



SPUTNIK ANNIVERSARY MARKS 50 YEARS OF SPACE RACE

October 3, 2007

When the Soviet Union launched a basketball-sized satellite into space October 4, 1957, it shocked the world and set off a space race.

An aluminum ball with four antennas and two radio transmitters inside, Sputnik I weighed 183 pounds and orbited Earth transmitting a beeping radio signal for 23 days before it ran out of batteries. It fell out of orbit and burned up upon reentry into the Earth's atmosphere in January 1958.

The launch spurred the United States to create NASA and try to outdo the Soviets by sending an American spacecraft outside of Earth's orbit.

Roger Launius, curator of the National Air and Space Museum, said the Sputnik I launch changed the course of scientific research and the tone of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War.

"Two generations after the event, words do not easily convey the American reaction to the Soviet satellite, the only appropriate characterization that begins to capture the mood on Oct. 5 involves the use of the word 'hysteria,'" he told ABC News.

"The communists were going to rule," recalled Homer Hickam, who was 14 when he saw Sputnik. "And the proof of this was this shiny little bauble that flew around the world every 90 minutes."

"I was awestruck by this bright, shiny star that came across the sky with such energy, and I decided at that moment that I wanted to be part of the movement that was the whole world going into space," Hickam, who now trains NASA astronauts, told the Washington Post.

Laika the spacedog

While the United State scrambled to catch up, the Soviets again broke new ground with Sputnik II on November 3 of the same year, which transported the first passenger to space: a dog name Laika.

Laika survived in space for two days before succumbing to heat in the pressurized cabin.

The Americans tried to launch a satellite called Vanguard TV3 on December 6, but it crashed back onto the launchpad.

Not until January 31, 1958, did the United States successfully send Explorer I into orbit. That craft contained a Geiger counter to detect cosmic radiation.

Both countries later sent humans into space and in July 1969 the United States sent the first human to the Moon.

Space race leads to cooperation

The Sputnik launch came during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in decades of political tension and proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s, becoming Russia and several other smaller nations, the Americans and Russians began to work together and pool their space research in projects such as the International Space Station.

Asia is new player in space race

But while the U.S. has been a leader in developing new space technologies for decades, some experts warn that Asia might lead the next space race.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium, warned that lack of investment in developing science professionals in the U.S. could shift the cutting edge to China, Japan and India.

"In America, contrary to our self-image, we are no longer leaders but simply players. We've moved backward just by standing still," he told Agence France-Presse.

Although the U.S. has plans to travel to Mars and revisit the Moon, China launched its first manned spaceflight in 2003 and plans to send a satellite to orbit the Moon.

Japan is also jumping in, planning a similar Moon probe and several manned space missions.

NASA's chief scientist for the Moon and Mars, Jim Garvin, said the age of America going it alone in space is over and the first person on Mars will probably be planting a whole sheaf of flags.

"It's really a playing field for the world community," he told the Post.

"I see it as a U.N.-type flag arena on Mars."

-- *Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra*

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