

Fifty Years of Human Space Flight: The Measure of Mankind

by Marsha Freeman

April 11—On April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, became the first human being to leave the Earth and orbit the planet. The following month, in response, President John F. Kennedy challenged America to land a man on the Moon and return him safely to the Earth by the end of the 1960s. Thirty years ago on April 12, 1981, the Space Shuttle Columbia became the first reusable spaceship that could launch, then return to Earth, and be readied to launch again.

The most remarkable aspect of the first 50 years of manned space flight is not the history-making flight of Gagarin, or even the 1969 landing of man on the Moon--the first step in Krafft Ehrlicke's Extraterrestrial Imperative--but the fact that we have, repeatedly, destroyed our ability to take the next step.

After President Kennedy's death, the British-instigated U.S. war in Vietnam, in full swing under an embattled President Lyndon Johnson, destroyed the U.S. post-Apollo program to establish permanent manned lunar settlements, along with President Kennedy's initiative to develop advanced propulsion technologies to take us to Mars. In 1971, President Nixon's destruction of the Bretton Woods system cancelled NASA's Earth-orbiting space

station and lunar development programs, which would have been the stepping-stones to Mars.

In the mid-1970s, President Jimmy Carter slashed the funding for the one remaining manned space flight program--the Space Shuttle--creating an hiatus in manned missions from the last Apollo mission, in 1975, to the first Shuttle flight, in 1981.

The budget cuts also resulted in an engineering design that compromised the safety of the Shuttle crews and the orbiter fleet.

While President Reagan initiated the space station program in 1984, monetarist budget-balancers in his administration made sure it was never funded at a level to allow it to meet its goals, or its schedule.

Although the elder President Bush announced in 1989, on the 20th anniversary of the first manned landing on the Moon, that the United States would return to the Moon and then venture to Mars, that exploration initiated was never funded, and quietly died, creating widespread demoralization in the space agency, and the aerospace community.

Under President Clinton, NASA's budget over the 1990s was in steady decline, as NASA became Al Gore's ``poster boy" for

``reinventing government," to do with less. The International Space Station was frequently redesigned (``descoped") to "cost less." But under President Clinton, the integration of the U.S. and former Soviet manned space programs, culminating in the International Space Station, did save Russia's precious space capabilities, which had been nearly destroyed by its turn to ``capitalism."

President Bush the younger followed in his father's footsteps, announcing a new Moon-Mars program after the Columbia accident, in early 2004, but never funding it. Last year, President Obama proposed cancellation of the Bush Vision for Space Exploration, altogether. Since the Congress refused to go along with this insane policy, NASA has been set adrift, with no future manned exploration program, at all.

By the middle of the 20th century, one critical platform for mankind's future progress was the ability to send both his instruments, and himself, off the planet. Fifty years ago mankind first broke the bonds of Earth, and later traveled a quarter million miles to land on another celestial body. Since then, there has been no serious or sustained effort to go beyond.

Now, if it had not been evident before, it is clear that mankind's future depends upon his ability to better understand

the fundamental nature of the cosmos, our near-Earth neighborhood, and our planet. Whether or not our species takes up that challenge will be the measure of us all.