strategically pursuing the goal of putting a man on the moon, the United States would be able to demonstrate its power on the global stage and its superiority over the Soviet Union.²⁶

During this famous speech, in order to rouse excitement for the moonshot, Kennedy emphasized patriotic ideals and romanticized notions of exploration by proclaiming, "The exploration of space will go ahead, whether we join in it or not, and it is one of the great adventures of all time, and no nation which expects to be the leader of other nations can expect to stay behind in the race for space."²⁷ In calling attention to the United States' leadership on a global level and how it was lacking in prestige during that time, Kennedy drew enthusiasm for moving forward into the future and played into the idea that Americans expect to be international leaders. Further, he noted how the country cannot expect

²⁶ Launius, *Apollo's Legacy: Perspectives on the Moon Landings*, 30.

²⁷ John F. Kennedy, "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort." *Houston, Texas: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, 1962.

prominence on the global stage while it is losing the space race; therefore, from his perspective, the United States must intensify its space efforts to maintain its power.²⁸

Beyond this appeal to the global authority of the United States, Kennedy also appealed to stereotypical assumptions of what it means to be an American. He played on these stereotypes by explaining, “This city of Houston, this State of Texas, this country of the United States was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them. This country was conquered by those who moved forward—and so will space.”²⁹ In using these appeals, he created a distinctly patriotic narrative that made American space exploration a notably democratic endeavor that specifically contrasted with perceptions of the Soviet program in the United States.³⁰ Further, in using the phrase “conquer,” Kennedy was speaking to a certain type of American, distinctly the kind has the resources to think beyond their day-to-day needs and concerns who was generally a white, middle or upper class man, which reflects the divisive nature of the rhetoric surrounding the Apollo program. Additionally, he used this speech to persuade Americans on the basis of hard work and individual will. These ideals are often tied to American perceptions of how the government should operate and go against how Americans perceived the governing ideologies of the Soviet Union. Collectively, his speech was also oriented to a very particular American, seemingly a straight, white man, which is indicated by his use of typically

²⁸ Stone and Andres. *Chasing the Moon: An Epic Rivalry, a Monumental Challenge, the Race to Be the First*. 54.

²⁹ John F. Kennedy, "Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort."

³⁰ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 65.

masculine stereotypes. Thus, Kennedy's address shaped American space exploration as anti-Soviet, anti-communism, pro-democracy, and pro-capitalistic in nature.³¹

Further, in this speech, he set the tone for the United States' approach to space exploration by creating an atmosphere of competition and national pride. He explained space exploration as an opportunity to demonstrate Americans' hardworking spirit, and he encouraged enthusiasm for what was going to be a major financial investment on the part of taxpayers.³² In trying rouse excitement, he quoted William Bradford, referred to the country's European origins, and captured sentiments of adventure and perseverance. He then related these ideas to space exploration. He made his most important and emotionally-charged point by emphasizing, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept."³³ In this statement, Kennedy created a challenge, knowing that Americans would be invested in an opportunity to make global history and beat the Soviet Union. Thus, the Apollo program began to take shape.

The 1960s in the United States

In distinct contrast to the image of a bright, united future that Kennedy conjured in his speech, the social climate in American society was undergoing

³¹ Launius, *Apollo's Legacy*, 19.

³² Stone and Andres. *Chasing the Moon: An Epic Rivalry, a Monumental Challenge, the Race to Be the First*. 60.

³³Kennedy, "Address at Rice University."

several major changes. The overall climate in the United States in the 1960s was conducive to critical looks at different American institutions, ideals, and beliefs in part because of the tension between government officials and the state and federal level, especially in the case of civil rights movements and the Jim Crow Era South.³⁴ The lack of rights at the state level, especially in the South where opposition to segregation and racial violence was reaching new heights, prompted collective action by those being oppressed as well as sympathizers to the unjust conditions. Further, disagreement among political elites at the state and federal levels allowed for more organization among activists and allowed for protests to gain more traction within the media.³⁵

At this time, many people found themselves empowered and supported by their peers in challenging the racist system that had shaped life in the South since the end of the Civil War, and these protesters took issue with many aspects of American life and society. Issues such as civil rights, women's rights, environmental destruction and preservation, poverty, and action against the Vietnam War pushed people into the streets to protest American policy, and activists readily engaged in calling for change.³⁶ While these protests, marches, court cases, and sit-ins unfolded, government officials called attention to the space program and encouraged Americans to be enthusiastic about its progress and unite around this technological progress, which caused a greater hostility toward the Apollo program that many already believed to be a waste of resources.

³⁴ Isserman and Kazin, *America divided: The civil war of the 1960s*, 51.

³⁵ Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of détente*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

³⁶ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: the Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*. 85.

Civil rights activism has its roots throughout many episodes in American history, but the collective movement that was active during the 1960s came as a result of leaders that had been planning smaller actions and working on court cases throughout the 1940s and 1950s.³⁷ During the early 1960s and the beginnings of the Apollo program, civil rights activists had yet to turn their attention to critiques of the space program, and they were primarily focused on legislation and advocacy for basic civil rights and voting rights. Civil rights leaders organized marches, boycotts, sit-ins and other non-violent protests that garnered high levels of media attention. The movement achieved major successes with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington for Civil Rights in 1963, and these efforts ultimately culminated in President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.³⁸

Romanticizing Space Exploration and American Innovation

One specific moment of this romanticization of American space exploration as a source of hope can be viewed through the December 24, 1968 Apollo 8 mission, which marked the first-time humans orbited the moon. This episode and its portrayal in past and present media exemplify President Kennedy's construction of the space program as a patriotic and unifying experience purportedly for all Americans, while also pushing the era's social unrest to the background. The mission itself came at the conclusion of 1968, one of the most emotionally-charged years in American history, due in part to campus

³⁷ Thomas F. Jackson, *From civil rights to human rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the struggle for economic justice*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. 67.

³⁸ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* University of Georgia Press, 2001. 41.

protests surrounding the Vietnam War, devastating assassinations including Martin Luther King Jr., clashes with the police, international conflict, the Chicago protests at the Democratic National Convention, overall protests across the world that appeared to be growing, and further heightened Cold War tensions.³⁹ With these tumultuous events as a backdrop, the Apollo 8 astronauts prepared for takeoff.

In a television broadcast, viewers at home saw a blurry image of the moon's surface and heard the astronauts serenely reading from the book of Genesis.⁴⁰ The astronauts closed their broadcast by stating, "From the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth."⁴¹ These good-natured sentiments in this moment helped to foster the perception of American space exploration as a global and unifying endeavor removed from the era's civil unrest and social injustice. This perception of unity persists to the modern day and frames American space exploration as full of hope, democratic ideals, and promise for the future. However, this enduring understanding creates a limited view of how space exploration impacted Americans in a broader sense and persists into the contemporary era.⁴² Through episodes like the Apollo 8 mission, the American space program in the 1960s is remembered in an isolated and romanticized way distant from the other, more negative episodes of the United States during the 1960s.

³⁹ Isserman and Kazin, *America divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 28.

⁴⁰ Launius, *Apollo's Legacy*, 23.

⁴¹ Edgar M. Cortright, *Apollo Expeditions to the Moon: The NASA History 50th Anniversary Edition*. Courier Dover Publications, 2019. 163.

⁴² Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 131.

In conjunction with the complex narrative that emerged from the civil unrest during this time, the tone surrounding the space race shifted on November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated in the very state where just a year prior, he had promised to send man to the moon. Following his tragic and unexpected death, the legacy of President Kennedy propelled efforts on the Apollo program to move forward with added the impetus of fostering national pride to honor the late president.⁴³ Paired with this need to complete Kennedy's promise, the awe, wonder, and patriotism of the journey, popular memory often fails to connect American space achievements to other major events that were happening in the country at this time. Retellings of the Apollo program either entirely separate the ventures from the social justice issues at the time or use it as a symbol of hope and unity. Because of these factors, the Apollo program and moon landing came to be viewed as a bright, optimistic moments in the 1960s where the media and government officials encouraged Americans to support space exploration as a democratic endeavor indicative of hope and progress, and it did not receive the harsh criticism that other events of the time did in the mainstream press.⁴⁴

Another example of the romanticism of the space age comes from the technological advances happening in the United States at this time and how these advances were described as examples of the wonders of capitalism. Because of the United States' capitalistic approach to developing technology, scientists were

⁴³ Robert Stone and Alan Andres. *Chasing the Moon: An Epic Rivalry, a Monumental Challenge, the Race to Be the First*. London: William Collins, 2019. 45.

