Roots of the Space Race: Sputnik and the Language of U.S. News in 1957

By Jack Lule

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in October 1957, it also launched the space race. A qualitative assessment of the coverage given this event by the New York *Times,* St. Louis *Post-Dispatch,* and Los Angeles *Times* finds depictions of Sputnik in dramas of defeat, of national mortification, and of doom and dread. This study concluded that a 23-inch aluminum ball able (only) to send radio signals to earth was not in itself significant, but the language of reaction and interpretation was.

➤Space has been a site of drama for ages, heaven and haven for humankind's hopes and fears. But on Oct. 4, 1957, the nature of human dramas about space was changed forever with the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik. Humanity's first step into space, the launch was an awesome event, the fulfillment of long-lived dreams.[1]

But in the United States, dramas created around the event depicted only doom and disaster. "Americans reacted with shocked disbelief," writes Robert Divine. "The public outcry in the United States came close to hysteria."[2] Sputnik's influence was felt from grade-school curriculum to the deployment of U.S. missiles.[3] Indeed, many historians accept that Sputnik launched an era of heated competition in space that continues to this day.[4]

Yet why and how was this epochal launch transformed into the starting gun of a dangerous space race? News reports can provide some insight.[5] Newspapers of the day, in this era just before the dominance of television news, played at least a partial role in helping to shape understanding of Sputnik.

As "managers of the symbolic arena,"[6] newspapers devoted or denied their columns to legislators, officials, scientists, and others who sought to interpret and explain the Soviet success. In so doing, newspapers controlled access to *the language* that helped structure and shape public discussion of Sputnik.

The purpose of the project summarized here was to study language used in U.S. news coverage and commentary about Sputnik and, more broadly, the way news language can shape and sustain ways of understanding. The study was justified as offering insights into the context surrounding the roots of international space competition as well as the

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context in which the roots, goals, doubts and desires of an embryonic U.S. space mission were embedded. The primary question: In what terms was Sputnik understood?

From this perspective, news reports on Sputnik were seen as dramatic acts whose language unavoidably gave some meaning to events reported. That is, while certainly reporting the launch, the news did so with dramas that also offered ways of understanding Sputnik.

But what kinds of dramas were enacted? Whose views held the stage? To what extent did the newspapers contribute to the public outcry and hysteria noted by historians? With what terms did the news give meaning to Sputnik?

Language in Context

Answers to these questions are inextricably linked to the formidable cultural context of the late 1950s. The era of course was marked by Cold War tensions between the United States and Soviet Union, tensions made urgent by the threat of nuclear weapons. "What made the Cold War unique," said historian Carl Solberg, "was the frightfulness of the weapons that were brandished."[7]

For many, Sputnik was understood in this context. J. Ronald Oakley wrote that "the possibility of invisible missiles raining nuclear death down on Americans began to seem very real indeed."[8] The American public immediately realized, Solberg said, that the satellite "required rockets every bit capable of boosting nuclear-tipped missiles from

1. For accounts of the Sputnik launch, see Walter A. McDougall, *...the Heavens and the Earth* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 41-65, 141-76; James R. Killian Jr., *Sputnik, Scientists and Eisenhower* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 1945-1971 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), pp. 201-11; D.F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins: 1917-1960* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1961), pp. 885-93.

Also see discussions of Sputnik in histories of the 1950s including: Charles C. Alexander, *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1952-1961* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975),pp. 211-19; Paul Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 192-95, 276-77; Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade — And After: America, 1945-1960* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), pp. 307-15; J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), pp. 242-49; Carl Solberg, *Riding High: America in the Cold War* (New York: Mason and Lipscomb, 1973), pp. 335-76.

2. Robert Divine, *Since 1945* (New York: John Wiley & Sons,1975), p. 89.

3. Walter LaFeber notes that, "Strategic air force units were dispersed and placed on alert, short-range Jupiter missiles were installed in Turkey and Italy to offset the long-range Soviet weapons, money was poured into missile and bomber programs, and 'gaps' were suddenly-discovered in everything from missile production to the teaching of arithmetic at the preschool level." *America, Russia, and the Cold War: 1945-1984* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 195.

4. NASA historian Homer Newell has written that space came to be perceived in military terms immediately following Sputnik. "It was the military implications of space, the bearing that future space developments might have upon national defense and security, that imparted a sense of urgency to the deliberations in the executive and legislative branches." Homer E. Newell, *Beyond the Atmosphere: Early Years of Space Science* (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1980), p. 88.

