

The Race for Space

By

Artie Knapp

On January 20th, 1961, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was sworn in as the 35th President of the United States. At age forty three, he was the youngest president ever elected in American history.

After being sworn in as president, President Kennedy addressed the nation in his first speech, which is known as an inaugural address. He spoke about the sacrifices that Americans must make to move the country forward. President Kennedy asked his fellow Americans: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

During President Kennedy’s first year in office, the United States and former Soviet Union were in competition in what has been called “the space race.” And on April 12th, 1961, Russian Yuri Gagarin became the first human to go into outer space. The following month, American Alan Shepard became the second human and first American to achieve the same feat.

The accomplishments of the United States and Soviet Union inspired the world. The Russians had reached space first, and President Kennedy did not want to lose ground in “the space race.” So he challenged America to send astronauts to the moon and return them safely to the earth before the end of the 1960’s. In a speech before Congress, President Kennedy said: “We should do this, not because it is easy, but because it is

hard.” In other words, for America to achieve great things, we must set goals for ourselves that others may think impossible.

NASA, which is America’s National Aeronautics and Space Administration program, continued to send more astronauts into space after Alan Shepard’s first successful mission. And in 1961, the Apollo program, which was NASA’s moon mission program, was officially created.

On July 16th, 1969, three American astronauts blasted off on the Apollo 11 Saturn rocket, headed for the moon. After four days and over 235 thousand miles, the Apollo 11 crew had reached the moon’s orbit. As astronaut Michael Collins stayed aboard and piloted the command module, astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made the first manned landing on the moon’s surface. The name of their lunar module spacecraft was called Eagle.

On July 20th, 1969 people around the world watched with great excitement as astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped off a ladder and onto the moon’s surface. After doing so, Neil Armstrong famously said: “That’s one small step for “a” man; one giant leap for mankind.”

After returning safely to earth, America felt great pride for what the astronauts had accomplished. There were parades in their honor and the astronauts went on goodwill trips to countries around the world.

In the early 1960’s many believed that going to the moon was impossible, but President Kennedy inspired America to reach for greater heights. And we must continue to believe as President Kennedy did, that for our country to reach its greatest potential, we must not ask what America can do for us, but what we can do for her.