⁴⁴ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 130.

given a unique opportunity to design and create, which further drove the narrative centered on innovation and American ingenuity. Whereas the USSR centered resources and scientists exclusively on developing defense technology, scientists in the United States had more freedom to decide what type of science they wanted to develop.⁴⁵ Further, the United States allowed for collaboration between private businesses and government entities in developing technology, and the government incentivized development by paying private companies. Historian David Reynolds argues that because of the USSR's centralized governmental structure, they were able to more quickly develop rocket technology at the beginning of the space race.⁴⁶ However, since less opportunities existed for civilians to develop their own ideas beyond the scope of military-funded research, the USSR found its potential more limited than the United States.⁴⁷ As these advantages became more publicized, a clear narrative that supported the ideals of capitalism emerged. American media lauded the technological advancements made possible by the freedom of capitalism and entrepreneurial spirit, which deepened the romanticization of the Apollo program and its characterization as a model American endeavor.

This embracing of the purportedly American ideals within the space race are reflected in Walt Disney's *Disneyland* episodes "Man in Space," "Man and the Moon," and "Mars and Beyond," which use animation to make explanations of rocket technology more accessible and fascinating to the general public.⁴⁸ These

⁴⁵ Reynolds, "Science, Technology, and the Cold War," 381.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, "Science, Technology, and the Cold War," 384.

⁴⁷ Reynolds, "Science, Technology, and the Cold War," 384.

⁴⁸ J. P. Telotte, "Animating Space: Disney, Science, and Empowerment." *Science Fiction Studies* (2008): 49.

episodes feature actual rocket scientists, writers, and engineers, such as Willy Ley, Heinz Haber, and Wernher von Braun to provide information about NASA's work in an educational and entertaining way that helped to further characterize the pioneering spirit associated with space exploration in the United States during this era. The episodes use voiceovers from the scientists while animations helpfully demonstrate concepts like the history of rocketry and weightlessness in space.⁴⁹ The most widely-viewed episode was "Man in Space," which had around forty million viewers tune in to watch the animated descriptions of what it would be like to have Americans in space. This episode even received an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Short, and Pentagon and Soviet rocket experts requested copies of the short film.⁵⁰ Strangely, both scientists Haber and von Braun were working for the United States as a result of the previously discussed Operation Paperclip and were both involved in and did research for the Nazi regime during World War II. Therefore, their lighthearted rocket explanations seem to be in tension with their past experiences as rocket scientists although this uncomfortable irony was lost on the general public at the time. Collectively, these *Disneyland* episodes worked to conjure an image of space exploration that was on par with the pride and patriotism of President Kennedy's speech at Rice University.

NASA's Own Challenges with Racial Injustice

Despite American society seeming to regard space exploration as unifying and removed from the social ills of the time, activists were highly critical of the

⁴⁹ Ward Kimball, *Man in space*. Walt Disney Studios, 1957.

⁵⁰ J. P. Telotte, "Animating Space: Disney, Science, and Empowerment," 51.

narrative that had been portrayed in the media. Further, NASA itself had its own issues with racism during the Apollo era. This injustice can be viewed clearly through Edward Dwight's story of his time at NASA, which is not only reflective of the racism within government entities at this time but also further shows the problematic nature of the romanticization of the moon landing as a moment of unity for all Americans. During this time, NASA needed to critically evaluate who the first astronaut in space should be and what they should represent since optics were a such an important factor in the space race. From a logistical standpoint, they could have selected any person to go into space. Dwight himself explains this by noting, "The basic thing you have to understand is everything that happens on that spaceship, from the time you crawl into that seat to the time it touches down, is controlled from the ground. There's no one thing that makes a good astronaut."⁵¹ The only government-mandated requirement for selection as an astronaut was that the first Americans into space must have come from the military; beyond this, public relations officials in NASA were tasked with evaluating the other criteria for the astronauts.⁵²

Robert Voas, the NASA employee tasked with selecting the astronauts, understood the potential social or political message NASA could send by choosing a particular person to be one of the first people on the moon, especially given the tenuous social climate of the 1960s. Cognizant of this opportunity to make a particular statement and the United States and its ideals, Voas asked

⁵¹ Emily Ludolph, "Ed Dwight Was Set to Be the First Black Astronaut. Here's Why That Never Happened." *New York Times*, July 16, 2019. 1.

⁵² Launius, *Apollo's Legacy*, 59.

NASA officials if he should be looking for a person of a certain race to include on the team, but officials urged him to focus solely on who would be best suited for manning the vehicle instead of focusing on the astronauts' race.⁵³ Yet, President Kennedy strongly advocated for one of the astronauts to be African American, and he was particularly impressed with Edward Dwight.⁵⁴ Dwight, who was a young African American Air Force pilot, demonstrated skill in the air and was exceptional at handling press interactions. He drew media attention as he trained in the Aerospace Research Pilot School (ARPS). While at ARPS, he gave talks and appeared in magazines and newspapers, which gave hope to champions of the civil rights movement across the country, and he was publicly supported by President Kennedy.⁵⁵ His presence within the Air Force and pursuit of being an astronaut helped to lessen some of the criticism of civil rights activists as he helped to make space exploration seem less exclusive and more appealing to all Americans.

Kennedy's support proved essential to Dwight's success at ARPS. Tom Wolfe explained the efforts made by President Kennedy on Dwight's behalf in the *Right Stuff*, noting, "Every week, it seemed like, a detachment of Civil Rights Division lawyers would turn up from Washington from the Justice Department. The lawyers squinted in the desert sunlight and asked a great many questions about the progress and treatment of Ed Dwight and took notes."⁵⁶ Kennedy's support created a safe atmosphere for Dwight despite being regularly

⁵³ Ludolph, "Ed Dwight Was Set to Be the First Black Astronaut," 2.

⁵⁴ Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979. 353.

⁵⁵ Eugene M. Zuckert, interview 1 (I), 3/18/1969, by Dorothy Pierce (McSweeney), LBJ Library Oral Histories, LBJ Presidential Library.

⁵⁶ Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*, 354.

discriminated against by officials at ARPS. Then in November of 1963, everything changed for Dwight, and for racial progress within NASA, with President Kennedy's assassination. Dwight's support in Washington quickly dissipated, and he found himself alone against the stereotypes and biases of others involved with ARPS.⁵⁷ Years later in a *New York Times* interview, Dwight recalled that, "I was in this trap of no man's land. The team and all the support system I had seemed to have left me hanging out there."⁵⁸ Following the loss of Kennedy's support, Dwight lacked the necessary backing for becoming an astronaut and returned to the Air Force to work on obscure projects away from the public eye, which further exemplified to civil rights activists that space exploration was an exclusive privilege to only be afforded to certain Americans. This further enraged these activists because their tax dollars were being spent on an expensive endeavor that they neither supported nor felt connected to in any way.

Dwight's story illustrates several key issues that defined civil rights activists' perceptions of NASA. Dwight was joined by many others in the sense of hopelessness that he felt following the loss of President Kennedy and his support of matters of racial justice and civil rights.⁵⁹ Many of these activists felt discouraged by Kennedy's assassination and felt that they had lost their most important sympathizer in Washington.⁶⁰ Although Dwight was a promising candidate for space exploration and was a trailblazer for African Americans

⁵⁷ *All Things Considered*, "'Black in Space' Explores NASA's Small Steps and Giant Leaps Toward Equality." Produced by Andrew Craig and William Troop. Aired on March 1, 2020, on National Public Radio

⁵⁸ Ludolph, "Ed Dwight Was Set to Be the First Black Astronaut." 2.

⁵⁹ Neil M. Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*. 32.

⁶⁰ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 154.

within NASA, much like the other instances of the Apollo program's shortcomings, his name is left out of the movies, documentaries, and events celebrating NASA's achievements. Beyond this, Dwight's story demonstrates that despite being a purportedly unifying effort, space exploration was not a pursuit for all Americans, and it was specifically not for people of color within the United States.

Civil Rights Activists' Opposition to the Apollo 11 Mission

Several key ideas emerge in the protests, testimonies, and articles that activists published criticizing the Apollo program. First, many black Americans viewed the Apollo program as problematic and yet another reminder that government officials were not concerned with tackling the more pressing issues that civil rights activists were advocating for.

Following these successes, these leaders and groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were able to more clearly articulate their frustrations and gain media attention. Following progress on voting rights, civil rights groups sought to fight against the rampant poverty that plagued African American communities.⁶¹ While the SCLC and civil rights leaders made some progress in shifting public opinion on poverty, they faced many challenges in gaining concessions from President Johnson's Great Society initiatives, specifically Johnson's War on Poverty.⁶² Civil rights leaders regularly condemned the priorities of the War on Poverty, which was intended to minimize poverty. As

⁶¹ Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 14.