Other scholars note that rivalry with the Soviets has helped drive many aspects of the U.S. space mission including the moon landing, spy satellites, the shuttle program, strategic defense initiative, and the proposed space station. See Edward W. Ploman, *Space, Earth and Communication* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 1984), pp. 1-25; Larry Martinez, *Communication Satellites: Power Politics in Space* (Dedham, Mass.: Artech House, 1985), pp. 1-52; John D.H. Downing, "Cooperation and Competition in Satellite Communication: The Soviet Union," in *Tracing New Orbits: Cooperation and Competition in Global Satellite Development*, Donna A. Demac, ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 283-304.

5. A review of literature revealed that several early studies discussed in general terms the importance of news coverage of Sputnik. See Paul J. Deutschmann and Wayne A. Danielson, "Diffusion of Knowledge of the Major News Story," *Journalism Quarterly*, 37:345-47 (1960); G.A. Almond, "Public Opinion and the Development of Space Technology" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24:4:553-72 (1960); D.N. Michael, "The Beginning of the Space Age and American Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24:4:573-82 (1960); J.W. Swinehart and J.M. McLeod, "News About Science: Channels, Audiences, and Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24:4:583-89 (1960); J.G. Whelan, "The Press and Khrushchev's 'Withdrawal' from the Moon Race," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 32:2:233-50 (1968).

More recent inquiries into press coverage of Sputnik include: Dorothy Nelkin, *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1987), pp. 21, 135-36, which discussed the adequacy and accuracy of news coverage, and; Cheryl L. Martin, "Space Race Propaganda: U.S. Coverage of the Soviet Sputniks in 1957," *Journalism Quarterly*, 64: 544-49, 559 (1987), which found that *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report* covered Sputnik in propagandistic, Cold War terms, while *Newsweek* emphasized the positive aspects of space exploration.

6. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 298.

7. Solberg, *Riding High*, p. 333.

8. Oakley, *God's Country*, p. 344.

Moscow all the way to Detroit."[9]

Domestic politics also influenced Sputnik's U.S. reception. The Eisenhower era was coming to an end and Democrats were positioning themselves for Congressional races and the 1960 presidential campaign. Sputnik was primed for partisan politics. Leading Democrats "attacked the Eisenhower administration for being so shortsighted and parsimonious."[10] Lyndon Johnson, Senate majority leader, with designs on the 1960 presidential nomination, chaired a highly publicized inquiry into the space program.[11]

The U.S. space program itself provides important context for understanding Sputnik. Until the Soviet launch, U.S. military missiles received primary attention over the separate, space missile program. After Sputnik, disaffected space scientists brought their complaints to Congress and the press. The space program, Project Vanguard, was rushed ahead,[12] but suffered embarrassing failures. Not until January 1958 did a U.S. satellite successfully achieve orbit. U.S. space failures — and the rush to assign blame — were an important backdrop to discussions of Sputnik.[13]

Other, less tangible, contextual factors are also relevant to U.S. reactions. Although concepts such as a "national self-confidence" or "public psyche" may be questionable, there is little question that foreign and domestic developments had created a sense of nation-wide anxiety exacerbated by Sputnik.[14] Trouble loomed in many places: racial problems broadcast world-wide from Little Rock; an economic downturn; urban flight; Cold War tensions. Alexander noted even before Sputnik a "collective mood of deep anxiety, often bordering on hysteria among Americans in the late summer and fall of 1957."[15] Writers worriedly debated the nation's priorities.[16]

Sputnik intensified such anxiety. Eric Goldman found "a sense of alarm, exasperation, humiliation and confusion" after Sputnik.[17] Another writer saw "a crisis in self-confidence."[18] Another termed the shock of Sputnik a "second Pearl Harbor."[19] Debates over national purpose and priorities took on real urgency after Sputnik.

