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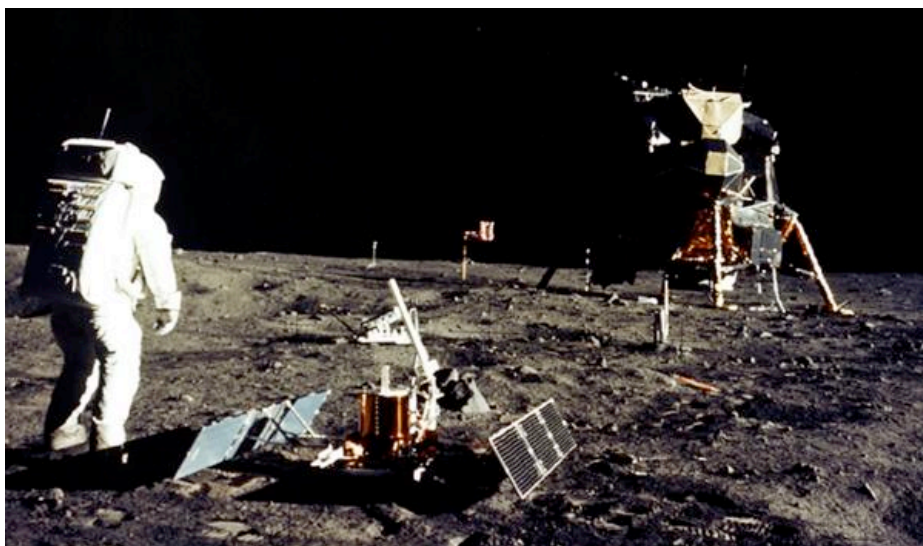
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One Small Step

My memories of covering Apollo



Courtesy of NASA

By George Alexander | Newsweek Web Exclusive

Jul 17, 2009

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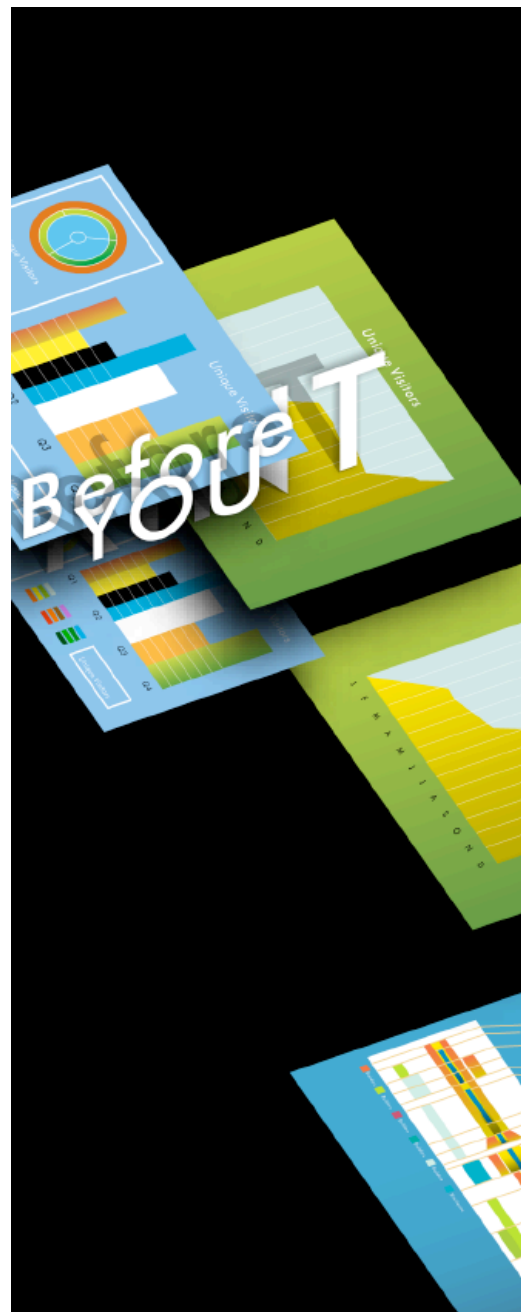
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I thought many things that hot summer morning of 40 years ago, standing at the then-Cape Kennedy press site, staring at the Apollo Saturn vehicle some 3 miles distant, listening to the quasi-Gregorian

countdown chant of "minus 10 seconds, 9, 8..." until, finally, the powerful first-stage rocket engines had built up enough thrust to pop open the big rocket's hold-down clamps and it began rising slowly, ponderously, into the blue sky.