⁶² Catherine M. Paden, *Civil Rights Advocacy on Behalf of the Poor*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 27.

the decade progressed, civil rights activists' launched campaigns and organized to mitigate the negative effects of poverty contributed to their disdain for governmental spending on the space race.⁶³ Civil rights activists vocalized their discontent with government spending on the Apollo program through congressional hearings, speeches, protests, newspaper publications, and poetry, and none of which are recognized in contemporary celebrations of the Apollo program.

At this time, civil rights activists were working to direct media attention toward the lingering inequality that remained in American society, which worked in contrast to Kennedy's aim of projecting the image of the United States as a land of equal opportunity and capitalist success. As previously discussed, newspaper articles condemning the United States' treatment of Black Americans, worked to the advantage of activists since this coverage placed pressure on federal government officials to intervene in these situations of racial injustice, especially on the state level.⁶⁴ The contradictions among the goals of federal, state, and local officials allowed for activists to attract international and national attention, which helped others to be better aware of the issues of Jim Crow, poverty, voting discrimination, and other instances of racial injustice. However, outside media outlets did not garner enough concern in terms of criticism about the space race; therefore, activists needed to draw attention to this issue on their own terms.

⁶³ Jackson, *From civil rights to human rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the struggle for economic justice*, 92.

⁶⁴ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold war civil rights: Race and the image of American democracy*. Vol. 73. Princeton University Press, 2011. 78.

The overarching theme that emerges from the addresses, protests, and poems is that the federal government was overfunding the Apollo program and underfunding antipoverty initiatives. The SCLC and other civil rights group were primarily fighting for justice for both poverty-stricken urban centers and rural areas during the same time that the Apollo program was receiving its highest amount of funding. The main source of dissatisfaction for these activist groups came from Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA), which was intended to reduce poverty. Initially, the act received widespread support from labor, business, and advocacy groups; however, the support waned following the actual implementation of the act.⁶⁵ Both sides of the aisle found issues with the EOA; Republicans believed that it cost taxpayers too much money, and Democrats felt that the programs offered by EOA needed restructuring.⁶⁶ Generally, civil rights groups condemned the implementation of the EOA, acknowledging that it was largely under-funded, thus limiting its ability to have any real impact.⁶⁷

When evaluating appropriations for the Apollo program in comparison to appropriations for EOA-related measures, several factors must be considered. The respective timeframes of both major programs are similar.⁶⁸ The 1966 fiscal year provides a useful lens for comparing funding for the Apollo program versus funding for antipoverty initiatives. This particular year captures a moment when

⁶⁵ Paden, *Civil Rights Advocacy on Behalf of the Poor*, 39.

⁶⁶ Martha J. Bailey & Nicolas J. Duquette, "How Johnson Fought the War on Poverty: The Economics and Politics of Funding at the Office of Economic Opportunity." *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 2 (2014). 351–388.

⁶⁷ Paden, *Civil Rights Advocacy on Behalf of the Poor*, 42.

⁶⁸ Ivan D. Ertel, *The Apollo spacecraft: A chronology*. Vol. 4009. Scientific and Technical Information Division, Office of Technology Utilization, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1969, 134.

the Apollo program and the EOA were receiving peak funding.⁶⁹ In this year, the category of “Space Research and Technology” received \$5.1 billion in funding (for manned space flight, scientific investigation in space, and meteorology, communications, and other space applications). In contrast, “Economic Opportunity Programs,” specifically outlined to “attack the sources of poverty” were allocated only \$1.3 billion in funding.⁷⁰ Therefore, looking at both items from the 1966 federal budget reveals that “Space Research and Technology” received \$3.8 billion more in funding than programs focused on reducing poverty. Therefore, this disparity within the budget fueled the criticisms by civil rights activists.⁷¹

One instance of civil rights activists drawing attention the issues associated with the space race can be seen through Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s remarks about national priorities and NASA’s funding in his Congressional testimony in 1966 before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization of the Senate Committee on Government Operations. This particular subcommittee’s task was to evaluate the role of the federal government within urban affairs, and Dr. King went before the committee to express his concern for the condition of urban centers within the United States, especially in light of racial injustice and the major disparities present in urban communities. Given the opportunity to speak directly before members of Congress, Dr. King compelled members to think about how pouring billions of dollars into going to space while many

⁶⁹ United States. Bureau of the Budget. "Fiscal Year 1966," *Budget in Brief* (January 25, 1965). 23.

⁷⁰ Bureau of the Budget, "Fiscal Year 1966," 47.

⁷¹ These values have not been adjusted to contemporary amounts.

Americans suffered sent a message that that United States government did not care about all Americans.

Outside of explaining the generally disadvantaged place of African Americans within urban populations, King emphasized his point by calling attention to a major issue with the role of space exploration as a national priority. He explained, “Without denying the value of scientific endeavor, there is a striking absurdity in committing billions to reach the moon where no people live, and from which none presently can benefit, while the densely populated slums are allocated miniscule appropriations.”⁷² This impactful testimony called attention to a specific tension underlying the criticism held by these activists. In his critique, he specifically explained that he values progress and scientific achievement; however, he felt that it should not be prioritized over the wellbeing of the American people, especially when the situations within urban communities was exceptionally dire with high unemployment rates and people unable to make a livable wage. Further, he did not want to be viewed as anti-science or opposed to progress, and instead, he urged these senators to consider how space exploration fit into the nation’s priorities and what sort of precedent they were setting by failing to acknowledge the racial disparities within Americans urban centers.

Beyond emphasizing the budget disparities between funding for the War on Poverty and space exploration and how they reflected the malignment of

⁷² *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Eighty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, December 14 and 15, 1966, Part 14.* Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1967. 2970.

national priorities, King called attention to the difference in how the government, the media, and American society treated these issues. Within his testimony, he identified a key component of how the United States and popular media framed NASA and the Apollo program by explaining, “the exploration of space engages not only our enthusiasm but our patriotism. Developing it as a global race, we have intensified its inherent drama and brought its adventure into every living room, nursery, shop and office. No such fervor nor exhilaration attends the war on poverty.”⁷³ By emphasizing how space exploration roused patriotism, King captured how the space race evoked excitement, engaged the nation’s competitive spirit, and received widespread media coverage, which is reflective of the narrative Kennedy constructed in his Rice University address. King’s testimony also speaks to how Americans how were invested in the space race because of how exciting it was and that the tension between the United States and the USSR provided a competitive element to space exploration that was simply not a factor involved in the War on Poverty.

In contrast to glamor of the space race, poverty within urban communities was not receiving similar coverage because it was not exciting or patriotic; rather poverty reflected some of the worst aspects of the United States. Solving urban poverty was not going to make the United States into a global superpower in the way that landing on the moon was. Yet, Dr. King felt that this lack of appeal should not have lessened its presence in American media, and it actually indicated some of the country’s greatest flaws. He respected science and

⁷³ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization of the Committee on Government Operation, 2971.*

patriotism, but he found the government's alignment of its priorities to be unjust, which is a theme that emerges in much of the criticism of the Apollo program. This lack of support for the war on poverty and the civil rights movement heightened the frustration that the leaders within the movement felt toward the Apollo program's appropriations.

Following Dr. King's testimony before members of the Senate, he again touched on the disparity between governmental funding for combating poverty and funding for the Apollo program at the Eleventh Annual SCLC Convention in August of 1967. The SCLC convention provided a different audience than the Senate subcommittee as this group already deeply understood the problem of the government pouring billions of taxpayer dollars into the moonshot. Thus, with this speech, King intended to further rouse support for condemning the amount of money spent on the Apollo program.⁷⁴ The address itself covered a broad range of topics from celebrating the achievements of the past year to empowering the SCLC to move forward in the future.

Within the address, King outlined how African American communities remain impoverished despite the efforts of governmental programs. He noted that, "with all the struggle and all the achievements, we must face the fact, however, that the Negro still lives in the basement of the Great Society. He is still at the bottom, despite the few who have penetrated to slightly higher levels."⁷⁵ With this metaphor, King proposed an interesting juxtaposition between African

⁷⁴ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*. 32.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington. *A Testament of Hope*. Harper. San Francisco, 1991. 245.

