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THE AMERICAN SPACE AGE:
HISTORY, NATIONALISM, AND POPULAR CULTURE

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

JULIE M. DAVIS

SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: JOSEPH ORSER
COOPERATING PROFESSOR: JIM OBERLY

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the history of space exploration in the United States. The American space age, in this study, is defined as the years between 1957 and 1969. The events in space exploration that occurred during this time are interpreted through the use of three main types of sources. These are government documents and media, scholarly written works, and popular literature and media sources. This paper interprets each set of carefully selected sources individually, then collectively to assess their historical and cultural significance in the modern understanding of the space age as an important part of the national identity of the United States. Furthermore, this paper articulates the ways in which these sources can be used to assess notions of nationalism and cultural identity.
“Now it is time to take longer strides--time for a great new American enterprise--time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth.”

-John F. Kennedy, May 25, 1961

Introduction:

John F. Kennedy’s time as President of the United States of America, though short-lived, represents the early stages of an era of great technological achievement which has left a lasting imprint on our nation. The many achievements of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) from the time of its creation in 1958 up until about 1970 represent one of the most important eras in the history of our nation- the space age. The space age can be defined in many ways, and it could be argued that today’s generation is in fact still living in the space age. However, this study will define the space age as the era in which space exploration was at the height of its importance in national and world politics, as well as in popular culture within the United States. For this purpose, it is essential that this study focus on a specific set of events and people from the past which have left a legacy of influence on modern popular culture as well as the contemporary notion of American nationalism.

The concept of nationalism is one that applies to all countries, irrespective of size, government structure, and wealth. Each nation has its own unique set of ideals, customs, and practices that contribute to the national identity. This national identity reflects the values of a nation as a whole. Over time, the ways in which a nation defines itself change, in response to the international political climate, economy, advancements in technology, and various other factors. In effect, the national identity is a fluid notion. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the

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word “nationalism” as: “Advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations. Also, advocacy of or support for national independence or self-determination.” Furthermore, Oxford English Dictionary designates proper modern usage of the term: “Whereas patriotism usually refers to a general sentiment, nationalism now usually refers to a specific ideology, esp. one expressed through political activism. In earlier use, however, the two appear to have been more or less interchangeable.”

This definition is one of the cornerstones of the idea of nationalism as it applies to the study and analysis of the history and influence of space exploration in the United States.

The specific events used in this paper to describe and defend the claim for American nationalism are some of the most important events in the history of space exploration in America. The first event, which is regarded as the catalyst that inclined the United States to enter into the Space Race with the Soviet Union, was the launch of Sputnik I on October 4, 1957. The political, social, and cultural significance of this event was so great that it fueled American interest in space technology and achievement for over a decade, until American space programs reached the ultimate goal on July 20, 1969 of landing humans on the moon. A set of carefully selected sources will be used to identify, analyze, and evaluate these events.

For the purpose of the argument presented in this study, the sources used are divided into three main categories: government media, scholarly written work, and popular literature and media. The first series of sources, government media, are sources produced during the time

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frame previously described. These sources are from the time that the events referred to in this paper were occurring and provide the framework for the historical context of this study. The second series, scholarly media, are modern interpretations of these events which analyze them through a historical lens. This not only provides a historiographical context for the study, but also speaks to how today’s younger generations understand these events. The final series is popular literature and media. This set of sources encompasses literature geared towards a more general audience, such as popular magazine articles on the topic of space exploration. The other main component of this series is film and television sources. This includes multimedia sources produced between the early to mid-1960’s and today. These sources will be used not only to show evolution of the theory of space travel over time, but more importantly, reflect cultural interest in space, which began during the climax of space programs in America and continues to this day.

Individually, each of the sources used or consulted in this study provide insight into space exploration programs in America, and the cultural interest in space that has resulted from these programs over the past fifty or so years, as well as the politics, both national and international, which have promoted the advancement of these programs. Collectively, the analysis of these sources have allowed for a deeper assessment of the history of space programs in America. The purpose of this study is to assess the historical, cultural, and political legacy of events in space exploration from the 1960’s. Furthermore, this study will determine the extent to which these events have left a lasting impact on modern American culture and contemporary notions of American nationalism. The influence of the events described and analyzed in this study will make a significant claim for the continued importance of space exploration in the popular culture
of America as well as determine the extent to which events in space exploration have shaped the historical and modern notions of American nationalism.

**Government Media**

The concept of a national identity is a very broad one. There is no single right or wrong way to designate which characteristics of a nation stand out as its dominant features. This study does not aim to achieve this. Instead, this study examines a small portion of our nation’s history and uses it to contribute to the overall understanding of the significance of the space age and determine to what extent that space age has influenced the national identity of our nation. There is an abundance of information that can be learned from studying the actions of our nation’s government. Through careful selection and examination of sources, it is possible to make a legitimate argument for a strong sense of nationalism during the space age. This can be seen in many types of government media. The following section will present a set of sources which have preserved not only factual information regarding our nation’s involvement in space exploration, but also present some of the less concrete characteristics of our government and our identity as a nation.

