

The Billionaire Space Race

Senator Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, on August 3, 2021, “For many of our billionaire friends, apparently they are increasingly unconcerned about what happens here on Earth because they’re off in outer space.”

I think Senator Sanders’s perspective is shortsighted and irresponsible. And the saddest part is that so many people share that perspective.

Most of us would probably agree the Apollo program was a worthwhile pursuit. It calmed Cold War tensions and probably helped avoid WWII, expanded our understanding of science, sparked new innovations (like cordless vacuums and drills, fireproof firefighter uniforms, breathing apparatuses, and water purification systems), and most importantly, inspired the next generation of scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and explorers.

But for most of the 60s, most people were furiously opposed to the program. Even when support reached its peak—when Armstrong and Aldrin took their first steps on the moon—“only a lukewarm 53 percent of the public believed such a momentous historical occasion had been worth the cost.”¹

I wonder what Sanders’s position would’ve been on the Apollo program back in the 50s/60s—amid civil unrest at home, ongoing wars in Southeast Asia, and geopolitical tensions in Europe. I’m curious if Sanders would even concede now that the Apollo program was worth the cost.

I understand Sanders’s sentiment coming from science deniers. Like JFK said in his famous July 17, 1962 Moon Speech, “the greater our knowledge increases the more our ignorance unfolds”. Knowledge prompts doubt (doubts about our belief system and our place in the world) and doubt, in turn, prompts insecurity. Even if I don’t agree with science deniers because it’s a perspective that’s kept us in the cave for as long as it did, I can understand and somewhat sympathize with where they’re coming from.

What I don’t understand, however, is how self-proclaimed science and technology advocates, knowing how investments in science and technology have always reverberated through society, can be so eager to denigrate scientific and technological exploration.

There’s a Carl Sagan quote I love, “These days, there seems to be nowhere left to explore. Victims of their very success, the explorers now, pretty much, stay home. Maybe it’s a little early- maybe the time is not quite yet- but those other worlds, promising untold opportunities, beckon. Just now, there a great many matters that are pressing in on us that compete for the money it takes to send people to other worlds. Should we solve those problems first, or are they a reason for going? Our planet and our solar system are surrounded by a New World ocean: the depths of space. It is no more impassable than the last.”

As long as we can focus on more than one thing at once, I think we should be a bit less complacent about the few agencies left that still give people something to be inspired by.

¹ <https://www.space.com/10601-apollo-moon-program-public-support-myth.html>