Americans living in the basement and white Americans going beyond the sky. This imagery further emphasized the divide that these leaders were attempting to combat. This discussion also demonstrated King's awareness of how African Americans were regarded by some government officials. These civil rights activists faced a challenge deeper than demonstrating that the government's priorities were out of order. They also had to appeal to leaders that were racist or discriminatory, which complicated how activists could explain their grievances with the War on Poverty and the cost of the Apollo program.

Further, he utilized powerful language in order to empower SCLC members to be proud of how far they have come but also to look to the future. He emphasized that the federal government must increase expenditures in order to mitigate the issue of poverty, and he made the argument: "And I say to you today, that if our nation can spend thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam, and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth."⁷⁶ In making this compelling comparison, King developed a rational argument that he hoped would present the issue in a logical way. King impacted the perception that civil rights activists had of the Apollo program, and again, he developed of an awareness of this divide between reducing poverty and moving forward with space exploration.

As the Apollo program progressed throughout the late 1960s, civil rights activists continued to stage protests and gain increasing momentum. Despite

⁷⁶ King and Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 245.

facing a major setback with the assassination of Dr. King in April of 1968, the SCLC continued forward by holding protests and carrying out the Poor People's Campaign of 1968.⁷⁷ In July of 1969, the Apollo 11 mission was preparing for takeoff, and the SCLC leadership decided that this historical moment would be an ideal time to protest the program. On July 15th, 1969, the day before the Apollo 11 launch, more than one hundred SCLC protesters led by Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King's successor and head of the campaign, marched on Cape Canaveral to oppose the mission. The crowd sang "We Shall Overcome," and the protesters brought along four mules and two broken-down wagons, which were recognizable symbols of rural poverty.⁷⁸ The protesters intended to draw attention to the disparities between those in poverty and those that were championing the space race.

Upon reaching the launch area, Abernathy confronted Thomas O. Paine, the Acting NASA Administrator, who agreed to speak with him. In this discussion, Abernathy explained, "This moonshot is possible because of our tax money as well as your tax money," and called attention to how this technological achievement was made possible by all Americans, but it was not accessible to all Americans.⁷⁹ Following Paine and Abernathy's conversation, both leaders understood each other's perspective, and Abernathy agreed to pray with the other protesters for the success of the mission. Further, Paine communicated that he did understand the SCLC's complaints, but he stated that "If it were possible for

⁷⁷ Michael J. Winston, "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference's implementation of the poor peoples' campaign of 1968." (1975). 6.

⁷⁸ Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 11.

⁷⁹ Steve Huntley. "'Poor People' Get VIP Seats at Moon Launch." *New Journal and Guide (1916-2003)*, Jul 26, 1969.

us not to push that button and solve the problems you are talking about, we would not push that button,” which indicated that NASA was not responsible for how different government programs were funded and thus did not feel any responsibility for mitigating the disparity between its funding and funding for antipoverty initiatives.⁸⁰ Paine’s deflection of responsibility showed the division between scientists and policymakers, and the newspaper, *Provo the Underground Tab*, which was a radical Dutch student collective that was active during the 1960s, featured an article that commented directly on Paine’s remarks and stated,

In a sense, of course, Paine was right. If the nation was interested in building human cities, ending poverty, etc. it probably wouldn’t have created moonism in the first place. It simply wouldn’t have been able to. Hence, there wouldn’t have been a button to push. Dr. Paine was simply reminding Rev. Abernathy what he already knew. Those who wield power had already made a [sic] irrevocable decision. As long as they hold power so will their decisions prevail.⁸¹

This writing captures the frustration that civil rights activists at this time were feeling, and again reflects the power struggle between government leaders and civil rights leaders. Further, this encounter between Abernathy and Paine reaffirmed that the Apollo program was a failure of the government in establishing national priorities that served all Americans. In staging this protest, Abernathy and the other SCLC leaders understood that their funding issues were not a result of NASA’s decisions, but they also felt that publicly demonstrating their discontent with the government’s funding choices at such a historic event

⁸⁰ Huntley, 3.

⁸¹ *Provo the Underground Tab, Volume 3, No 8, July 1-15, 1967*. Provo Collection, International Institute of Social History.

would provide their cause with coverage in the media, garner attention from government officials, and help Americans in general understand the major disparities between funding for antipoverty initiatives and space exploration.

At this time, other SCLC leaders offered more comments on the protest and its specific goals. Hosea Williams, the SCLC's chief field lieutenant, described the march on Cape Canaveral by explaining, "These demonstrations are not in protest of our ability to explore outer space, but in protest of Congress' inability to choose priorities and to bring to the nation the injustices and inequities of the space exploration appropriations as against appropriations for the poor."⁸² Again, Williams, as with King's previous correspondences, did not want to take away from the actual science and innovation that led to the moonshot. However, he wanted to also use the Apollo 11 mission as a platform to draw attention to the amount of funding the program received in comparison to programs for reducing poverty, and to amplify the public and governmental officials' awareness of this issue.

In addition, Walter E. Fauntroy, director of the SCLC's Washington bureau, explained, "I hope the rest of the nation can see that we have devoted 10 years and billions of dollars to sending a man to the moon and feel some kind of guilt that there hasn't been a similar effort against the internal problems of this nation."⁸³ Similar to King's congressional testimony and Abernathy's comments, Fauntroy expressed concern about how the nation could rally around and support space exploration but could not generate the same level of unilateral support for

⁸² July 15, 1969. *Nashville Tennessean* (1923-1972), Jul 15, 2.

⁸³ *Nashville Tennessean*, 2.

reducing poverty. These civil rights leaders understood that they were fighting against government officials and leaders that did not sympathize with their cause, yet they still attempted to appeal to the general public and pull on the sympathy of those outside of the South.⁸⁴ As the SCLC, was committed to being nonviolent and staging peaceful protests, they found that their most viable option for making progress was through these protests that drew on outside media coverage.⁸⁵ Further, Abernathy's march on Cape Canaveral came to be perhaps the most recognizable moment of civil rights opposition to American space exploration. However, Abernathy and the SCLC were not the only civil rights activist groups to call attention to this issue.

Another example of this opposition in action can viewed through the National Welfare Rights Organization's (NWRO), protest in Houston on July 21, 1969 as the Apollo 11 astronauts returned back to earth. Although this protest was not coordinated with the SCLC and received far less media coverage, it still championed the same ideals as the Cape Canaveral protest and attracted a crowd of around 150 onlookers.⁸⁶ During the protest, a choir of thirty African American children gathered to sing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" on a mock-up of the Eagle module as the astronauts landed, and protesters demanded that the United States set a new goal to eliminate poverty.⁸⁷ Hubert James, director of field operations for the NWRO and leader of the protest, shared a similar stance to that of the SCLC leadership: "Our position is that we applaud this space

⁸⁴ Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 15.

⁸⁵ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*. 22.

⁸⁶ Paden, *Civil Rights Advocacy on Behalf of the Poor*, 76.

⁸⁷ F. P. McGehan. Civil Rights Demonstrators Start Singing as the Astronauts Land: New timetable Urged to Eliminate Poverty. *The Sun (1837-1994)*. Jul 21, 1969.

landing... but we would like to make a strong statement that we hope it is the last space launch.”⁸⁸ James’ position echoes that of both King and Williams’ writings about the innovation of the technology in space race. They collectively indicated that they were not upset that the United States was developing this technology, but as they all stated, it should not have taken precedence over intervention in impoverished communities. Similar to the SCLC protest, the media presented coverage of the NWRO protest alongside coverage of the Apollo 11 mission; therefore, people reading about Apollo 11’s return would also be exposed to the NWRO’s argument.

In addition to the congressional testimony and physical civil rights protests against the Apollo 11 program, other activists utilized poetry, music, or newspapers to express their disagreement. Gil Scott-Heron’s poem, “Whitey on the Moon,” compellingly exemplifies the complicated emotions felt by civil rights activists at the time, especially in regard to urban poverty.⁸⁹ The poem itself is performed as spoken word, and it originally appeared on Scott-Heron’s debut live album, *Small Talk at 125th and Leno*. It accompanies other pieces centered on governmental criticism, such as “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” The entire album used Scott-Heron’s voice and subtle drumbeats to call attention to social issues, racial injustice, the ills of capitalism, and the unrest of the preceding years. Scott-Heron introduced “Whitey on the Moon,” by acknowledging, “We have a poem here. It’s called ‘Whitey on the Moon.’ And, uh, it was inspired by some whiteys on the moon. So I want to give credit where

⁸⁸ "Protest Staged at Space Center." *The Hartford Courant (1923-1994)*, Jul 21, 1969. 7.