The History Division of NASA preserves and maintains a vast amount of historical material, dating back to even before the creation of NASA. The sheer fact that this division exists is evidence that Americans value the achievements of the space age and admire the contributions that these programs have made to various fields of science and technology. Furthermore, the existence of such a division represents the value of resources which educate American citizens on a very critical time in our nation’s history. This division maintains an up-to-date website which offers a wealth of information on the history of space-related events and activities of the
United States. These resources are of particular importance to this study because they provide brief, factual information such as important names and dates to give people an educational overview of NASA’s history. This is especially important for this study because it is that information which provides the foundation for further historical understanding and analysis of events related to space exploration in our nation’s history.⁵

Before there can be any analysis of the history included in this study, there must be a presentation and explanation of the events and figures selected for this paper. As previously mentioned, the event which marks the beginning of the era that this study focuses on is the launch of Sputnik 1 on October 4, 1957. This event had a tremendous impact on the minds of people worldwide. Just a month later, on November 3, Sputnik 2 was launched, carrying the dog Laika. On April 12, 1961, the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, aboard Vostok 1, became the first man to travel into outer space. He was followed closely by Alan Shepard on May 5, who became the first American to accomplish spaceflight aboard Freedom 7. A few weeks later, President Kennedy delivered his soon-to-be-famous “Before This Decade Is Out” speech to a special joint session of Congress, during which he expressed the goal of a lunar landing. On February 20, 1962, John Glenn, aboard Friendship 7, became the first American astronaut to orbit the earth. There continued to be significant achievements in space technology and exploration over the next several years. On December 21, 1968, Apollo 8 was launched and the crew, comprised of American astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and William Anders became the first men to orbit the moon. The United States fulfilled its ultimate goal on July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, aboard Apollo 11, along with Command Module Pilot

Michael Collins, became the first men to walk on the moon.\textsuperscript{6} This is an extremely brief outline of the events that make up the era of history discussed in this study.

The creation of NASA is a pivotal moment in the history of American space exploration. The legislation that created this administration, H.R. 12575, opened the doors for this nation to embark on a series of tremendous experiments in the field of space technology.\textsuperscript{7} President Eisenhower signed this Act into law under immense public pressure to do so. NASA evolved out of the National Advisory Committee of Aeronautics, which was actually a military division that was created in 1915 out of urgency for national security rather than widespread interest in air and space, as that developed in later years.\textsuperscript{8} The following paragraphs will outline the actions of our nation’s leaders during this critical time in the history of the United States, as well as evaluate those actions and their significance in a discussion on nationalism from the space age.

Speeches, press releases, and other media interactions that the President uses to connect with the people of our nation are immensely insightful sources which serve many purposes; a few of them being to inform the public of the actions of our government and the current state of affairs, as well as rally support for government programs and raise awareness for national pride. Each president has had his own style of representation to the public. The rise of the space age saw four presidents in office: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. Each of these men took slightly different stances on space programs and their attitudes towards these programs are reflected in many of the sources essential to this analysis.

President Eisenhower became president during a delicate and critical time in American history. The end of WWII brought about a delicate time in the international political climate. Nations were reorganizing and rebuilding, America was in the process of jumpstarting its economy. While the world was cheerful that the war was over, there was also a definite sense of fear. The United States had demonstrated its ability to produce and effectively use in war atom and hydrogen bombs, which were capable of tremendous destruction. Many people wondered what other potentially destructive uses this kind of advanced technology could be capable of, and what would happen if an enemy nation had those capabilities. The fantasies of spaceflight and missile warfare were alive in the minds of people all over the country and the world, though they remained fantasies until 1957. The launch of Sputnik 1 brought those fantasies to reality, which heightened the sense of fear that most Americans were feeling towards space technology. Though Eisenhower saw no real threat to national security in Sputnik, he was under heavy pressure to push America towards making accomplishments in space. This, of course, led to the creation of NASA shortly after in 1958.

“The enactment of this legislation is an historic step, further equipping the United States for leadership in the space age. I wish to commend Congress for the promptness with which it has created the organization and provided the authority needed for an effective national effort in the fields of aeronautics and space exploration.”9 This comment, though brief, represents many of the characteristics of a nationalist agenda. The definition of nationalism used in this study describes a specific ideology expressed through political activism. In this context, the political activism being described are measures such as H.R. 12575 which gave the United States

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9 Dwight D. Eisenhower, Statement by the President regarding H.R. 12575, the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958.
government the ability and freedom to pursue its goals for space exploration. Eisenhower’s remarks on the Act, expressed in this quote, also hint at a few underlying issues which are critical to the understanding of the importance of this quote in the context of this study. There are essentially three main issues in this quote that collectively point towards a nationalist stance on space exploration. They are: leadership on behalf of the United States, promptness or urgency to create the programs necessary to make that leadership become reality, and the sense of a national effort, one that requires the resources and support of the entire nation in order to be effective. Eisenhower’s efforts while in office were merely the introductory efforts of American strategy for achieving leadership in space, which President Kennedy was eager to continue.