These cultural and political factors combined, we know now, to transform Sputnik into a potent symbol, a Cold War coup, a rebuke to U.S. prestige, and ultimately the start of the space race. But what was the press' role? Historians refer vaguely to the "near-hysterical reaction of

9. Solberg, *Riding High*, p. 341.

10. Oakley, *God's Country*, p. 343.

11. Alexander, *Holding the Line*, p. 217.

12. For discussions of the agitation and zeal that drove the U.S. space mission after Sputnik, see Killian, *Sputnik, Scientists and Eisenhower*; Edwin P. Hartman, *Adventures in Research: A History of Ames Research Center* (Washington, D.C.: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1970); Frank Walter Anderson, *Orders of Magnitude: A History of NACA and NASA, 1915-80*, 2nd. ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1981); Arnold S. Levine, *Managing NASA in the Apollo Era: An Administrative History of the U.S. Civilian Space Program, 1958-69* (Washington, D.C.: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1982); also see Ploman, *Space, Earth and Communication*, pp. 1-25; Martinez, *Communication Satellites: Power Politics in Space*, pp. 1-52; LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1971*, pp. 201-11.

13. The political infighting among military branches involved with satellites drove Eisenhower to distraction and was an important influence on the decision to consolidate space research under the civilian umbrella of NASA. See Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 424-35, 454-61; Killian, *Sputnik, Scientists and Eisenhower*; Alexander, *Holding the Line*, pp. 219-24; Solberg, *Riding High*, pp. 441-44.

14. See Oakley, "Trouble in God's Country," *God's Country*, pp. 331-394; Alexander, "Affluence and Anxiety," *Holding the Line*, pp. 101-58; Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties*, pp. 192-97.

15. Alexander, *Holding the Line*, p. 210.

16. Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties*, pp. 108-13; Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, pp. 307-15; Solberg, *Riding High*, pp. 333-76.

17. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, pp. 309-10.

18. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, p. 424.

19. Solberg, *Riding High*, p. 340.

the American press"[20] and its "chorus of criticism."[21] Yet we have few specifics. Even McDougall's lauded...*the Heavens and the Earth*, with a chapter devoted to the "media riot" surrounding Sputnik, cites less than ten articles.[22]

What were the reactions of the press? How was the criticism mounted? What was the process, the reasoning? Who were its protagonists? Whose viewpoints ultimately reached the public? What was the language used to portray the 23-inch aluminum ball?

Method

The study analyzed coverage and commentary in three members of the prestige press — New York *Times*, St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, and Los Angeles *Times* — selected partly for geographical distribution, but also for elite quality and influence.[23] Dates examined were Oct. 4 to 31, 1957, the first four weeks of Sputnik's 92-day flight.[24] Each report and editorial on Sputnik was studied.[25]

The nature of the project justified a qualitative approach capable of engaging the subtle and suggestive as well as the surface aspects of news language. The method employed was an interpretive textual analysis. Different from quantitative content analysis, which imposes systematic categorizations upon manifest content, an interpretive approach seeks to bring forth the meaning of both manifest and latent content found within a particular text and rooted within a particular culture and time.[26]

Briefly, the analysis first proceeded by examining within each report the selection and portrayal of actors and acts. It noted the descriptors applied to actors, the roles actors played, the choice of verbs and qualifiers. Symbols and metaphors then were isolated; patterns of portrayals in the report were made clear. For example, the metaphor of the race served an integral role in early reports, with explicit references to victory and defeat.

Analysis then constructed "the world of the text," isolating assumptions, values and beliefs that buttressed a report.[27] This world was not

20. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, pp. 423-24. Ambrose found that Sputnik "had a remarkable effect on the White House press corps, usually so friendly to Eisenhower." Five days after Sputnik, Eisenhower held a press conference that Ambrose called "one of the most hostile of his career." Still we are left with no particulars or analysis of press coverage. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, p. 429.

21. Oakley, *God's Country*, p. 344.

22. McDougall, ...*the Heavens and the Earth*, pp. 141-56.

23. John Merrill, *The Elite Press* (New York: Pitman, 1968). Although the Los Angeles *Times* does make Merrill's 1968 list, the paper in 1957 was still undergoing its transformation into elite status. Its breadth and influence in southern California, however, can justify study of its coverage.

24. In this period, Sputnik at first dominated front pages. By the fourth week, coverage had dropped off almost completely.

25. The language of news reports and editorials certainly differs and the study will make clear whether words are taken from a report or editorial. However, the dramas created about Sputnik — the ways Sputnik was understood by the newspapers — were enacted on the editorial page as well as the front page; thus, editorials as well as reports were analyzed.

26. "Position, placing, treatment, tone, stylistic intensification, striking imagery, etc., are all ways of registering emphasis," says Stuart Hall. "The really significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern — but which is *also* given, in its exceptional context, the greatest weight." Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in A.C.H. Smith with Elizabeth Immirzi and Trevor Blackwell, *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 15.

