From the Magical Land of Egelloc to the First Man on the Moon

by Jeff Plude (July 2019)

The First Steps, Michael Jamieson, 1963

As the first human to set foot on the Moon, Neil Armstrong said, “That’s one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.” It’s a grand sounding sentiment (despite Mr. Armstrong being unsure if he enunciated the *a*), and supposedly unscripted. But considering it a half century later, is it true? Was it a giant leap for humanity? Or just an act of hubris, another way to escape our galaxy of problems right back here on plain old Earth?

It was the pinnacle of the U.S. space program. After July 1969, there were a half dozen more Apollo-manned missions till December 1972, which covered the heart of my boyhood. The launches became so routine that it was like another installment of a hit TV drama, with the first-season finale never to be eclipsed. But then, only three and half years after that small step and giant leap, it was suddenly, without notice, off the air. Man was right back where he started from, and right where he’s stayed as far as the Moon goes.

So the question hovers over the golden anniversary of the first man on the Moon: If it was such a big leap, why have we gone nearly fifty years without putting a man (or woman) back there, especially with all our vaunted technology? Was the $20 billion or more for the Apollo program, which would now be more than a $100 billion, simply too much for the return on investment? Of course, in retrospect, it’s easy to second-guess a program that was not only a milestone for humanity but might lead to great advances in science, perhaps a greater understanding of not only our planet but the universe.

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For those of us who lived through it, sometimes it all seems like a dream.

And a few people apparently think it was even more unreal than that. According to various polls, a small percentage seem to believe that the manned Moon trips never happened at all, that it was all a colossal hoax produced by NASA and directed by Stanley Kubrick, just like he did the year before the first Moonwalk with his inscrutable, magnificently filmed *2001: A Space Odyssey*, this time on location in the Nevada desert, perhaps, and on stage sets. In other words, it was nothing more than a cynical, psychological military tactic in the middle of the Cold War, a lunar Potemkin village by way of Hollywood to one-up our superpower enemy, the Soviets. They'd beaten us into space in 1957 and again in 1961 by sending a Cosmonaut into orbit around the Earth.

I think such a view is farfetched, to say the least. Though flying men in a rocket to the Moon and back seems incredible too, especially back in the days of rotary phones, remoteless TVs, and print newspapers. And we've never sent a human back there.

The Moon conspiracy theory appears to be the polar opposite of how the public sees the assassination of President Kennedy. Almost two-thirds of Americans seem not to believe the Warren Commission's official finding. In other words, they think the president wasn't murdered by just one man with a bolt-action rifle, but that the killer must have had at least one

accomplice, probably more. Then there's the fact that that the supposed lone killer was himself conveniently murdered three days later, while in police custody no less.

Coincidentally it was President Kennedy who championed the idea of landing men on the Moon. Taking office at forty-three, the same year I was born, he seemed to embody the whole project with his youthful dashing appeal. On May 25, 1961, a few months into his presidency, he boldly told a joint session of Congress:

> 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 the 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.

Eight years later, with little time to spare, NASA delivered on the president's ambitious, or some would say grandiose, plan.

I was about to turn eight. I vaguely remember watching it all on TV: the avuncular Walter Cronkhite; the blurry and grainy black-and-white film, the robotic voices of mission control and the astronauts a quarter of a million miles away (our cosmic back yard, since the sun is 93 million miles away); Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin hopping around on the gray powdery lunar surface in spacesuits and bulbous helmets; a U.S. flag planted on the cratered barren moonscape.

It was July 20, 1969, and almost 11 p.m. where I lived when Mr. Armstrong took his small step and giant leap onto the Moon, that dreamy mysterious object of human fascination and folklore. I was surely safely tucked in bed, ready for tomorrow's replay.

The next day I don't remember my parents talking about it, or any other adults I knew. After all, it was just another day on Earth for us. Though we were part of the mankind President Kennedy said would be impressed by men on the Moon, I don't think we were much, if any, different in this respect than our neighbors or our peers.

The first Moonwalk occurred during one of the most turbulent periods in America in the twentieth century. There were the Cold War and the Vietnam War; anti-war protests and Civil Rights marches; the assassination of a president and a candidate for president—his brother, no less—and the most revered black leader in U.S. history; and the Black Panthers and the hippies. Speaking of the hippies, two and a half weeks after the first Moonwalk, the Manson family went on their murderous rampage in the Hollywood Hills. And the weekend after that, in a very different kind of sensual orgy, a half million people who were mostly younger than thirty (the age past which, according to the counterculture handbook, you weren't supposed to trust anybody, except of course for gurus like Aldous Huxley or Timothy Leary) rocked and smoked and tripped at Woodstock, giving the world a glimpse not so much of peace and love but of drugs and flesh.

In light of all that, when Mr. Armstrong stepped off the

Eagle's ladder onto the Moon itself, it must have been a much-needed relief for the country as a whole. It was a symbol of American initiative, ingenuity, courage. It was no doubt seen as unequivocally good. For a brief moment, it must have been like a Sea of Tranquility not only on Earth's lone satellite, but right here on crazy old Earth itself.

But like all good stories, there were plenty of obstacles for the protagonists to overcome. Before the Saturn V rocket even blasted off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, problems abounded.

For instance, the Van Allen belt was thought to be impassable by humans. The belt is actually two belts, or concentric rings of radiation high above the Earth, and while trapping harmful radiation to protect life on our planet, they'd prove equally deadly to humans if immersed in them. But it was calculated that a manned rocket flying at a certain speed through certain parts of the belts would minimize the exposure, and that the capsule itself would also shield the astronauts from absorbing a harmful dose of radiation.