When John F. Kennedy was elected President, he strongly advocated for the expansion of space programs already in place and the creation of new ones. By the time he began his term, the United States had already fallen behind Soviet space programs, and within the first few months of Kennedy’s term Yuri Gagarin had made his historic trip into space, which was a major blow to American space efforts. Kennedy seized the opportunity to push America into a more intense set of programs which would carry extreme costs and require a vast amount of resources. On May 25, 1961, President Kennedy delivered a speech to a special joint session of Congress. This speech represents one of the most pivotal moments in President Kennedy’s career as our nation’s leader, and in the entire institution of space exploration in America. The speech, now popularly known as the “Before This Decade Is Out” speech, was a bold move and has left a lasting imprint on his legacy as president.

Kennedy’s use of language in this speech presents a strong nationalist agenda and sense of unity towards a collective goal. “. . . the facts of the matter are that we have never made the

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10 Kennedy, John F., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961.
national decisions or marshaled the national resources required for such leadership. We have never specified long-range goals on an urgent time schedule . . . to insure their fulfillment.”

What this speech really did was bring space-related issues to the center of American politics. During Eisenhower’s time as president, experiments in space were still in their infancy in America. Kennedy took a more aggressive, expansionist approach to the administration of space programs. His next few words demonstrated the weight of his aspirations for the nation:

I therefore ask the Congress, above and beyond the increases I have earlier requested for space activities, to provide the funds which are needed to meet the following national goals: First, I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.

There are several characteristics of this excerpt and of the entire speech that are similar to earlier expressions of national aspirations of space achievements. Kennedy’s language articulates the extremities of his goal—both technologically and fiscally. “. . . let it be clear that I am asking the Congress and the country to accept a firm commitment to a new course of action—a course which will last for many years and carry very heavy costs: 531 million dollars in fiscal ’62—an estimated seven to nine billion dollars additional over the next five years.”

Aside from the massive amounts of money that Kennedy predicted the nation would require to reach the moon and fulfill other space projects leading up to that event, he acknowledged the heavy sacrifices that would potentially need to be made in order for his plan to work. “This decision demands a major national commitment of scientific and technical manpower, materiel and facilities, and the

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11 Kennedy, John F., *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961*.  
12 Kennedy, John F., *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961*.  
13 Kennedy, John F., *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961*.  

possibility of their diversion from other important activities where they are already thinly spread.”

Kennedy’s requests were greeted with enthusiasm and support, and space programs were literally and figuratively taking off. On September 12, 1962, Kennedy delivered a speech to a stadium crowd at Rice University in Houston, Texas. This speech is one of the most famous and most quoted speeches that President Kennedy ever delivered. Commonly known as the “We Choose to go to the Moon” speech, this is a moment in which much of our nation’s remembrance of the space age is stored:

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

President Kennedy made every effort to articulate the importance of space achievement. His actions and words not only accumulated popular support for space programs, but also encouraged intellectual and cultural interest in space. When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson continued the course on space programs that Kennedy had laid out during his presidency. In an address to a special joint session of Congress on November 27, 1963, Johnson expressed his sentiments towards Kennedy and his accomplishments as president. “No words are strong enough to express our determination to continue the forward thrust of America that he began. The dream of conquering the vastness of space . . . these and other American dreams

14 Kennedy, John F., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1961.
16 Kennedy, John F., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1962.
have been vitalized by his drive and by his dedication . . . And now the ideas and the ideals which he so nobly represented must and will be translated into effective action.”

Presidents Johnson and Nixon continued to pursue the goal of a lunar landing before the end of the 1960’s. That goal became a reality in July of 1969. This achievement was extraordinary in many ways, not only because America had actually reached its spacefaring destination, but because this was the ultimate triumph over Soviet space programs, which led the world in space exploration for most of the decade. On July 20, 1969, President Nixon spoke with astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin on the moon. “Because of what you have done the heavens have become a part of man’s world, and as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquility, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquility to earth.”

In the context of this study, the preceding section has many purposes. First, it defines the era known as the space age as it applies to this written analysis, which is the time between October 4, 1957 and July 20, 1969. It also mentions a small handful of significant events in space achievement on behalf of both the United States and the Soviet Union between those years. The events selected for inclusion in this study are events that represent moments of great accomplishment or great historical and political significance. There are essential characteristics of each of these events that make them great, such as: being the first of their kind, gaining immense international attention, and asserting opinions of dominance in the fields of technology and politics. The activities of the National Advisory Committee of Aeronautics, and later the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, were relatively reserved in their infant years.

