

The Space Race

One of the most symbolic representations of the Cold War was the competition between the USSR and the USA as they raced each other into space. How did this “space race” get started? How did it end?

On October 4th, 1957, the Soviets became the first nation to launch an artificial satellite into orbit around the planet. This satellite, a large metal sphere about the size of a beach ball, was known as Sputnik 1. With the successful launch of Sputnik, the “space race” had begun.

America quickly responded. Within four months, the first US satellite, Explorer 1, achieved orbit around the Earth.



However, the US had always thought of itself as the leader in rocket development and space technology. Therefore, the fact that the Soviets had achieved this feat first greatly disturbed many Americans. In fact, many citizens panicked, viewing this as proof that the American education system was far behind that of the Soviets. School curriculum was carefully examined, placing a stronger emphasis on science and mathematics courses.

The following year, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was created to help the United States more effectively achieve its goals in space.

In April of 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the planet. Once again, the United States had been beaten into space. One month later, Alan Shepard became the first American in space, but, the US did not have a man orbit the planet until nearly a year later, when John Glenn accomplished the feat.

On May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy made a bold announcement that the United States would make it a goal to land a man on the moon before the end of the decade. Needless to say, since the US had stated this as their goal, the USSR also began making plans to put a man on the moon.

Throughout the decade of the 1960s, both the Americans and the Soviets experienced many successes and failures in their efforts to reach the moon. The most tragic event occurred in 1967. In January of that year, three American astronauts were killed in a fire while onboard the Apollo 1 spacecraft. In April of 1967, the Soviets also lost their first cosmonaut who died while attempting re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere.

Finally, in 1969, the Apollo 11 mission saw the US win the race to the moon. The craft was commanded by Neil Armstrong, along with crewmates Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin and Michael Collins. On July 20th, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the surface of the moon. As he did so, he spoke his famous line, “That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.”

With the astronauts' arrival on the moon, the space race effectively came to an end. Both the Soviet Union and the United States would continue their space programs, but many of the early goals had already been achieved.

Multiple Choice: *Please answer the following questions related to the passages you just read:*

1. _____ The first Soviet satellite was known as?

- a. Eagle I
- b. Explorer I
- c. Sputnik I
- d. Cosmonaut I

2. _____ What was the American reaction to the launch of the Soviet satellite?

- a. Most Americans did not care, they were too busy with their lives to notice.
- b. Many Americans panicked, fearing that America's school curriculum was not difficult enough.
- c. The US military immediately shot down the Soviet satellite.
- d. Americans reacted with contempt; they knew the Soviets could not compete with the US in the space race.

3. _____ The first human to orbit the planet was?

- a. Yuri Gagarin
- b. Neil Armstrong
- c. Chuck Yeager
- d. Alan Shepard

4. _____ What is the significance of John Glenn?

- a. He was the first man to walk on the moon
- b. He was the US President who started America's space program
- c. He was the primary designer of all of America's space technology
- d. He was the first American to orbit the Earth

5. _____ Why is Neil Armstrong significant?

- a. He was the first man to walk on the moon
- b. He was a top-ranking general who ordered a halt to the space program
- c. He was the director of NASA
- d. He was the first American astronaut

Free Response Questions for the Space Race:

1) After the Soviets managed to get an early lead in the Space Race, the United States restructured their education system and placed a greater emphasis on math and science courses in the public schools. Which school subjects do you think should be stressed the most and why?

2) After reading the Space Race and other lessons thus far, do you feel that the rivalry between the US and the USSR helped to advance the two nations and push them forward in any way? If so, what are some examples of this? If not, explain why you feel it is not the case.

3) Do you feel that the United States should strive to be the world leader in satellite technology and space exploration? If so, should agencies such as NASA receive more funding, or should the undertaking be turned over to privately-owned companies? Explain your answers.