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Mankind's next great leap

By James C. McLane III, Ottawa Citizen July 17, 2009

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This view of the rising Earth greeted the Apollo 8 astronauts as they came from behind the Moon after the lunar orbit insertion burn. Earth is about five degrees above the horizon in the photo.

Photograph by: Handout, NASA

It was a hot summer night in Houston, Texas, when my mother and I, like countless millions around the world, watched ghostly TV images of the first men to walk on the moon. My father was viewing the same event in the observation gallery at NASA's Mission Control Center. He returned home wearing a big grin on his face. He strode into the house taking long, exaggerated, bouncing steps, swinging stiff arms back and forth, imitating the brave astronauts who had just made us so proud.

History may ultimately decide that Apollo 11 was humanity's greatest triumph. While the landing was a technological tour de force, the human element in the adventure was what created the suspense and excitement. As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of that event, I note that half of those alive today weren't born soon enough to personally witness the moon landings. These are the younger and most vibrant members of our society and sadly, they've never seemed very interested in space travel.

The failure of nations to continue sending humans into deep space after Apollo is inexcusable. I'm irritated when ignorant people demand that such exploration be justified by economic or military returns. The benefits from a mastery of space-related technology are everywhere and undeniable. As far as military aspects, it is fortunate that Apollo was an unclassified civilian effort that experienced little interference from the military to impede its breakneck progress. Human space exploration is the natural result of our species's technology driven, tool making evolution, the ultimate marriage of man and machine.

The pace of environmental and social change on Earth is accelerating. Automation and machines mass produce more and more of whatever we want, at ever lower cost and in copious quantities. Computers are getting smarter and smarter. In 20 to 30 years they could be more intelligent than us. Will we then defer to impassive thinking machines to make all decisions? When that new age comes, society may breathe a collective sigh of regret, and focus nostalgically on the not-too-distant past, the time of the moon landings when humans showed they can be self reliant, brave and adventurous.

This 40th anniversary of Apollo 11 is a time to think about embarking on another similar human space adventure, one that might make an ultimate statement about our nature. We can choose to do something that is just barely possible; a unique endeavour in a class by itself.

We can send a person to live on Mars.

Humanity's million or so years of evolution was punctuated by technological leaps ahead, like the cave man mastering fire, inventing tools, writing, mathematics, etc. Now quite suddenly our species finds itself capable of interplanetary travel. But if we want to send a person to live on Mars, the trip must be accomplished in the near future, for with the ever-increasing ability of robots, the politics of cost will persuade our leaders that we should just watch a sophisticated toy move around on the red planet rather than a member of our human family.

For a human Mars landing to occur within the next 10 to 15 years it can only be a solo, one-person, one-way mission. Our current space technology will allow us to send a human to Mars, but we do not have any way to bring that person back. The explorer would have to live alone, periodically resupplied, but never to return to Mother Earth. The problems with delivering life support materials to the first Martian will be minimized if there is only one person that needs the supplies. In time others might join that first pioneer and form a tiny colony, but it could easily be a half-century before there will be any capability to return to the home planet.

Perhaps the first Lander could carry a single male/female pair, a sort of Adam and Eve as in the biblical creation story. Such a special couple would be more than just historical. They would in time become legends.

The people of the world held their collective breath when the Apollo 11 astronauts walked on the moon. In like manner, people today would follow every report from a manned Mars adventure. Constant communication would provide the explorer with the comforting virtual presence and support of society on earth. We would admire and love the new Martian for daring to embark on man's ultimate adventure. We would follow his or her every move via TV, relish struggles for self-preservation, and celebrate innovations, coping, and of course the bravery necessary for such a mission. International tensions would pale to insignificance and defuse when the world tunes in to this dramatic life-or-death situation. Humanity would become acutely aware that our common bond as earthbound brothers and sisters transcends culture and religion. This singular event could usher in a new age of international co-operation and fresh respect for humanistic values.

As was the case during the extraordinary decade of technical effort leading up to the Apollo moon landings, a renaissance of scientific progress on earth would be the tremendous legacy from any effort to put man on Mars.

This journey might be the last chance for our species to demonstrate a unique human trait, the willingness to do and risk all for an idea. It could be the final statement in the evolution of our collective society, an astonishing effort that would forever capture the essence of what it means to be a human. History could finally record that the Family of Man had the audacity to leave its home planet and strive to live in the heavens, something our primitive cave dwelling ancestors would only think could be the acts of a god.

James C. McLane III is an aerospace engineer with a long background in NASA's manned space program. He lives in Houston.

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This view of the rising Earth greeted the Apollo 8 astronauts as they came from behind the Moon after the lunar orbit insertion burn. Earth is about five degrees above the horizon in the photo.

Photograph by: Handout, NASA

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