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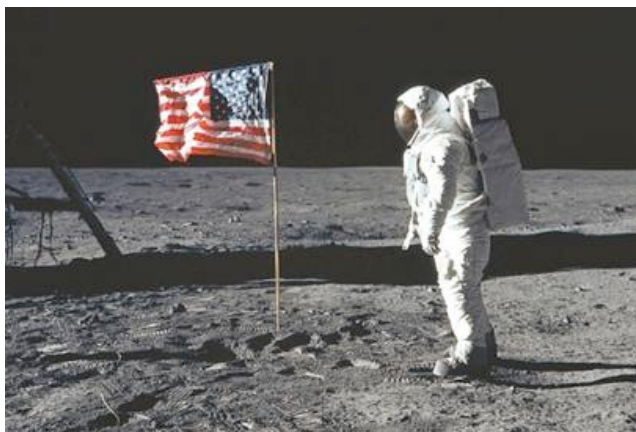
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ONE GIANT LEAP THAT MOVED THE WORLD

40 years after man walked on the Moon, will we ever regain the awe?; Space dreams in limbo as shuttle winds down

Joseph Brean, National Post
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AFP, Getty Images

The world was fascinated by the mission that carried Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, above, to the Moon. But science has lost interest in the Moon, now seen as cosmically unremarkable.

The 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon landing, on Monday, comes after an awkward week for human space exploration.

For Canada in particular, Wednesday's launch of the shuttle Endeavour, setting Montreal astronaut Julie Payette on an "orbital chase" of Vancouver's Bob Thirsk in the middle of his six-month Space Station mission, made for a rare moment of nationalistic pride in the space race --and rarer still in that it did not directly involve the Canadarm.

But for human space flight in general, the omens were bleak. With NASA fretting over wind and rain like a wound-up wedding planner, and deciding whether it was acceptable that small bits fell off the shuttle during liftoff, it was hard to conjure the awe at human space flight that enveloped the Apollo program, and made the colossal price of putting a man on the Moon -- measured in both human lives and billions of dollars -- seem almost like an afterthought.

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This week's liftoff was delayed three times because of nasty weather in Florida, and twice due to a fuel leak. The few remaining shuttle flights before the program is retired next year are now in doubt, and the current one perhaps in peril, due to fears about damaged heat-insulation tiles of the kind that doomed the 2003 Columbia flight.

In Los Angeles on Thursday, a judge delivered a guilty verdict in the case of a spy who leaked space shuttle technology to Beijing. And even Wednesday's confirmation of a new NASA director, Charles Bolden, who spoke of the balancing of space exploration with the study of Earth itself, was a veiled reminder that his predecessor, Michael Griffin, was so singularly and controversially focused on human spaceflight.

It has become trite wisdom to say that the public started losing interest in exploring the Moon on July 20, 1969, at 20:17:40 GMT, when Neil Armstrong fulfilled the vow of John F. Kennedy by stepping off the Eagle lander at Tranquility Base, shortly after a dangerous, manual landing with Buzz Aldrin that left them with less than a minute's worth of fuel to spare. Ten other men followed until Richard Nixon finally scrapped Apollo in 1972, after 17 missions and three fatalities --in a 1967 command-module fire during training for Apollo's first manned flight.

But science also lost interest in the Moon, which today is seen as cosmically unremarkable. In the past 40 years, the Moon's origins in an ancient asteroid collision, and its current state of dry, lifeless, "magnificent desolation," as Mr. Aldrin put it, have become so well understood that it seems quaint, in hindsight, that Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Aldrin had to spend three weeks in quarantine before embarking on their global celebratory tour, due to fears of some mysterious space bug.

But a return to the moon, according to NASA, is a crucial stepping stone for a mission to Mars, a planet that probably has water and may well support life, and so the crowning engineering feat of the 20th century must be repeated if even more ambitious goals are to be possible.

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