More extensive discussions of interpretive methods can be found in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

27. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 88. Elsewhere, Ricoeur says, interpretation seeks "the kind of world opened up" by a text. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 218.

It is interesting to note that Walter Lippmann used similar language in discussing news. Lippmann stressed that news *creates worlds*. For example, describing stereotypes, he noted, "They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world." He added, "They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted." *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 95.

necessarily the world view of a culture, but the report's own world, which helped shape and was shaped by the cultural context. The world was seen as an *act of the text.*[28]

With this approach, news reports and commentary were explored as dramatic forms[29] that offered worlds for understanding Sputnik and thus offering insights into the origins of the space race and the U.S. space mission. As will be shown below, the study identified, from the language of news, three primary dramas: a drama of defeat; a drama of mortification and national self-reflection; and a drama evoking the dream and dread of space.

The study hopes to demonstrate how U.S. news reports, while drawing from a rich, timeless, almost mythic treasury of wonder and terror about space, also used humanity's first step into the heavens as a means to enact powerful dramas that evoked and extended ongoing cultural concerns over the Cold War, atomic weapons, perceived shifts of power and prestige, and deteriorating national values.

A Drama of Defeat

On Oct. 5, the day following the launch, the three newspapers gave the satellite large, front-page play, befitting a momentous, international event. But why was Sputnik important? What was the initial meaning ascribed to the satellite?

As might be expected, language in the first reports portrayed the launch as a major defeat suffered by the United States at the hands of its archrival. Humanity's first step into space was quickly situated within the context of the Cold War; the Soviet success was understood as a U.S. loss.

How was this portrayal accomplished? Reports immediately employed the metaphor of a race, attributing the metaphor to the Soviets. "Victory for Russia," a Los Angeles *Times* subhead said. "The Soviet Union claimed a victory over the United States," the report stated. "The two big powers had been in a hot but mainly secret race to be first to probe space with spheres laden with instruments."[30] A New York *Times* account stated, Russia "asserted it had put a scientific instrument into space before the United States." [31] The *Post-Dispatch* called the Soviet announcement a "dramatic claim that Russia had beaten the United States in the satellite race."[32]

News language from Washington often made explicit references to the Cold War; sources emphatically situated Sputnik in that context.[33]

28. "The text speaks of a possible world," Ricoeur says, "and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it." *Interpretation Theory*, p. 88. Ricoeur is greatly concerned with the nature of evidence and the defense of interpretations. Following this concern and aware that qualitative approaches often are accused, sometimes rightly, of failing to provide supporting evidence for conclusions, I take pains in this essay to refer and defer always to the texts, using as evidence for my interpretations of the news the very words of the news itself.

29. The work of Kenneth Burke has had the greatest influence on the consideration of critical and imaginative works as drama. See *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945); *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

30. "Russ Satellite Circling Earth," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct. 5, 1957, p. 1.

31. "Soviet Launches Earth Satellite," New York *Times*, Oct. 5, 1957, p. 1.

Some of this competitive zeal was attributed even to the Russian people. "Soviet citizens made no secret of their pride of the accomplishment of their engineers and specialists," said a New York *Times* report filed from Moscow. "It was not so much that they had performed a wonderful scientific feat that impressed the people as that they had beaten the United States in the race." "Soviet Releases Satellite Times," New York *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 42.

32. "Device Circling Globe 15 Times a Day; Will Burn in Dense Space," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 5, 1957, p. 1.

The *Post-Dispatch* report from Washington used even more forceful language: "The rueful reaction here today to news of the Soviet earth satellite was that this country has had the daylights beat out of it in an epic contest of the twentieth century." "Congressional Investigation is Demanded by Symington," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 1.

33. It is of interest that U.S. news reports turned to Cold War language, even though, apparently, leaders in both nations attempted to downplay this interpretation. See James Reston's extraordinary three-hour interview with

"Washington Sees Feat as Cold War Setback," said the front-page headline in the *Post-Dispatch*.[34] A New York *Times* report noted Vice President Nixon "Sees Spur to 'Cold War.'"[35] A front-page essay in the New York *Times* by former President Harry Truman charged that the Soviets had used Sputnik "to accelerate the 'cold war' with brazen threats and bold-faced lies."[36]