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18 Johnson, Lyndon B., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1963-64
20 Nixon, Richard M., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1969
under President Eisenhower. However, changes in the international political climate and the growing Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union pushed the United States into what is known as the Space Race. With President Kennedy as a champion advocate for the expansion of space programs, the United States Congress appropriated huge amounts of money for space missions during the 1960’s. The events in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s experienced a snowball effect and space programs grew exponentially in size, expenditures, and achievements over the duration of the decade.

Though the linear progression of the most significant events in space exploration history worldwide is relatively easy to understand, some of the more complex issues associated with those events are not so easily understood. The second purpose of the preceding section is to identify and some of the less concrete, but no less visible or significant, aspects of the space age. These issues include: the attitudes of our nation’s leaders, legislators, and policy makers; as well as those of other nations, especially the former Soviet Union. In the case of President Kennedy in particular, the words of a leader during times of crisis are revered. It is important to understand that Soviet advancements in space were regarded as moments of international crisis for the United States, because it demonstrated extraordinary technological capability that could potentially be used against the United States. The solution was simple: embark on bigger and more extreme endeavors, and develop bigger, more impressive, and more expensive technologies. This, of course, was easier imagined than accomplished. However, a figure as charismatic and influential as Kennedy is exactly what this nation needed to believe that it could accomplish its most ambitious goals for space exploration.

There are some distinct patterns and similarities that can be observed through careful analysis of previously described sources such as presidential speeches and remarks on current
events. These characteristics reflect nationalist tendencies as they are described by the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word “nationalism.” Certainly Kennedy’s language in both of his presidential speeches which have been previously outlined displays a nationalist attitude. Kennedy was a strong advocate for space programs, and his language has a definite competitive tone. This is especially apparent in his Rice University speech when he uses the phrase, “we intend to win” which quite literally speaks to Kennedy’s aspirations to accomplish his goals for American space exploration at the detriment of Soviet space accomplishments. This and other sources mentioned in this section reflect a very pro-America attitude, which from a historical perspective, contributes to the understanding of this era as one with strong nationalist values.

Scholarly Interpretations

The discipline of academic history is very complex. Those who actively contribute to the field are the writers, readers, and critics of the work of fellow historians. These people study, analyze, and interpret the past, and in doing so come up with unique perspectives which leads to debate within the field. How historians choose to interpret historical events often lead to differing conclusions. The history of the space age in America is no exception to this. The ways in which historians have studied and analyzed the history of space exploration in America is proof in itself that there is no single correct or incorrect way to interpret events in space exploration.

The History Division of NASA assumes the responsibility of preserving the history of events related to space research and exploration. One of the ways in which this is achieved is the publication of documents, essays, and other written materials. During the relatively recent 50th

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21 Kennedy, John F., Public Papers of the Presidents, 1962
Anniversary Conference, historians convened to discuss and present their scholarly work on the
history of space age events. A compilation of some of the works presented at the conference was
subsequently published.22 This book, a compilation of essays, is just one example of scholarly
work published by the United States government which represents some of the best scholarly
written work on the topic of space exploration history.

For today’s youth and younger generations, the space age is exclusively history, a string
of events that happened before their time and not a memory from the past. However, older
generations are not so far removed from this era of American history. One such example of this
is Emily S. Rosenberg, author of the essay “Far Out: The Space Age in American Culture.”23
Rosenberg’s essay was a great source of inspiration for this paper and offers perspectives on the
clash of the political and popular media interests in space between 1950 and 1970. Rosenberg’s
essay is part personal reflection on the events discussed in the essay, and part historical analysis.
Essentially, the essay is written from two perspectives. That is in contrast to this essay, which
analyzes historical events and sources from a strictly historical perspective, but draws
conclusions on how those events and sources impact modern understanding of them.

Rosenberg’s essay focuses on space age remembrance. She offers her own personal
memories of the space age, which articulates some of the not-so-concrete aspects of the space
age which can be very difficult to understand from studying purely fact-based sources. Each
generation has its own music, television shows, films, toys, comics, and other sources of
entertainment that reflect some of the cultural markings of that generation. Rosenberg offers

22 Dick, Stephen J., ed. Remembering the Space Age: Proceedings of the 50th Anniversary Conference. Washington,
23 Emily S. Rosenberg, “Far Out: The Space Age in American Culture” in Remembering the Space Age, ed. Stephen J.
examples and describes these sources and explains how they contribute to scholarly understanding of some of the cultural aspects of the American space era.