Snugged into the couches of their Apollo spacecraft like gems in a Fabergé egg were three Americans—Neil Armstrong,



Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and Michael Collins. They were bound for the Earth's moon, where Armstrong and Aldrin would scuff that ancient, dusty surface for the very first time.

My heart raced. Torn between being a spectator at a most historic event and a professional journalist who would soon have to convey the wonder of all this to readers, I tried to commit to memory every aspect of the moment: the thunderous roar, overlaid by the sharp, distinctive crackling of the rocket engines and the tremors they set off in the ground; the billowing white exhaust; the lacquered blue sky; the cheers and gasps of the reporters and broadcasters all around me; the bright red countdown clock now counting up as the huge space vehicle rose oh so slowly before gathering speed and then climbing higher and higher before disappearing downrange little by little, like the Cheshire cat's grin.

Forty years can weather a memory like soft sandstone, but I still recall all that clearly. I was certain that people everywhere—from Spitzbergen to Punta Arenas, from Atlanta to Adelaide—were similarly excited. After all, there were several thousand print, radio, and TV journalists there that day, reporting the event as it was happening second by second, minutia by minutia, in hundreds of languages and fonts, to the farthest corners of the planet.

Impossible, I thought, for anyone outside the upper Amazon Basin or the farthest Gobi dunes to be unaware of what was taking place at that very moment on that Florida spit; impossible for anyone to be unmoved by the courage of these three men; impossible not to be awed by the skills and ingenuity of the tens of thousands of engineers and technicians who built that rocket and that spaceship; impossible not to admire America's technological prowess.

And while both rocket and spaceship bore "USA" and "United States" logos on their sides, I thought the then three and a half billion people of the world would readily see this was not a proprietary American effort but, rather, an American gift to all humanity. We were about to set foot on another body in the solar system archipelago, a body that had always seemed both tantalizingly near and yet forever beyond reach. And we were doing it, as the plaque on the lunar landing craft stated, "in peace for all mankind."

When people everywhere saw that humans were landing on luna nova and not claiming it for some king or empire, surely, I thought, they would also see that the territorial lines they had drawn on this planet from time immemorial, boundaries that had almost always led to wars and bloodshed, surely they would think anew about their relationship to Earth—and themselves. Well ... such were the heartfelt, if perhaps naive, thoughts of the then-30 something science editor of *Newsweek*.

There were critics, back in 1961, when President John F. Kennedy committed the U.S. to "achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth," who ridiculed the idea as a stunt, a day-late/dollar-short project to negate the Soviets' earlier triumphs of *Sputnik*, Laika the space dog, and astronaut Yuri Gagarin (among others). And, of course, it was also said that Kennedy was papering over the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April of that same year. I didn't think that then; I don't think that today. Kennedy sought a competitive arena with the Soviets where America's leadership and skills could be demonstrated to the world—without resort to warfare.

And make no mistake about the Soviets' ambitions then: they had an aggressive manned lunar program that closely paralleled the Apollo project for several years, but they kept it as hidden as only they could, for as long as they could. (It collapsed, according to some historians, because of internal rivalries and poor management.)

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Posted By: Skyvel-21 @ 07/20/2009 9:16:15 AM

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<http://www.24horas.cl/videosRegiones.aspx?id=7238&idRegion=10>

regards and happy 40th anniversary!

Posted By: chipher @ 07/19/2009 1:51:19 AM

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"One small step for man, one giant leap for the Bishopry of Canaveral and the Popedom on the Potomac." N-A-S-A!
All bend over! Hey, where's that Hypersonic Space Plane the Reaganauts sold us \$20B ago? Or SBL? I think my kidneys have Brilliant Pebbles! Here in the greatest recession since GD1, we are covertly spending \$Bs on a bogus NASA Mission to Mars? I hear there's a St Mammon's Cathedral there, alongside the Venusian Canals filled with red gumdrops and lollies for the all good little tax drones~

Posted By: DrJoeS @ 07/17/2009 5:28:59 PM

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I too was there at the Cape on July 16, 1969. I was a 13 year-old BoyScout, there with my troop on a field trip. I remember the day well, including my old telescope which we dragged on to the beach to get a closer look. I agree with Mr Alexander that there was such a letdown after the final mission. It was if Kennedy got his wish - let's do it to say we did it and then move on. I hope that the current NASA planners can do something to get the program back to where it once was - or maybe that can never be.

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