Another characteristic of news language, complementing the drama of a U.S. defeat, was the portrayal of Sputnik as a great propaganda victory. The "Soviet space satellite announcement appears to have been one of the world's greatest propaganda — as well as scientific — feats," said one New York *Times* lead.[37] "Russia scored a smashing propaganda and psychological victory over the United States with its successful launching of history's first earth satellite," a Los Angeles *Times* report began.[38] The *Post-Dispatch* noted the Soviets "had carried off a feat whose propaganda value may far outweigh its scientific contributions."[39]

Reports gave space to disaffected scientists to probe *how* the nation had met defeat. One lead asked, "Could the United States have launched a successful earth satellite by now if money had not been held back and time wasted?" U.S. scientists, "without wishing to make their sentiments sound like sour grapes," said yes.[40] Another story said U.S. scientists did not wish to take advantage of the propaganda value of a launch.[41] Said another report, "U.S. Could Have Won Race, Says Scientist;" the article quoted a scientist, "'In a sense, our men have acted like scientists and the Russians have played it like sophisticated world politicians. I must agree — they played it smart."[42]

To summarize this first section, interpretive analysis found U.S. news reports and commentary on Sputnik enacted a drama of defeat based in language of the Cold War. Highlighting assertions by the Soviets as well as powerful U.S. figures, the reports saw Sputnik as a significant propaganda set-back and a huge boost for Soviet efforts to win people to communism. In the language of the news, humanity's first step into space was a major U.S. defeat in a space race — a race the nation quite probably could have won.

Khrushchev in "Khrushchev Asks World Rule of the Satellite and Missiles if Part of Wide U.S.-Soviet Pact," New York *Times*, Oct. 8, 1957, p. 1; and a report on Eisenhower's first press conference after Sputnik, "President Voices Concern on U.S. Missiles Program, But Not on the Satellite," New York *Times*, Oct. 10, 1957, p. 1.

34. Russian Satellite Crossing U.S. Seven Times a Day; Washington Sees Feat as Cold War Setback," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 1.

35. "Nixon Says Nation Must Place Arms Before Tax Cuts," New York *Times*, Oct. 16, 1957, p. 1.

A later report by James Reston was quite complimentary of Nixon's actions after Sputnik. "In the post-sputnik policy review going on here [Washington], Vice President Richard M. Nixon is playing an important and effective role," the lead stated. "While others are running for cover or scoffing at the recent Soviet scientific, political and propaganda shots, he is frankly facing the facts and furnishing some leadership." See "The Post-Sputnik Nixon," New York *Times*, Oct. 30, 1957, p. 9.

36. "Truman Urges an Agency To Rule All Missile Work," New York *Times*, Oct. 31, 1957, p. 1.

37. "A Propaganda Triumph," New York *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 43.

38. "Russia Scores Tremendous Propaganda Beat Over U.S.," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. A.

The Cold War context was also evoked through use of metonymy, metaphoric representation of a part by a whole or whole by a part. Through metonymy, the primary actors and conflict were created: "the Soviet Union" was placed in opposition to "the United States." Through such language — journalistic convention, really — news reports established a world of competition between the two powers. Metonymy produced a dramatic narrative of nation against nation.

39. "Device Circling Globe 15 Times a Day; Will Burn in Dense Space," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 5, 1957, p. 1.

40. "U.S. Delay Draws Scientists' Fire," New York *Times*, Oct. 5, 1957, p. 2.

41. "Pentagon Tells Why Russia Won Satellite Race," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 1.

42. "U.S. Could Have Won Race, Says Scientist," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct. 9, 1957, p. 16.

Another explanation also attributed the Soviet "victory" to illegitimate means. "The Soviet despotism achieved its success by concentrating all available resources and talents (including kidnapped German talent and stolen espionage data) into a crash program carried out at the expense of Soviet living standards," declared one editorial. "A Call For Action," New York *Times*, Oct. 18, 1957, p. 22.

A Drama of Mortification

A second drama found in U.S. news language about Sputnik took up, in shrill terms, the ongoing debate and reappraisal of national goals and policies. In this world, the United States, now mortified and chastened, must use the defeat as motivation for change.