Rosenberg’s interpretation of Kennedy as a leader includes descriptions and explanations of his famous speeches and political tactics in which he drew on already established themes in the media.\(^{24}\) Kennedy was certainly one of the most aggressive advocates for space programs, with the goal of establishing dominance in the field of space exploration. Some of the most basic pieces of evidence that Kennedy’s approach was taken well by legislators and the American people are budget figures. “Kennedy’s inspirational phrase that Americans would ‘pay any price’ in their struggle against communism applied quite literally to the early space race. From 1961 to 1963, the NASA budget soared from 1.7 billion to 3.8 billion to 5.7 billion. . .”\(^{25}\) This kind of massive government spending, Rosenberg argues, could only be justified by the kind of fascination and fear that people had over the U.S.-Soviet space race. Much of the panic and paranoia that led to such extreme measures is what Rosenberg calls the “Sputnik moment” in which Americans were so mindboggled and blown away, they were willing to make the kinds of sacrifices Kennedy had asked for in his first famous space address.

Rosenberg touches on the topic of space in entertainment, which is of course a major component of this study. Some of the film titles mentioned are: Apollo 13, Contact, Space Cowboys, Armageddon, and The Right Stuff. These are all major Hollywood motion pictures that have tapped into the market for space-themed entertainment. Rosenberg also mentions an array of other films and television shows with similar qualities. The term she uses in the essay to refer to space enthusiasts from the space age is “astrofuturists.” These people are the creators and

\(^{24}\) Emily S. Rosenberg, “Far Out: The Space Age in American Culture” 163.  
\(^{25}\) Emily S. Rosenberg, “Far Out: The Space Age in American Culture” 164.
viewers of literature and other media that is centered on space fantasy and technology. Advancements in space exploration during the space age, she argues, inspired people to look to the future, which encouraged wild imaginations of human involvement in space in years to come. Many of the popular sources of entertainment she cites in the essay revolve around this concept.

In the conclusion of her essay, Rosenberg points out a few essential key points. First, that the space age, as it is defined in this study, was a symbolic time in American culture. Second, that Americans grew out of the space hype due to the exhaustion of popular interest in space symbolism. This study, however, argues that rather than a decline in popular interest in space that is seen in popular media, there was a shift in focus, which will be described later on in this paper. Furthermore, Rosenberg argues that after the first moon landing, Americans had less and less to look forward to in terms of groundbreaking achievements in space. She argues that only such extreme events in American space exploration such as the Challenger and Columbia explosions, which were both tragedies, have continued to engage a widespread audience.26

No other essay in Remembering the Space Age focuses on the same set of principles as Rosenberg’s however, some of the other essays have similar conclusions and/or convictions. The essay “Gigantic Follies? Human Exploration and the Space Age in Long-Term Historical Perspective” comes to a similar conclusion that Rosenberg’s essay does, in that cultural interest in space and the importance of space achievements are declining and will continue to decline, with the exception of such incidents as the Challenger and Columbia tragedies.27 The essay further argues that the space age is over, and not a dominant feature of modern society.

The essay “Spaceflight in the National Imagination” addresses the issue of the importance of the space age and its accomplishments on a national level. Because the pursuit of space exploration has historically been a national effort, its political, economic, and cultural impact is experienced on a national level. The essay also addresses the idea of space as an expression of national identity.28 “. . . discussions about space exploration across extremely different national contexts almost always include the notion, implicitly or explicitly, that there is something fundamental in the national character that gives force to the urge to explore space.”29 This quote could be interpreted as one explanation for justification of the aggressive efforts in space exploration on behalf of both United States and Soviet space programs during the space race.

These essays all contain elements that are essential to this study. There are a few themes that stand out as critical key points of understanding the interpretation of the history of events in space exploration. The first is the acknowledgement of the importance of popular sources. This demonstrates the ability of scholars to look beyond traditional, fact-based sources to draw conclusions about a specific era of history. Along with that idea is the importance of symbolism that Rosenberg’s essay mentions. Symbolism is a powerful cultural identifier, and its significance is no different in the context of interpretations of space exploration history. Another theme is legacy. Scholars have differing opinions on whether the space age, which is a dominant feature of modern United States history, will have a lasting impact on our nation’s history in generations to come. Lastly, the theme of nationalism has been addressed, either directly or indirectly, in all of the essays mentioned in this section. No scholar can doubt that the space age

had strong nationalist characteristics. American space programs made very aggressive efforts to accomplish its goals for space exploration, and did so in response to the efforts of Soviet space programs. This is almost a perfect example of the definition of nationalism. Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union were used as the justification for these aggressive efforts. The many angles from which scholars study and write about the history of American space exploration makes for a stronger analysis of the history of these events. The fact that scholars continue to approach this topic from differing perspectives signifies the continued significance of this topic within academia and within American culture.

**Popular Media**

Entertainment sources are, arguably, some of the most insightful cultural identifiers. The kinds of entertainment that people choose to view, whether it is written, audio/visual, and anything in between, offers a great deal of perspective on the cultural values of that society. It is for this reason that there is great value in studying these types of sources. The following section will present examples and explanations of how space exploration and fantasy has been weaved into popular culture and media since before, during, and after the American space age.