⁸⁹ See Appendix 1 for entirety of Scott-Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon.”

credit is due.”⁹⁰ This introduction sets the tone for the poem in an interesting way because, similar to the SCLC activists, he does not explicitly blame the astronauts. Instead, he takes the approach of simply drawing on the stark contrast that exists between his personal reality and white men being on the moon.⁹¹

Scott-Heron also used brutal honesty in constructing the poem, which makes it exceptionally poignant. Within the poem, he describes the financial challenges that he, or family or those in his community, encounter daily because of the lack of governmental support and advocacy. As he describes these challenges, such as “[He] can’t pay no doctor bill,” the phrase “but Whitey’s on the moon” echoes immediately after.⁹² The repetition of “Whitey’s on the moon” makes the phrase memorable to the listener, and it also depicts the consistent and unchanging nature of what Scott-Heron perceives to be the experience of white people in the United States.⁹³ In contrast, the African American experience is transient and increasingly stressful, and he reflected these circumstances in the poem by listing his varied concerns that could be aided if the government were to reassess its priorities, such as “Taxes takin’ my whole damn check / Junkies makin’ me a nervous wreck / The price of food is goin’ up.”⁹⁴ From these lines, Scott-Heron paints a picture of what it means to be a black American living in urban poverty, which includes unaffordable food prices and drug abuse. In

⁹⁰ Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," track 9 on *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, Flying Dutchman Records, 1970, vinyl.

⁹¹ Allen, "Landing on a Dream," 2.

⁹² Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon."

⁹³ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 26.

⁹⁴ Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon."

addition, the constant drum beat in the background allows for the listener to conceptualize the song as emblematic of everyday experiences; he is sharing regular, nonexceptional experiences, but they are nonetheless traumatic and should be addressed instead of paying for the moonshot.⁹⁵

Further, Scott-Heron does not say that his experience is the fault of white astronauts on the moon, though he does sarcastically finish the song with the line, “I think I’ll send these doctor bills / Airmail special / to Whitey on the Moon.”⁹⁶ This poem provided something that African Americans in similar circumstances could identify with in a similar style to Dr. King’s address to the SCLC convention; he called attention to the contradiction of the Apollo program and poverty within the United States in a way that resonated with people. Again, similar to the protests at Cape Canaveral and in Houston, his poem critiqued the disorder of governmental priorities, and the indignation that many black Americans felt at the government spending billions of taxpayers’ dollars on going to the moon. Scott-Heron spoke to this by reciting, “Was all that money I made las’ year / for Whitey on the moon? / How come there ain’t no money here?”, and he did so in a personal and accessible way that added great depth to the criticism of the Apollo program.⁹⁷ Scott-Heron also recognized that these activists were facing a challenge with appealing to governmental leaders. His poem reflects an understanding that gaining ground within the movement was difficult because

⁹⁵ Allen, “Landing on a Dream,” 3.

⁹⁶ Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon.”

⁹⁷ Scott-Heron. “Whitey on the Moon.”

some government officials simply did not care or were not sympathetic to African American struggles with poverty.

Poetic Opposition to Reaching the Moon

In a similar vein to Scott-Heron, other poets also used this medium to take a critical stance on space exploration. Some took the position of civil rights activists in terms of the cost and statement it made about American priorities, while other poets took issue with the goal of reaching the moon for reasons ranging from ethical and artistic to its overall reflection of the state of American society. From a more artistic standpoint, the moon had existed as a physically untouched muse for many poets; therefore, some poets were distrustful of man personally interfering with a symbol that had never been physically reached.⁹⁸ One example of these concerns about interfering with the moon can be seen in May Swenson's "Landing on the Moon." In thinking about this notion of landing on the moon, May Swenson wrote "who have arrived to map an apparition / who walk upon the forehead of a myth / can flesh rub with symbol? If our ball / be iron, and not light, our earliest wish / eclipses. Dare we land upon a dream?"⁹⁹ Swenson and others did not want the human race to take its issues and conflicts, like racial inequality and conceptions of social hierarchies, to another world.¹⁰⁰

In addition to concerns about having man physically interact with the moon, poets also wrote about the significance of reaching a new world. In regard to the issues stemming from the struggle for civil rights, some African American

⁹⁸ Austin Allen, "Landing on a Dream: The Moon in Poetry." *Poetry Foundation*. July 15, 2019. 2.

⁹⁹ May Swenson *Collected Poems*. Edited by Langdon Hammer. The Library of America, 239. New York, N.Y.: Library of America, 2013. 82.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, "Landing on a Dream," 2.

poets used poetry to expand on how they felt about the coinciding of the moon landing and the civil rights movement. Robert Hayden, a well-known African American poet, wrote many poems analyzing the place of African Americans within society and often criticized the government through delicately crafted metaphors. In his 1962 “Full Moon” poem, he reflected upon the significance of actually landing on the moon and how it changed the moon’s place in poetry and the universe. He explains “The emphatic moon ascends— / the brilliant challenger of rocket experts / the white hope of communications men.”¹⁰¹ In this stanza, Hayden personifies the moon as being in opposition to being reached by man, and he identifies reaching the moon as a “white hope” ostensibly referring to the idea of the “great white hope,” which is a term associated with white racial pride.¹⁰² In making this observation, Hayden condemns the exclusionary nature of the moonshot while also acknowledging the tension between man and nature when considering space exploration.

In his poem, he went on to write, “Already a mooted goal and tomorrow perhaps / an arms base, a livid sector / the full moon dominates the dark.”¹⁰³ Within this stanza, Hayden goes beyond condemning the racial inequality aspect of the Apollo program to further criticize how the American focus on going to the moon connects to the threats of the Cold War, and he suggests that they may even militarize the moon and use it as an arms base, which further takes away the moon’s poetic mystique and takes away from its ethereal, supernatural

¹⁰¹ Robert Hayden, Wright, John Williams. *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems*. United States: Liveright, 1975. 79.

¹⁰² Wilburn Williams, “Covenant of Timelessness & Time: Symbolism & History in Robert Hayden’s “Angle of Ascent”.” *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no. 4 (1977): 741.

¹⁰³ Williams, “Covenant of Timelessness & Time” 741.

characterization. Poems like Hayden's manage to provide a deep criticism of the U.S. government's lack of consideration in going to the moon in a less explicit manner than the protests and speeches; however, they still stand as an effective means of expressing opposition to the United States' ventures into space.

Student Antiwar Activists and the Apollo Program

Civil rights activists were not the only activist group concerned with the federal government's space exploration goals. At the same time as the SCLC and other civil rights activists were planning actions and organizing campaigns, student groups across the United States began to gather over several social issues. These groups took inspiration from young people in preceding years that had protested anticommunist witch hunts during the 1950s and opposed development in nuclear weapons. However, the actions of civil rights activists in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially the actions of student groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and students that participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer project in Mississippi, helped to invigorate student movements, particularly in opposition to the war in Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ Overall, these students mobilized against the exclusive American dream that President Kennedy championed in his speech at Rice University and the version of the United States that is commemorated in the celebrations of the Apollo 11 mission. These students took issue with the Apollo program for reasons of poverty, violence, and imperialism.

¹⁰⁴ Horn, Gerd-Rainer. *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976*. 54.

Perhaps the most visible antiwar student group, Students for a Democratic Society, which a group of students at the University of Michigan founded in 1960, organized itself on the principles of participatory democracy and collective action. These students found themselves united under the ideas of theorists and philosophers, like C. Wright Mill and Herbert Marcuse, who questioned Cold War politics and were critical of American capitalism and conformity.¹⁰⁵ Unlike the SCLC, SDS and other student groups avoided hierarchical power structures within their local chapters, and because they were student groups, leaders of chapters did not stay in charge for extended periods of time. At the beginning, the organization had clear nationally-elected leaders; however, by 1967, SDS member eliminated both the national president and vice president in favor of secretaries.¹⁰⁶

Further, because of SDS members' general skepticism of authority and organizations collectively, the group did not have a centralized system of communication or power. In not focusing on power structures, these student government were able to maintain their momentum as students left the group, and this prevented the groups from being dependent on only a few leaders.¹⁰⁷ Groups like SDS allowed students to find solidarity with their peers through organizations, specifically these organizations afforded students the opportunity to talk about issues together and stage on-campus protests and collaborate on underground publications. Further, because of their status as students, young

¹⁰⁵ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 104.

¹⁰⁶ Isserman and Kazin, *America divided: The civil war of the 1960s*. 98.