The self-reckoning was fueled by portraying Sputnik as a severe blow to U.S. prestige. One New York *Times* story cited scientists who said Sputnik had been "a devastating blow to the United States' scientific, industrial and technical prestige in the world."[43] A Los Angeles *Times* report underscored the impact with results of a Gallup poll that showed ordinary citizens in many countries believed Sputnik "was a hard blow to U.S. prestige."[44]

An interesting aspect of the self-examination was a reappraisal of U.S. national character. Taking up a theme debated throughout the decade,[45] the reports suggested that the humiliation by Sputnik occurred because Americans had become transfixed by comfort, stultified by luxuries. One report said "the Soviet satellite was 'a stinging rebuke to the complacency which has pervaded America in recent years.'"[46] The *Post-Dispatch* noted, "Most Newspapers Hope Soviet Moon Has Dealt Death-Blow to American Complacency."[47]

Walter Lippmann, in a column printed in the *Post-Dispatch*, expressed such feelings eloquently. He saw Sputnik as a "profound challenge" to cultural values. He saw "prosperity acting as a narcotic," and argued that, "Our people have been led to believe in the enormous fallacy that the highest purpose of the American social order is to multiply the enjoyment of consumer goods."[48]

Lippmann was not alone. A New York *Times* editorial said, "we have become a little too self-satisfied, complacent, and luxury loving. In this world our 'fat dripping prosperity' — to use Sandburg's phrase — is not enough to go on."[49]

How could the United States regain its diminished stature? Much of the national self-reflection enacted in the news reports immediately centered on the state of the educational system. Although attacks on "progressive" theories of education had been intensifying since the early 1950s,[50] Sputnik dramatically focused the offensive. Education, especially in science, became a means to explain the U.S. defeat and also, importantly, a means by which the United States might recapture prominence and position.[51]

Daily, reports hammered home the theme, giving the stage over to

43. "Blow to U.S. Seen," New York *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 42.

44. "Sputnik Hurt U.S., Gallup Poll Finds," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct. 21, 1957, p. 7.

45. Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties*, pp. 108-13; Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, pp. 307-15; Solberg, *Riding High*, pp. 333-76.

46. "'Penny Pinching' Hit," New York *Times*, Oct. 14, 1957, p. 18. Some reports were more harsh. "U.S. 'Stupidity' Seen," said another New York *Times* headline, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 42.

47. "Most Newspapers Hope Soviet Moon Has Dealt Death-Blow to American Complacency," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 8, 1957, p. 1C.

48. "The Portent of the Moon," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 11, 1957, p. 3C.

Also see Michael L. Smith's essay, "Selling the Moon," a critique of the space program itself as a gross exemplar of consumer culture. Michael L. Smith, "Selling the Moon: The U.S. Manned Space Program and the Triumph of Commodity Scientism," in Richard Wightman Fox and T. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp.177-209.

49. "An Ill Wind," New York *Times*, Oct. 16, 1957, p. 34.

50. Solberg devotes an entire chapter to the implications of Sputnik for U.S. education in his Cold War history. See Solberg, "Sputnik and the Illusion of the Primacy of American Education," *Riding High*, pp. 333-76; also see, Alexander, *Holding the Line*, p. 131.

51. This is the position taken by Solberg in "Sputnik and the Illusion of the Primacy of American Education," *Riding High*, pp. 333-76.

educators and scientists. "Education as usual can no longer be accepted in this country, leading college and university spokesmen said here today," a New York *Times* report began.[52] Another story said Sputnik "was the signal for increasing public and private financing of higher education."[53] Reports argued that youths "must be taught to appreciate the importance of science or the United States' way of life is 'doomed to rapid extinction.'"[54]

Some stories summed up the revived interest in education by reworking the term "egghead," a derisive label, from the Adlai Stevenson 1952 campaign, for intellectuals.[55] "Eggheads Called Hope of Country," said the New York *Times*. "This country must return to the acceptance of eggheads and ideas if it is to meet the Russian challenge, according to Dr. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.," the lead stated.[56] A *Post-Dispatch* subhead said, "Americans Mistrust, 'The Egghead,' Russians Educate, Honor and Reward Him." The article decried anti-intellectualism, shown "in the use of the opprobrious term, 'egghead' to identify a person who brings logic and objectivity to a discussion of political and social problems."[57]

In this second drama then, reports offered Sputnik as a sign that something had gone wrong in America. The Soviet success was transformed into a catalyst for reevaluating U.S. roles, goals and values. And in this reckoning, America was found wanting: Sputnik was the catalyst but also the proof.

A Drama of Dream and Dread

Along with dramas of defeat and bitter self-reflection, grounded in the specific context of the Cold War, some U.S. reports enacted broader, more far-reaching dramas that drew upon almost mythical themes of dream and dread. In this world, Sputnik was placed in a large, historical context, the culmination of humankind's consideration of space. This step into space, the press understood, had implications both wonderful and terrible.