One of the best representations of popular culture in today’s world is magazine sources. Magazines are so popular because they provide readable literature for general audiences, they are constantly changing, they address current issues, and they are visually enticing with photographs, catchy slogans, etc. People today rely heavily on magazines for quick, entertaining news and general information. The May 16, 1969 issue of *Life* magazine contained a wide photo spread with pictures of the Apollo 10 crew and their families. The article is very short—just one

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column— that describes the Apollo 10 mission and gives the names of its crew; Tom Stafford, Gene Cernan, and John Young. On the next page is a similar column and photo spread which portrays the Apollo 11 crew; Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins. The photo spread, which depicts all the astronauts mentioned and their families, takes up most of the two pages. The articles are merely there to remind Americans what was coming in just a few weeks and fuel excitement and popular interest in these astronauts and their mission. There is a striking contrast of character happening in this photo that speaks to the unique position that these astronauts had in popular society. They are depicted with their families, modestly but attractively dressed, as if they were the prime examples of what Americans out to look like and act like. However, these men were also tremendous celebrities. They were famous not just because everyone knew their name, but they were also regarded as heroes. Today, the names of individual astronauts might be mentioned in newspaper and magazine articles, but it would be a stretch to say that people would remember their names or recognize their faces if seen anywhere else. The astronauts of the 1960’s, and especially the men of Apollo 10 and 11 were superstars in their time. The people that society chooses to be interested in offers a lot of insight into what kinds of character or occupational traits that society admires most in people, and more importantly, which current events of the time are the most talked about and what people have the most interest in.

About two months later, on July 15, 1969, when Americans were so close to experiencing a lunar landing they could almost taste it, the article “Apollo & Beyond” was published in Look magazine. The article is large print and visually appealing, as well as readable for younger audiences. The article summarizes, very briefly, the history of the conquest of the moon over the

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previous decade and describes the then-visible future of spaceflight - the construction of space stations in the next decade, as well as the eventual use of reusable spacecraft (known today as space shuttles). It is probably safe to say that, with the planned Apollo 11 mission just days away, people didn’t need reminding of what was coming. However, the article is a brief depiction that is full of imaginative language and attractive pictures that provokes thought and reflection of past human accomplishment in space and what is to come of the future; even for a modern reader of an article that is over 40 years old.

Something that these two articles have in common with each other and that is typical of magazine literature is that they are brief and visually stimulating. They offer small amounts of information; names and dates, mostly. In the case of the second article especially, they articulate things that are already known. Magazines are made to be sold - they cater to what people want so that people will buy them. During this time, space and astronauts were so popular that anything with their name or face on it was marketable. While these are just two prime examples of the kinds of material one could expect to find in any almost any popular magazine from the time, they offer some excellent insight into what was popular and what people wanted to read, which is an enormous indicator of popular culture traits and trends from that era.

The fantasy of space has been around for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Since the beginning of human civilization, people have observed the sky and tried to make meaning out of it. The significance of the sky, the stars, and the heavens has never faded in importance, but has merely become more “real” and better understood. The connection between humans and space has, if anything, strengthened over the past century as people have achieved the art of flight and have actually gone to space. Stories and fantasies of outer space have been around since nearly the beginning of human history. This section will describe the transformation and evolution of
human imaginations of space. Whereas the heavens were once revered as an untouchable, fantastical place, ideas about space were wild and speculative. As human understanding of space has become clearer over time, stories and imaginations of space have become more realistic and closer to reality than fiction.

One of the most famous writers of popular fiction is Jules Verne. He lived during the middle of the 19th century and wrote many books where humans go to places that were once untouchable; the deep sea, the sky, and outer space. Today, if a reader picked up one of his works, it would probably be an interesting read, but not necessarily provoke any unheard of or extremely exotic fantasies about other-worldly places. During his time, however, science fiction was just a fledgling genre. His writing represented an almost completely untouched set of subject matter, which is undoubtedly part of the reason his works became so popular and he eventually became a recognized author all around the world.

Beginning in approximately the early 1960’s and continuing to today is the trend of space-themed movies and television shows, as well as short videos, skits, and other entertainment media. Since this time, there have been countless films, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as television series and features, on the topics of space exploration, space fantasy, disaster, and so on. These sources are and have been geared towards a general audience for entertainment purposes. These sources have gone through an evolution of their own over the past 40 years and maybe even before. The following section will provide a few carefully selected examples and interpret them in the context of this analysis of popular entertainment media.