¹⁰⁷ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 106.

people, such as members of the SDS, had a greater degree of biographical availability in comparison to their older, busier counterparts who had more to lose from engaging in risky protests.¹⁰⁸

These on-campus student activists groups experienced many changes throughout the 1960s as they shifted their goals and efforts based upon events that were happening throughout the decade. Over time, these groups took cues from communist leaders, such as Mao Zedong and Che Guevara and rallied around anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and pro-civil rights issues.¹⁰⁹ At the beginning of the 1960s, student groups like SDS found inspiration from SNCC and particularly admired the energy and daring actions of the groups as opposed to the more restricted civil rights groups like the SCLC. Specifically, during the early 1960s, campus student groups centered on civil rights issues; however, after the Freedom Summer and increasing tensions within the civil rights movement, organizations like SNCC encouraged white student activist groups to organize on their own terms before ultimately expelling all white members in 1967.¹¹⁰ Following this change of focus, student groups turned their attention to organizing protests in support of establishing unions and advocating for change in urban poor white communities, but many student activists maintained support of the civil rights movement while they were reevaluating their own efforts.

During this period of reevaluation in the mid 1960s and following the excitement of Freedom Summer, students in California became increasingly

¹⁰⁸ Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 179.

¹¹⁰ Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, 57-58.

frustrated with restrictions that universities had placed on organizing and protesting in the wake of the Red Scare and McCarthyism that pervaded the state during the 1950s. A group of over 500 students joined together to protest an order that the University of California Berkley implemented preventing political organizing near campus, and during their march, the students were able to reach an agreement with police. However, that specific march empowered students to form the Free Speech Movement on Berkley's campus.¹¹¹ The excitement and rationale behind the protests at Berkley gave new meaning to the nationwide student movement and provided opportunities for students to form connections and collaborate on protest campaigns.

Then as the Apollo program began to pick up momentum in the mid to late 1960s, student protesters were holding demonstrations aimed at bringing attention to myriad issues that were in the public eye, such as environmental concerns and women's rights. Students were exceptionally incensed at the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Following President Johnson's escalation of the war in 1965, students began to organize around anti-war actions specifically. The Vietnam War became an issue that student groups were particularly well-suited to organize against since they themselves and people their age were being drafted in a war that they ideologically opposed and could see unfolding graphically on television and in newspapers.¹¹² Not only were these students protesting the war and the draft, but they also targeted corporate recruiters that would come on

¹¹¹ Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, 171.

¹¹² Isserman and Kazin, *America divided: The civil war of the 1960s*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2000. 87.

campus from companies like Dow Chemical and General Electric, which contributed to the war by manufacturing napalm and military equipment. Importantly, companies like General Electric were also helping to power the technology behind the space race.¹¹³ These students were generally opposed to all groups and companies that had connections to the war; therefore, they also took issue with the United States' involvement in space and the Apollo program.

Students took advantage of this time to juxtapose United States' actions in Vietnam with the space race, which forced Americans to reconcile the notions of freedom, democracy, and international progress that were being extolled by the Apollo program with the grim and violent situation in Vietnam¹¹⁴. In order to convey their sincere disgust with the actions of the United States, students at universities across the country relied on underground newspapers that could be distributed to like-minded students. These newspapers often used names associated with secrecy and used casual yet pointed language to garner outrage about various issues during this time, such as police brutality, environmental concerns, and Cold War politics. While criticism of the war in Vietnam pervades many issues of these newspapers, in July of 1969, these students put the moon landing in conversation with the heightened racial tensions of the time as well as the Vietnam War.¹¹⁵

At this time, Berkley was known for its outspoken student activists as a result of the Free Speech Movement and the campus' continued activism. In

¹¹³ Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 54.

¹¹⁴ Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America*, 165.

¹¹⁵ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 179.

order to keep activists aware of different events and provide a platform for activists to share their thoughts and concerns, these students created the *Berkley Barb*. This particular publication was one of the first underground newspapers and helped to pave the way for others across the country. In August of 1965, Max Scherr published the first edition of the *Berkley Barb*; the publication continued to gain popularity throughout the following years.¹¹⁶ Following the moon landing in July of 1969, the *Berkley Barb* featured a picture of the moon on the front cover accompanied by the article title “The Moon Eats You” and depicted young Americans absorbed by mainstream newspapers and a thought bubble that declares, “I only know what I read in the paper.”¹¹⁷ This cover speaks to the idea that people only followed mainstream media and were unable to think beyond news outlets and media, which was largely the ideals embodied by Kennedy’s moon speech and Disney’s “Man in Space.” The *Berkley Barb* distinctly challenged this depiction of the moon landing and sought to tell readers why the moon landing was problematic and why they should be concerned. Within the July 1969 article, several different authors discuss their specific criticism of the moon landing and the United States government.

In one article titled, “Moon Views,” the author, Don Kaufman, reflected on his discussion with young people in the Berkley area. He shared pieces of conversations that he had with these young people, which range from optimism to outright anger. When retelling one of the interviews, Kaufman wrote, “‘Fuck the moon how about right here?’ one Avenue stroller named Jim responded when

¹¹⁶ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 169.

¹¹⁷ Coult, Allan, ed. In *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

asked his opinion of the moon shot. Jim's response represented about half of those approached on the subject."¹¹⁸ In including this exchange, Kaufman captured the anger that his respondents were feeling at the time. These outraged sentiments reflect similar frustrations to that of Gil Scott-Heron and Ralph Abernathy, which again were focused on how misguided spending money going to the moon was in comparison to the dire circumstances that many Americans were facing in their own backyards.

In addition to highlighting the outrage felt by those that he spoke to, Kaufman went on to express his own perspective on the moon landing. Kaufman closed out his article by writing,

The total cost of the Apollo program is **24 BILLION DOLLARS!** Reflect for a moment on other possible directions this bread could have gone. How much food and clothing could have been purchased? How many houses could have been built? But let's not go so far as to charge that the moon shot was a tragic waste. After all, **WE'RE NUMBER 1!**¹¹⁹

Again, Kaufman's writing points to the issues that many other activists criticized, which was that the cost was too high. Given the nature of publication and his social location, he was able to be significantly more candid in his communication than activists like Dr. King or Reverend Abernathy, and in his candidness, he captures the competitive element of the space race that made the venture even more frustrating for these activists. Because of his position as a student, and young person, he was able to speak more freely than other activists, like Dr. King or Reverend Abernathy. As he noted, not only did the Apollo program cost a

¹¹⁸ Don Kaufman, "Moon Views," In *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

¹¹⁹ Don Kaufman, "Moon Views," In *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

significant amount of money, it was also a part of the Cold War that these activists did not support nor believe in. Further, his acknowledgement of how the moon landing elevated the United States' international status addressed the idea that government officials only cared about the country's place in the world and not their own people.

Beyond this, Kaufman criticized the non-peaceful ends of the moonshot, which spoke to the Cold War tension that permeated the entirety of the United States' efforts in space at this time. He illustrated his concerns about the motives of the country and government officials by writing, "Ideally, advanced technology would serve to make it easier for man to peacefully co-exist with man but this doesn't seem to have happened. Instead, social development has been forfeited while our creative energies have been directed elsewhere."¹²⁰ By calling attention to lapses in the aims of the United States, Kaufman expressed a sentiment that many young Americans were feeling. Technological development was thought to be a potential source of unity and progress; however, in this case, the United States was using advancement for selfish ends that were in direct conflict with what the student activists believed.

Another article in the *Berkeley Barb*, "The Moon Eats You," echoes much of what Kaufman expressed in his writing. The author, Tom Klaber writes, "There are many persons not caught up in national pride or awe and wonder over the fact that man has at last reached the moon...There are those who for a number of years have felt that the money could be better spent improving conditions on this

¹²⁰ Coult, Allan, ed. *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

planet rather than setting out to ruin another.”¹²¹ In writing this, Klaber notes the disillusionment felt by other antiwar activists at the time and how many were concerned that the United States was going to continue its imperialist expansion, even on the moon. Further, Klaber’s concerns demonstrated the general frustration that these students felt with the patriotism associated with the Apollo program. They found excessive patriotism to be ridiculous, especially at a time when many Americans had no reason to be full of national pride.

At this time, many of these student activists were disgusted with the imperialist policies of the United States, especially regarding Vietnam. Because of this hostility toward imperialism, these activists recognized that the United States could continue its colonizing efforts on the moon, which these students ardently opposed. Another underground publication, *Fifth Estate*, reinforced these concerns about American imperialism. One author wrote, “If nothing else [the moon landing proves] that no territory in the Universe is safe from U.S. expansionism and making one grateful that at least there are no ‘Indians’ on the moon who will have to be slaughtered for their resistance to ‘progress.’”¹²² The author’s outrage in this article matches the concerns raised by other activists about the United States’ motives and history.