Many of these more ethereal considerations came, naturally enough, on the editorial page. "The conquest of space has been a dream of man for centuries," began a *Post-Dispatch* editorial.[58] The New York *Times* editorialized, "Already now it is clear that Oct. 4, 1957, will go down imperishably in the annals of humanity as the date on which one of man's finest achievements was accomplished. The dream of the greatest minds among many past generations is now well on the way toward becoming reality."[59]

But even this appreciative note was tinged with dread. Great advances open up two roads, the editorial noted. One is the road of hope. "The other is the road of despair and disaster, the road which is

52. "Satellite Called Spur to Education," New York *Times*, Oct.12,1957, p. 3 .

53. "Satellite Called Goad to Training," New York *Times*, Oct.14, 1957, p. 18.

54. "Nation Is Warned to Stress Science," New York *Times*, Oct. 8, 1957, p.14.

55. The term apparently was coined by John or Joseph Alsop and was given national attention during the 1952 presidential campaign by the columnist Stewart Alsop. It eventually became a snide sneer used against Stevenson. See Porter McKeever, *Adlai Stevenson: His Life and Legacy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989); pp. 247-48, 270-71; Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, pp. 223-24. Also see Kenneth S. Davis, *The Politics of Honor: A Biography of Adlai E. Stevenson* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 160. Davis claims that Professor Madison Priest of Princeton University coined the term made famous by Stewart Alsop.

56. "Eggheads Called Hope of Country," New York *Times*, Oct. 26, 1957, p. 6. Schlesinger, an egghead from Stevenson's 1952 campaign, surely enjoyed the resurrected status of his group .

57. "Anti-Intellectual Climate of U.S. Hampers Science, " St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 13, 1957, p. 1D.

58. "Pushing Into the Cosmos" St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 7, 1957, p. 2C.

followed if the great achievements of universal science are used for the purposes of aggression, death and destruction."[60] A similar editorial was entitled, "Roads to Hell — or Heaven."[61]

Indeed, most often, the satellite launch was portrayed in dire terms. Sen. Henry M. Jackson called Sputnik "a life and death matter for our country and the free world."[62] An editorial said satellite development was "not a race for celestial 'basketballs' or 'scientific tricks,' but a race for our survival."[63]

Much of the fear and dread centered around a potent symbol of the era: the intercontinental ballistic missile — the missile that could deliver the atomic bomb. One report said the weight of the satellite "appears to confirm the Russians' ability to launch an inter-continental ballistic missile with nuclear warhead."[64] Another said, "Reds Are Said to Be Capable of Hitting U.S. With an ICBM."[65] A Los Angeles *Times* story captured the fear: "A prominent American scientist said tonight it would be fair to conclude Russia now has the ability to hit New York with an intercontinental ballistics missile, if their [sic] aim is good."[66]

Soon after the launch, events transpired to further intensify fears. Disputes on the Russian-Turkish border were depicted by some reports in apocalyptic language. A front-page Los Angeles *Times* story began, "The United States today warned the Soviet Union it will stand by its NATO ally Turkey and that any Russian aggression on the Turkish border could trigger World War III."[67]

It was amidst such dread that the Eisenhower administration acted, forging a new U.S. space program and wrestling space back from the edge of doom. In March 1958, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was created. Official NASA histories affirm that the agency was a direct response to "reaction in the U.S. immediately following Russia's success."[68] Another NASA history directly blames the press, noting that "the media ballyhooed the carefully qualified statements of U.S. officials" and "pressures for dramatic action gathered rapidly."[69]

This third drama thus embraced one of humanity's oldest dreams — the exploration of space. But dream turned into nightmare.[70] The problem of course was the United States had not "settled" space first. Mircea Eliade found this kind of dread even in ancient myth. He noted that societies often assume an opposition "between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The for-