On a more intricate level, this section will introduce a few well-known films and television series centered on outer space and human interactions with it. While this kind of
entertainment wasn’t new to the 1960’s, this decade saw, arguably, the most growth in popularity of these sources. Some notable examples, such as *Star Trek* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, are still well-known today. The original *Star Trek* television series debuted in 1966. As we know today, it was a tremendous hit. Even 45 years later, actors William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy are still best known for their leading roles in the series. *Star Trek* wasn’t simply a story about humans going into space, but a network of humans and other-worldly beings co-existing in the universe together. The concept is still popular today and has become a timeless classic. In fact, the series saw many spinoffs such as *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise* which all debuted between the years 1987 and 2001, indicating a truly lasting interest in the series. Between the years of 1979 and 2009 there were at least ten *Star Trek* films produced as well. 32

*Star Wars*, which is also a very popular series and has proven itself an extremely profitable franchise, made its debut in the late 1970’s. Between the years of 1977 and 2005, six full-length films were released and have earned billions of dollars to date. Following the model of *Star Trek*, this series is based on an intergalactic federation of planets and living creatures which attempt to live harmoniously in the universe with one another. Something that both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* have in common is the placement of human and American values, such as democracy and conquest for peace, justice, and cooperation, into a foreign setting. Another commonality between the two franchises is the very diversified case of humans and other intelligent creatures, which can be seen as a model for American society, in which many cultures live and coexist. In this sense, these films and television series are important markers of popular

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culture not just because they are popular sources of entertainment, but because they encompass distinctive character traits of American society.

Since about the 1950’s, films, cartoon, and television centered on human interest in space have been around. This study looks at a very few selected examples to designate commonalities, cultural identifiers, and examine change over time. One of the best-known films from the 1960’s is *2001: A Space Odyssey.* The film is a fantasy-driven futuristic look at incredible space endeavors and depicts humans going much further into space than we as a species have ever achieved. This, though, is a big part of what makes the film stand out. It is fantasy. The thought of humans travelling to distant planets is still a very far-out imagination. This approach to space-themed entertainment is in contrast with newer films centered on human activity and involvement in space.

One could go on for hours about space-themed popular films from the past twenty years. However, to make use of these sources as part of this study requires only a few selected examples. The more modern popular films that either take place in space or involve some part of outer space affecting the activities of humans on earth have experienced an evolution of their own in recent years. Essentially, older films portray space as a very picturesque, fantastical place. More modern films still have the fantasy element, but the space fantasies in newer films are more like an exaggeration of scientific fact of assumption. For example, the *Transformers* trilogy. This series is made up of three separate films released between 2007 and 2011. Essentially, the series is based on robotic organisms from a distant planet that come to earth to either destroy or protect humanity. While the concept of two clashing societies of robotic

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organisms is heavily fantasy-driven, there are certain characteristics of the basic plot lines which are more realistic than one would normally believe. The organisms, for example, transform into machines built by humans such as cars, planes, and satellites. These objects, while artificial, are familiar to humans and allow the organisms in the films to blend in with their earth setting. This is relevant to the topic because it places the fantasy closer to earth and creates a familiarity premise with which humans, and the viewers of the films, to associate.

The previous example portrays an outside, living force coming to earth. The next example portrays humans bringing earth to a foreign world. The 2009 film *Avatar*, the highest grossing film of all time, is an excellent model for this idea. In the film, humans have discovered a distant planet with intelligent life forms. Humans travel to this planet to learn about its ecology and more importantly, absorb its resources. In this film humans are both the enemy and the champion- some work towards destroying the planet’s life forms for the benefit of humans and others work towards protecting its life forms. The idea of humans discovering a planet with intelligent life on it is certainly not a new concept by any means. The film, however, portrays the human interactions with a foreign world in a unique way, with humans as both the villain and the hero, as well as employs very sophisticated special effects to visually portray the exoticness of the planet. Rather than bringing the fantasy to earth, the film brings viewers to another world and in doing so encourages viewers to expand their imaginations beyond the physical boundaries of earth or even our own solar system.

Some films contain non-living elements of space that come into contact with earth. Two notable examples of this, which are very similar to each other, are the films *Deep Impact* and

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The basic plot line of both of these films involves a massive space rock, hurtling towards earth at an unimaginable speed, which threatens the very existence of our planet. In both films, humans are forced to make difficult decisions and sacrifices in order to save their planet. This requires sophisticated technology and insanely brave maneuvers such as flying a space shuttle into space in an attempt to blow up the asteroid before it collides with earth. In both of these films, humanity, and especially those who do the actual flying into space, are revered as heroes of the earth. This concept is not new or exclusive to space disaster-themed movies. In fact, the hero element is perhaps the least original idea in either of these films, since during the heyday of space exploration astronauts were regarded in a similar fashion.

