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U.S. ahead of the class in a world beyond

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It's an accepted fact that the naysayers will find something to nay about, even when there might be something to cheer about.

The late-night television comedians led the pooh-poohing of NASA's latest foray into the world beyond, taking shots at the United States government for spending money on a lunar mission instead of "fixing" what's wrong on Earth. Then they poked fun because NASA's LCROSS mission — short for Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite and pronounced L-Cross — didn't make the public fireworks display some had anticipated, even though the agency pronounced the mission a success for all the data that was retrieved.

The expedition, in which the main goal was to look for water, was an attempt to further knowledge about the moon's surface. Scientists and NASA bean-counters say that if a "landing" can be made in a body of water instead of on a hard surface, the cost of exploration could precipitously fall.

This trip, planned in a short three years by NASA standards, cost \$79 million, a correspondingly low amount for a project by that agency. In contrast, the shuttle Endeavour, the orbiter that replaced the Challenger, cost about \$1.7 billion to build and costs about \$450 million each time it is launched.

Since just after Sputnik was sent up by the Russians in 1957, the United States has blazed the trail in the majority of space exploration. That's what the United States does and has done since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark successfully explored the western side of this continent in 1804 and since astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to step on the moon in 1969.

So, here we go again. The scientists celebrate, the naysayers berate and the United States is again at the head of the class in a world beyond.

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