Each Apollo astronaut wore a dosimeter, and after their return to Earth it showed that they'd absorbed a dose lower than the average amount of yearly radiation absorbed by federal workers who regularly handled radioactive materials. In fact, none of the Apollo astronauts suffered the effects of radiation poisoning, i.e., cancer.

And, predictably, there were problems during the actual nine-day mission. For instance, the lunar module had trouble

finding a suitable landing spot—the lunar module had less than a minute of fuel left when it finally touched down in the Sea of Tranquility (lunar “seas” were mistakenly named by early astronomers who mistook the large lunar basins for water). Mr. Armstrong radioed mission control with a typically understated response: “Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed.” As the room of controllers celebrated, Houston’s “capsule communicator” acknowledged the update and sealed the drama: “You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We’re breathing again. Thanks a lot.”

Soon after, Mr. Aldrin became the second man to walk on the Moon. For about two and a half hours the two astronauts walked around, collected samples of the surface, and took photos. All in all there wasn’t much to see; as Mr. Aldrin succinctly described it, “magnificent desolation.”

Splashing down on Earth four days later near Hawaii, the Apollo 11 crew assumed the dubious title of national heroes. But no one much remembers Michael Collins, who orbited the Moon in the command module, Columbia (named for the spaceship in Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon*, which also had three astronauts). As for the two stars, as much as Mr. Aldrin seemed to embrace his new earthly role, Mr. Armstrong seemed to dread it.

But his quiet, dignified, enigmatic demeanor intrigued the public even more. He was a couple of weeks shy of thirty-nine when he became world famous, and he lived more than four decades after that, till he was eighty-two, but for the most part he shunned interviews and the spotlight. Yet he wasn’t exactly a recluse either. After retiring from NASA in 1971, Mr. Armstrong taught aerospace engineering for nearly a decade

at the University of Cincinnati, which was near his home in Ohio, the state where he was born and grew up. In 1986 he served on a panel appointed by President Reagan to investigate the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster. But he refused to cash in on his historic Moonwalk, and it rankled him when others did. For instance, several years before he died, he threatened to sue his longtime barber for collecting his clipped hair and selling it, until the hairnapper agreed to donate the money to charity.

But there was a lot more going on inside Mr. Armstrong. In 2005 an authorized biography of him was published called *First Man*, which last year was made into a movie of the same name. In them, we see the devastating pain of losing his not-quite-three-year-old daughter, Karen, to a brain tumor in 1962. The day after her funeral the test pilot was back at his desk, to the amazement of his colleagues.

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His aloofness was so complete that his wife, Janet, confronts him the night before he's going to leave on his historic mission and demands that he talk to his two sons, since they may never see him again. Laconic as a Spartan, Mr. Armstrong talks to them as if he were debriefing them. Eric, or "Ricky," who was twelve in 1969, asks his father point-blank if he's coming back. After his father gives the kind of answer that sounds like a statement to the press, the boy follows up like a good reporter: "But you might not." "That's right," his dad-commander tells him. Every bit his father's son, Ricky, after

his little brother, Mark, hugs their father, goes over to him and extends his right hand to shake it, as they look at each other like two comrades who will do their duties no matter what.

But it seems Mr. Armstrong wasn't always such a consummate no-nonsense soldier. In one of the couple of humorous scenes in the movie, Janet tells their fellow dinner party guests, two other astronauts and their wives, that her husband Neil plays the piano and even wrote a musical in college (at Purdue, where they met) called *The Land of Egelloc*: "It was quite funny."

But the astronaut sitting across from Mr. Armstrong can't believe it: "*The Land* . . . *of Egelloc*."

Mr. Armstrong, in brilliant deadpan: "Egelloc. You've never heard of it?"

"I haven't."

"I'm surprised. It's a distant land, but uh, it's a magical place."

Without missing a beat, Mrs. Armstrong chimes in: "It's *college* spelled backwards."

Mr. Armstrong breaks into the barest of grins, then the whole table erupts in laughter.

Indeed, Neil Armstrong was destined to explore magical places. And so he did.

Now, instead of astronauts like him, we have tech "entrepreneurs" like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, who along with hawking books and newspapers and groceries and electric cars, have started companies that build and launch space rockets. This private pursuit of space is now called *space tourism*. And though it sounds like something Mr. Armstrong would scoff at, he supported these commercial efforts, according to his authorized biography, but was skeptical of their success.

By serendipity, I recently saw the first science-fiction film to be made after the silent era, *Things to Come* (1936). In it, over the course of a century the world goes from war to pestilence and barbarism to a technological utopia run by engineers. The movie ends with a race to launch a young couple to the Moon while the mob makes a futile attempt to stop them, lead by a man who proclaims: "Awake! Stop this progress before it is too late!" Of course he's chief of the Luddites, the reactionary straw man.

H.G. Wells, who adapted the screenplay from his own novel, lets the head technocrat, Cabal, have the last word. Setting him up, a colleague named Passworthy protests: "But, we're such little creatures. Poor humanity's so fragile, so weak. Little animals."

After roundly rejecting the animal comparison, Cabal declares as he looks down: “It is this,” then looking up at the night sky, “or that. All the universe or nothing!” And he sweeps his arm melodramatically across the night sky. “Which shall it be Passworthy? Which shall it be?”

I don’t in the least believe that we’re “little animals,” but on the contrary that we’re made in the image of God. But Cabal sounds more like the perfect angel who wanted to be God and therefore was cast out of heaven and still tempts humanity to follow him. And no trip to the Moon or anywhere else in the universe will free us of that.

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