In the world of audio/visual entertainment, there are entire networks and series based on science and technology. Space is a broad topic that can be approached from many different angles. Humans have been curious about space since the beginning of time. It is no surprise, then, that non-fiction audio/visual sources on the topic of outer space and human exploration of space are very popular. These sources serve several purposes. First, they educate people on space in a way that is both informative and entertaining. Second, they feed human imaginations of space and allow for the creative thinking about space and the impact it has on humanity. Networks such as History, Discovery, and National Geographic have all tapped into audience demands for space-themed programming. History has a number of series and special programs such as Ancient Aliens, a series which speculates the possibility of intelligent beings from outer space visiting earth hundreds or thousands of years ago, and special one-hour or two-hour programs and miniseries on important people and events from the space age such as Apollo 11

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and 13, Sputnik, Yuri Gagarin, John Glenn, and others. PBS programs also offer non-fiction programming on space science and technology. *PBS Newshour*, for example, is a regular program with a wide array of topics. Space is a regularly visited topic for this program and covers such subjects as: rocketry and spacecraft, celestial objects such as stars and planets, human exploration of space via probes and telescopes, and a number of other sub-topics.

Collectively, the popular sources mentioned and interpreted in this section indicate a few important aspects of their significance. First, the existence of such a wide array of sources on this topic demonstrates widespread interest in space, whether it be fantasy-driven or non-fiction oriented. Second, the fact that these entertainment sources have been around for so long and continue to be popular for today’s younger generations signifies that space is a topic of strong cultural interest. Some of the most insightful identifiers of popular culture are entertainment sources, so it is no surprise, then, that popular films and television programs about space technology, exploration, and history exist. There is a loose theory of the linear progression and development of these sources over time. The fantasy of space has been around since nearly the beginning of time, and stories about space were wildly imaginative. When technology allowed humans to become closer to space, people took a stronger interest in space. There is an evolution of space-themed entertainment sources that progresses from purely fiction, to a mix between science and fiction, to more “real” expressions of space. The significance of the evolution of these types of sources may remain to be seen; however, if one this is clear, it is that these sources collectively indicate a continued cultural interest in space.

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Conclusion

To summarize, each section of this study collects information from a specific set of sources and interprets them collectively. The first section analyzes some of the most famous and most historically significant government sources such the signing of H.R. 12575 which created NASA, famous speeches delivered by President Kennedy which demonstrated his approach to space programs, and the remarks of presidents Johnson and Nixon in response to efforts that were set in motion by Kennedy and Eisenhower. The second section analyzes a few selected essays from a collection that was published by NASA in 2008 after the 50\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Conference. These essays are modern scholarly interpretations of the history of space exploration in the United States. The main essay discussed in the section, Rosenberg’s “Far Out,” examines the cultural impact that this nation has felt from achievements in space exploration. The third section offers examples of popular media sources such as literature and films that are expressions of cultural interest in space. The section also demonstrates the evolution or shift in focus of these sources from a fantasy-fueled past to a more realistically-driven future.

To keep this study within the parameters of a historical analysis, it is essential that the understanding of the sources mentioned and interpreted be viewed from a strictly historical perspective. While some sources mentioned are very new, the ideas and interests that they reflect are not new. This study argues that the existence of these sources (popular films and scholarly works, specifically) stems from older interest in space and merely represent the continuance of that interest rather than the creation of a new one. In terms of the overall assessment of the sources cited throughout this study, the main question that remains to be answered is how they contribute to a modern understanding of the national identity, and what significance space holds within the national identity during the American space age, and if that is still relevant today.
Government sources are some of the most informative and valid materials for studying the activities of our nation’s government. The United States is a nation where public documents, speeches, and other sources which serve to inform the public on those actions are available and free to everyone. Ease of access is one reason government documents are such great resources; another reason is that they provide the most direct insight into events and actions of our government and our national leaders. The interpretation of these sources in this study has led to the following conclusions: activities related to space exploration, particularly between 1957 and 1969, were fueled by the hostile international political climate of the Cold War. The United States and its leaders, for the most part, strongly advocated for extreme achievements in space technology and explorations as a means to assert U.S. dominance. This is evidence and reflection of a strong nationalist agenda as described by the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word “nationalism.” Scholarly interpretations of the events that make up the era known as the American space age shape modern understanding of this particular phase in our nation’s history, which is significant to understanding the overall national identity of our nation from this time. Popular expressions of space, in the form of literature and film sources, among other entertainment, reflect cultural interest in space since before the American space age began and continuing to this day. Additionally, popular expressions of space in the form of entertainment media are strong cultural identifiers and help us make sense of how our nation’s history fits into modern interpretations of United States identity. While this study makes no significant claims for the legacy of space exploration in America, it asserts the significance of studying and understanding the history of American space exploration.
“I just can’t tell you how proud we all are of what you have done. For every American this has to be the proudest day of our lives, and for people all over the world I am sure that they, too, join with Americans in recognizing what an immense feat this is.”

-Richard M. Nixon, July 20, 1969\(^{39}\)

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