59. "Stride Into Space," New York *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 10E.
60. "Stride Into Space," New York *Times*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 10E.
61. "Roads to Hell — or Heaven," New York *Times*, Oct. 7, 1957, p.10E.
62. "Jackson Insists Eisenhower Act," New York *Times*, Oct. 11, 1957, p. 8.
63. "A Call For Action," New York *Times*, Oct. 18, 1957, p. 22.
Even a puff piece on a New York *Times*-sponsored youth forum called forth the danger of Sputnik. The lead stated, "That the Soviet threat to the free world had come home to the people of the United States as never before was conceded by the five high school students in yesterday's New York *Times* Youth Forum." Panelists Stress Threat of Soviet," New York *Times*, Oct. 7, 1957, p. 15.
64. "Pentagon Tells Why Russia Won Satellite Race," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 6, 1957, p. 1.
65. "Reds Are Said to Be Capable of Hitting U. S . With an ICBM," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 8, 1957, p. 2A.
66. "Russ Rocket Held Able to Hit N.Y.," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct.8, 1957, p. 27.
67. "Hands Off in Turkey, U.S. Warning to Russ," Los Angeles *Times*, Oct. 11, 1957, p. 1.
68. Jane Van Nimmen and Leonard C. Bruno with Robert L. Rosholt, *NASA Historical Data Book Volume 1* (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1988), p. 3.
69. Roger Bilstein, *Orders of Magnitude: A History of the NACA and NASA, 1915-1990* (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1989), p. 46. Also see, Robert L. Rosholt, *An Administrative History of NASA, 1958-1963* (Washington: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1966), p. 6.
70. In a recent book chapter, Daniel Hallin questioned whether "space will soon be appearing in the news primarily as a strategic resource and arena of global conflict." In 1957, news reports on Sputnik already were linking space to state strategies and the terrible possibilities of war in heaven. Daniel Hallin, "Cartography, Community, and the Cold War," in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 110.

mer is the world (more precisely, our world)."[71] He said a group did not consider a space sacred until its own people had settled it, for "everything that is not 'our world' is not yet a world."[72] News about Sputnik presented this very drama. Success in space would be meaningful only in the context of U.S. experience. Space, with Soviet satellites, was a threat; and so the accounts anticipated the settling of space with U.S. technology — as well as U.S. traditions and beliefs.

Conclusion

Sputnik, a 23-inch aluminum ball capable of relaying radio signals to Earth, had no fixed meaning. Reactions to Sputnik, interpretations of Sputnik — were the truly significant phenomena. This essay has assigned special significance to interpretations gathered, selected and offered by the prestige press, working in the days before the dominance of television news.

Analysis has shown that three members of the prestige press depicted Sputnik in dramas of defeat, of mortification, and of the dream and dread of space, and that in the firestorm of criticism after Sputnik, the press played an incendiary role.

The press' role in *creating* such dramas is difficult to measure. As "managers of the symbolic arena," the press might be seen as a mere conduit for the machinations of ambitious Democrats and frustrated scientists. This interpretation however may be too passive. Some historians have argued the press *led* the chorus of criticism. McDougall said, "The *press* assumed Sputnik meant Soviet superiority, and the *press* pushed the panic button" [italics his].[73]

This study supports such a view. It found immediate, consistent critiques of U.S. policy and practice in the press. Although sources surely had influence, the press did resist many sources — including the President. In the final analysis, the press *selected* its primary themes, its main actors, its own dramas to enact.

How the press accomplished its critique is also of interest. News on Sputnik reinforced many cultural concerns of the late 1950s. Sputnik was launched during a curiously vulnerable time. Huge specters haunted the national scene, from atomic weapons to domestic strife to World War III. News of Sputnik helped maintain this context by portraying the launch in words and worlds that drew from but also added to that context. It was a question of *language*, of actors, symbols, metaphors and worlds. The language of the press drew from cultural context to explain and report Sputnik; by its use of that language, the news confirmed and sustained that context.

Conversely, dramas about Sputnik also showed that news language was not always anchored to context, nor chained to the daily detail. News on Sputnik gave voice to timeless themes about space — from Eden to Armageddon. Without straying from the canon of journalism, news reports delved deep into the shared heritage of humankind, and grasped fixtures and forces that have moved people for centuries.

Northrop Frye said, "The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that

71. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), p. 29.
72. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 32.
73. McDougall, *...the Heavens and the Earth*, p. 148; also see, Smith, "Selling the Moon," pp. 177-79; Bilstein, *Orders of Magnitude*, p. 46, and Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, pp. 307-11.

always does take place."[74] In important ways, news on Sputnik captured the way people always have approached space, touching the very fabric of what it is to be human, to be able to contemplate the wonder and terror of space and time and eternity.

Sometimes drawing from rich reservoirs of dream and myth, other times drawing from the day's anxieties and concerns, news language gave voice to hopes and fears of people as they considered humanity's first step into space. News gave meaning to Sputnik and offered worlds in which and with which to understand.

74. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 63-64.