These activists were frustrated with both the United States’ actions in Vietnam which seemed to be in opposition with the country’s professed ideals and the failure of the country and elected officials to reckon with its past. These

¹²¹ Klaber, Tom, “The Moon Eats You,” *Berkeley Barb*, Vol. 9 No. 4, July 25 - 31, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Barb, 1969.

¹²² "AUGUST." In *Fifth Estate*, Vol. 4 No. 6, July-August 1969, edited by Alan Gotkin, Peter Werbe, and Cathy West. Detroit, MI: Fifth Estate Newspaper, 1969.

activists wanted to see the United States reconcile the injustices of the past and work toward a more equal future. However, government officials seemed unbothered by these concerns and continued to paint the moonshot as a purely patriotic endeavor.¹²³ The *Fifth Estate* article took issue with the country's glossing over social injustice and noted that "You can send men to the moon. But you cannot pack up a contradiction in a rocket ship and blast it away. In fact, the men on the moon will only make the contradictions more obvious."¹²⁴ From these articles, one can see that along with concerns about the cost of the Apollo program, these student activists were also concerned about the motives of government officials once Americans did reach the moon.

In addition to these ideas about the financial aspect of the Apollo program and the potentially imperialistic aims of the United States, these students were also frustrated with the mainstream media and government officials' understandings of how young activists were reacting to moon landing. The July 25, 1969 edition of *The Berkley Tribe*, which was published by a group of student activists that split off of the *Berkley Barb* in that same month, featured cartoon caricatures of the Apollo astronauts accompanied by an article entitled "Plasticmen Piss on Moon." The article expressed similar frustrations to that of the other student activists of the time and Diane, the author of the article, commented,

In the midst of all the back-slapping about this 'technological triumph,' Walter Cronkite and all the experts could not forget about the 'disillusioned, cynical' youth of America. They kept hoping and praying that this would show those creeps how good America can be when she puts

¹²³ Suri, Jeremi. *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*. 88.

¹²⁴ Gotkin, et al., "August," 19.

her mind to it. We weren't convinced Walter—America's death trip rolls on. An in fact, that plastic flag and plaque along with the millions [sic] spent on this sterile journey added insult to injury.¹²⁵

Diane's writings clearly depict the opinion of these young people that were opposed to the United States' involvement in space. However, she also demonstrated how these student activists refuted the idea of American excellence associated with moon landing that appears contemporarily in the discourse about the Apollo program. Further, her article called attention to the tension between student activists and their characterization within the media, and it expresses how mainstream media had trivialized the feelings of student antiwar activists and also thought that their perceptions about the country could be altered by the triumph of the moon landing. For these student activists, their activism faced an additional barrier in that the American public was skeptical of the legitimacy of young people's claims despite the fact that they were being directly impacted by the draft and the war in Vietnam. Therefore, being told by news corporations and reporters, like Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and Walter Cronkite, that their negative perceptions of the United States could be fixed by the national pride from the moon landing only made them more bitter. This appeal to young people worsened student activists' perception of the moon landing and intensified their outrage.

Additionally, Diane's writing is layered with satire and accompanied by a cartoon mocking the moonshot, which captures the overall mood of the *Berkley Tribe* and the other underground publications at this time. In closing her article,

¹²⁵ Diane, "Plasticmen Piss on Moon." In *Berkeley Tribe*, Vol. 1 No. 3, July 25, 1969. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Tribe, 1969, 1.

Diane writes, “So here is America. Spending all that fucking bread and energy to get to the moon with...poverty and oppression at home, genocide abroad, and they claim a triumph for mankind,” which speaks to the gravity of the anger that these young people felt at that time.¹²⁶ To them, similar to the civil rights activists, the United States was not taking the concerns of all Americans seriously. Instead, government officials were committed to a cause that failed to seriously address the many concerns that people had at this time. For these student activists, they felt disillusioned with patriotism because of American involvement, aggression, and brutality in a war that they did not agree with yet were subjected to participation in while racial injustice and other social issues were also reaching new levels of tension. Through these underground publications, students were able to express their concerns and gather support in their criticism of national priorities, including the space race, as well as engage in dialogue about American society as a whole.

The American Public’s Perception of Space Exploration Then and Now

The general American public’s opinions at this time also provides an interesting perspective. Given the program’s massive budget and the framing of the venture as patriotic and heroic, we might expect that a high number of Americans, excluding civil rights and student antiwar activists, were accepting and supportive of the spending on the Apollo program. Yet, in contrast to this notion, public opinion surrounding space exploration during the 1960s was not as positive as contemporary depictions of the space age make it seem. A Harris

¹²⁶ Diane, “Plasticmen Piss on Moon.” 19.

poll conducted just after the moon landing in 1969 found that just 53% of Americans approved of funding the Apollo program, and those that did not approve expressed concerns about the high cost. By 1970, just one year after the moon landing, a majority of Americans responded that they did not believe that the moon landing was worth the overall cost of the program, which again diverges from the way that the Apollo 11 mission is depicted within popular media.¹²⁷

Bearing these survey results in mind, understanding the overall rationale and intentions for the Apollo program becomes more complex. Many Americans disapproved its cost, especially these marginalized groups and those that advocated for poverty relief and other social justice issues. Thus, the intent of going to space appears less as a patriotic endeavor for the American people and more of a power move on the part of the United States to both prove its dominance on the international stage, reinforce the superiority of capitalism and democracy, and diminish the efforts of the Soviet Union and notions of communism. Kennedy addressed this idea of promoting democracy and capitalistic ideals through success in space when he pleaded to Congress for funding for space exploration. In his appeal to congress, he claimed, “If we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space...should have made clear to us all... the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are

¹²⁷ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 10.

attempting to make a determination of which road they should take.”¹²⁸

Kennedy’s success in this appeal demonstrates how elected officials were in agreement with the rhetoric about space exploration that Kennedy employed at this time.

Further, Kennedy’s framing of the space race as a patriotic endeavor had a lasting legacy on the perception of American space exploration, and while his language garnered excitement and enthusiasm, it certainly failed to address the concerns of the activists that went on to oppose this exploration in the years after his death. In the same address to Congress in which Kennedy expressed concerns about the battle between freedom and tyranny, he went on to say, “Now it is time to take longer strides—time for a great new American enterprise—time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth,” which suggested how Kennedy’s motives for space exploration had international implications and were set on going to the moon in order to increase the United States’ power and presence of American ideals a global level.¹²⁹ As this address to Congress reflects, government officials clearly bought into this idea of success in the space race having worthwhile and meaningful implications for the United States, even if this venture came at the cost of not providing services to or working in support of communities and Americans in need, particularly African Americans.

¹²⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs." In *Delivered in person before a joint session of Congress*, vol. 25. 1961.

¹²⁹ Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress," 1961.

By buying into Kennedy's vision of American excellence in space and pouring money into the NASA and the Apollo program, these elected officials communicated that they were interested in preserving the American identity of freedom and enterprise and demonstrating superiority over the USSR and its ideologies. This further plays into Cold War politics where the United States claimed to be taking a stance against communism by pursuing efforts in space. By getting to the moon before the Soviet Union, the United States was hoping to prove that these Americanized notions of capitalism and democracy could win over communist ideals.¹³⁰ By investing resources into reducing poverty and taking a stand on racial injustice, government officials would not have achieved the same level of international recognition or upper hand in the Cold War; therefore, these officials likely found this as a reason to be less concerned about the criticism expressed by civil rights and student antiwar activists.¹³¹ Furthermore, some government officials and their constituencies simply held racist beliefs. Despite not openly admitting that they held these beliefs, some officials were voted against funding poverty relief programs targeted at African American communities and still make a clear point about their lack of concern for African Americans.¹³² Following the ideas expressed by Kennedy regarding space exploration and then policies implemented by President Johnson after Kennedy's death, one can understand how officials framed funding the space program as

¹³⁰ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 59.

¹³¹ Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 34.

¹³² Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, 40.

much more appealing and providing better political gains than antipoverty and antiwar initiatives and why Congressional leaders backed these budget decisions.

