

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.

It’s worth remembering that even though we like to think of the space race in the 60s as an endeavor that brought the country together in support, in reality most of the country was always opposed to it. Even when support was at its height, as 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

What people didn’t consider—or couldn’t consider—then was how those investments in scientific and technological exploration would reverberate through society for generations. How the space race would encourage the next generation of scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and technologists for decades. How other industries would use the innovations from the Apollo program to catapult our economy and cement America’s position as the world’s scientific and technological leader—and what that would eventually mean for attracting the best STEM minds around the world.

I’m curious 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. While I don’t agree with science deniers because it’s that same perspective that’s kept us in the cave (metaphorically and literally) for as long as it did, I can understand and somewhat sympathize with it.

I don’t mean to pick on Sanders but I’m using him as a proxy for all the self-proclaimed science and technology advocates that are so eager to denigrate scientific and technological exploration.

I studied engineering and went into technology specifically because of one of those billionaires and the vision of the future they laid out for us. I wanted to be a part of that mission. My generation couldn’t rely on our government to be as audacious as it was. We talk about how important it is that kids don’t fall out of school and how we need more scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and technologists, yet we never ask scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and technologists why they went into those fields in the first place.

Sure, we have problems at home and it’s important we don’t become complacent about those problems, but for as long as we can focus on more than one thing at once, we should be a bit more cautious not to be complacent about the few agencies left in our society that give people something to be inspired by.

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