However, those that criticized the program were cognizant of these biased interests held by some government officials, and both civil rights and student antiwar activists knew that gaining public support for reducing poverty and withdrawing troops from Vietnam was going to be incredibly challenging. In order to call attention to why the Apollo program was harmful or did not serve all Americans, activists determined that their best option was to draw as much attention as possible to their issues and appeal to American's rationality and emotions.¹³³ To make rational appeals, these activists argued that the Apollo program was funded by all taxpaying Americans, but it lacked approval of those that were funding it. Further, they pointed out that program itself was expensive, and many Americans at the time were suffering financially. They hoped that Americans would not be invested in going into space when numerous, critical problems ran rampant on in their own country. Referring back to Thomas Johnson's *New York Times* article from July of 1969, he shares a sentiment expressed by an editorial, "Yesterday the moon. Tomorrow, maybe us."¹³⁴ This idea represents the general disillusionment felt by those advocating for change during the 1960s. They felt that their voices were not being heard, but they continued protesting and writing. However, records of this opposition scarcely exist in contemporary discussions of the Apollo program.

¹³³ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 65.

¹³⁴ Johnson, "Blacks and Apollo."

To fully appreciate the achievements and social impact of the moon landing, we must also look to the other stories and moments that shaped this era and acknowledge that the great patriotic achievements of American space exploration came at a time when many other facets of American society were increasingly under the scrutiny of a new generation of activists. Unlike how governmental leaders and the media portrayed and celebrated the moon landing in the past and contemporarily, this achievement did not occur in a vacuum, and understanding the struggles that were occurring in tandem with the Apollo program can help us see different disparities within American society during the 1960s and in the present day. Today, echoes of the past activist movements of the late 1960s resonated as civil unrest filled the streets following the killing of George Floyd.

On May 25, 2020, Floyd was killed by police officer Derek Chauvin while being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. Because of the outright injustice and brutality, Black Lives Matter activists organized protests and demonstrations across the United States to call attention to police brutality in response to Floyd's death and other police killings of black Americans. In the midst of these protests and demonstrations, on June 30, 2020, SpaceX, launched its Falcon 9 rocket into space, which marked the first time that NASA astronauts went to the International Space Station from the United States since the space shuttle program ended in 2011.¹³⁵ The juxtaposition between the news coverage of the BLM protests and Falcon 9 launch closely resembled the contentious July

¹³⁵ Kramer, Miriam. "What Space Means Right Now." *Axios*, Jun 2, 2020. <https://www.axios.com/spacex-launch-george-floyd-protests-cd775203-8c05-4a68-8a12-c4113df35072.html>

of 1969, which once again reinforced the idea that space exploration is not free of or separate from the very real concerns and challenges faced by people here on Earth, especially in the United States. During a press conference leading up to the launch, NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine commented on how he viewed the launch during that difficult moment in history by saying, “I am hoping that people can see this as something that is bright and hopeful and that people know that tomorrow is a new day, and a better day, and we’re always going to strive to do better,” which again bore an incredible similarity to the message of hope and a brighter future that was shared by elected officials and in the media leading up to the Apollo 11 mission.¹³⁶

Not everyone viewed the landmark launch as positively as Jim Bridenstine. In response to Bridenstine’s message of hope and optimism, Lucianne Walkowicz, an astronomer and co-founder of JustSpace Alliance, shared, “As long as we posit a world in which they [people of color] are supposed to turn off their humanity and draw some sort of colorblind inspiration from a launch that hasn’t even acknowledged their pain and their presence, we’re going to continue to not make strides in the way we need to be.”¹³⁷ Walkowicz’s remarks echo the frustration shared by student antiwar activists in *The Berkley Barb*, Gil Scott-Heron, and other activists that recognized how space exploration cannot be truly embraced by those that are continually oppressed within society. Walkowicz also noted, “The fact that we are still having these conversations some 50 years later, should show us how much we have failed to make progress,” which

¹³⁶ Kramer, Miriam. “What Space Means Right Now.”

¹³⁷ Kramer, Miriam. “What Space Means Right Now.”

captures exactly why we must look to the activists from the past and learn from their experiences and voices. By failing to acknowledge these critical voices in our celebrations of the Apollo program and the moon landing, we are setting ourselves up to continually make the mistakes of the past. Future coverage of the Apollo program should recognize those that called attention to the nation's priorities, protested at the Apollo 11 launch and return, and published their opposition in underground newspapers.

Acknowledging these criticisms of American space exploration allows for these often silenced or forgotten voices to be better appreciated and put into conversation with contemporary issues. Importantly, both a civil rights perspective and student antiwar perspective do not represent the full spectrum of dissenting opinions about the Apollo program. Other groups, such as those involved in the women's liberation movement and the environmental movement, also took issue with NASA's budget and the message that government officials were communicating by advocating in favor of American involvement in the space race.¹³⁸ Further, these groups did not only disagree with the cost, but they were also concerned about the increasing militarization that was associated with the space race and the adverse impacts that space exploration might have on the environment. However, contemporary media and historical depictions also do not portray these dissenting viewpoints.

Furthermore, American space exploration and technological progress has been inextricably linked to the Cold War and American efforts to develop

¹³⁸ Neil M. Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*. 109.

superior rocket technology than the USSR, but historical depictions in documentaries and celebrations of the moon landing downplay the connection to the Cold War and exactly what it meant for Americans at this time. Additionally, these depictions fail to acknowledge that German scientists active in the Nazi Regime majorly contributed to the United States' success in space. If historical retellings of the moon landing and the Apollo program ignore these contrasting and oppositional perspectives, Americans are denied a clear, full picture of the Apollo program and the history of our country during a crucial time in its history.

In addition, as several of the pieces written and spoken by civil rights and antiwar student activists have captured, technology and scientific development and achievement play a crucial role in society and have the potential to be sources of unity and interconnectedness. However, this togetherness cannot be achieved if only a portion of society can reasonably enjoy the achievement while others continue to suffer, as in the case of space exploration within the United States. The criticisms held by these civil rights activists and student antiwar activists specifically noted that they were not frustrated with scientific progress; however, they took issue with the failure of elected officials to prioritize the needs of those that were suffering at home and abroad and the media's approach to progress and patriotism. Therefore, these activists cannot to be said to be deniers of progress, rather they recognize that technology can be exclusionary, which is a lesson that is not isolated to space exploration.

As many of the activists noted, technology can largely be used to make meaningful improvements in society; however, it certainly should not come at the cost of improving the wellbeing of those in need. This disconnect between areas

of society and technological innovation will only continue to grow as technology improves and government officials fail to adequately address the needs of those that are systemically disadvantaged. By looking to past voices of dissent against technological innovation not only in the space race but also in other areas of technological improvement, like the rise of artificial intelligence or in groundbreaking medical developments, we can better understand where some facets of society may be being discriminated against or suffering

Finally, this disconnect between those that criticized the Apollo program and the media created for the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo program shares a great deal about how historical events are remembered within American society. In 1975, less than twenty percent of Americans could recall any of the three Apollo astronauts' names despite being only six years removed from the landmark event. Yet, in 2008, over sixty percent of Americans could recall the astronauts' names thirty-three years after the moon landing.¹³⁹ As time has progressed, people have produced media that heroizes the Apollo 11 mission and astronauts, such as books, children's television programs, movies, museum displays, and more.

Importantly, most of this media has been targeted at children and encouraged becoming an astronaut, like *Ready Jet Go!* and *Space Racers*. With the exception of the 2018 children's book *Hidden Figures*, which details the story of four African American women who were essential to NASA in the early years of the space race, most of this media reinforces the notion that space exploration

¹³⁹ Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: the Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture*, 55.

has always been and will continue to be a white, affluent endeavor that is free from politics and social injustice. However, this patriotic, single-sided narrative of the Apollo program must be complicated and include the voices of those that took issue with the program and the government's priorities in order to create a more inclusive historical memory of this landmark event in American history.

Appendix 1

“Whitey on the Moon”

Gil Scott-Heron

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
 (with Whitey on the moon)
 Her face and arms began to swell.
 (and Whitey's on the moon)
 I can't pay no doctor bill.
 (but Whitey's on the moon)
 Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.
 (while Whitey's on the moon)
 The man jus' upped my rent las' night.
 ('cause Whitey's on the moon)
 No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
 (but Whitey's on the moon)
 I wonder why he's uppinn' me?
 ('cause Whitey's on the moon?)
 I was already payin' 'im fifty a week.
 (with Whitey on the moon)
 Taxes takin' my whole damn check,
 Junkies makin' me a nervous wreck,
 The price of food is goin' up,
 An' as if all that shit wasn't enough
 A rat done bit my sister Nell.
 (with Whitey on the moon)
 Her face an' arm began to swell.
 (but Whitey's on the moon)
 Was all that money I made las' year
 (for Whitey on the moon?)
 How come there ain't no money here?
 (Hm! Whitey's on the moon)
 Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill
 (of Whitey on the moon)
 I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,
 Airmail special
 (to Whitey on the moon)

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