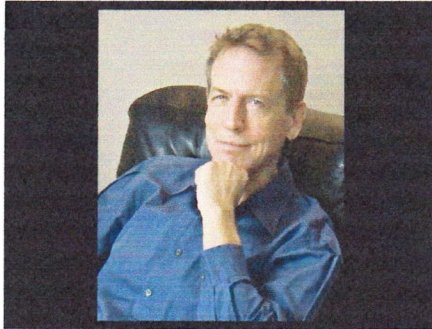




Space Race Featured Former Nazis, Cold War Rivals, Paparazzi

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Review by Katherine Tam



July 20 (Bloomberg) -- It took more than rocket fuel to get **Neil Armstrong** and **Buzz Aldrin** to the moon. As Craig Nelson shows in his fascinating history, "**Rocket Men**," political forces also propelled the **Apollo 11** journey in July 1969.

It began in 1961, when U.S. president **John F. Kennedy** promised that Americans would be on the moon "before this decade is out." In the midst of the Cold War, the Soviets had shocked the world by launching **Sputnik** in 1957, followed by the launch of the first man in orbit four years later. In response, Kennedy's predecessor, **Dwight Eisenhower**, signed legislation creating NASA in 1958.

The U.S. also strengthened its intelligence services and boosted spending in science to overcome a supposed technological and military gap with the Soviets.

But before the Americans could reach the moon, NASA was plagued by setbacks including grueling training runs with malfunctioning systems, fights between the agency and its contractors, and the fiery deaths of three astronauts during training for Apollo 1.

The Soviets were also struggling, with spacecraft reentry problems and perilous political battles. The Americans eavesdropped on a harrowing final call between the Kremlin and a cosmonaut whose spacecraft was about to crash.

Space Frenzy

Then in 1963, Kennedy was assassinated. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was forced out of office the following year. And in the ensuing space frenzy, the astronauts and their families lost all privacy, with photographers clicking away when the astronauts' children tried to play on their own front lawns.

Amid great jubilation, Armstrong and Aldrin made it onto the moon while astronaut **Michael Collins** orbited in another spacecraft as backup. Yet when they returned to Earth, they found that winning the space race for their country wasn't all that it seemed.

After being lauded with Collins as heroes, Armstrong and Aldrin each spent years dealing with emotional isolation that led to depression and divorce. It's an experience Aldrin describes in his new memoir, "**Magnificent Desolation**."

Once Aldrin came home, his biggest challenge was finding new ones. It would take years of alcoholism and subsequent sobriety before he found his passions: his current wife, Lois, and working as an advocate for further space exploration.

Not So Heroic

Not everyone at NASA was a hero. Several rocket scientists, including their charismatic leader **Wernher von Braun**, were Nazis who developed the devastating V-2 missiles during World War II.

Nelson discusses this history in "Rocket Men," but he doesn't mention the irony that those same German scientists were inspired, when they were young, by the work of rocketry's pre- Cold War founding fathers, the

Russian Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and American Robert Goddard.

Furthermore, Nelson rightly bemoans the huge cuts in NASA funding and the massive boosts in defense spending since 1969. He also mentions the pioneering U.S.-Soviet Apollo-Soyuz space flight of 1975. But with the escalating costs of scientific exploration and geopolitics, Nelson could have elaborated on U.S. and Russian space collaboration since the end of the Cold War, most notably through the International Space Station.

The question of America's future role in space has become more pressing. As the U.S. debates how much stimulus funding should go toward math and science education, emerging powers such as India and China are developing their own space programs. I wish Nelson had written more about how America could strengthen its faltering lead in technology and innovation.

But to move forward, we sometimes have to look back. When Armstrong looked at the sky from the moon, he covered the Earth with his thumb. He says that experience made him feel small. It also shows how human we all are.

"Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon" is published by **Viking** (404 pages, \$27.95).

"Magnificent Desolation: The Long Journey Home From the Moon," written with Ken Abraham, is published by **Harmony** (326 pages, \$27).

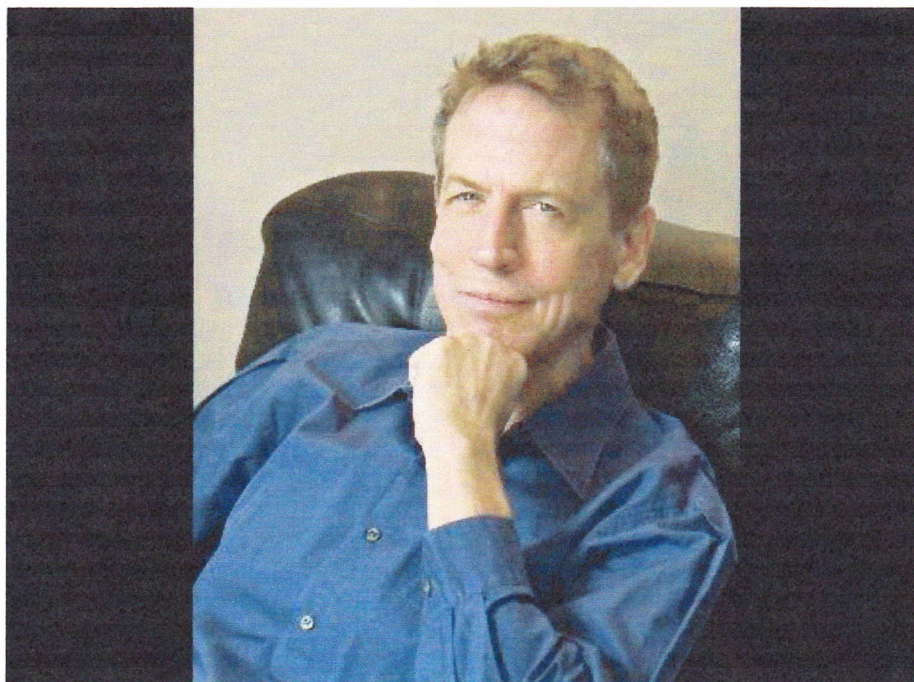
(**Katherine Tam** is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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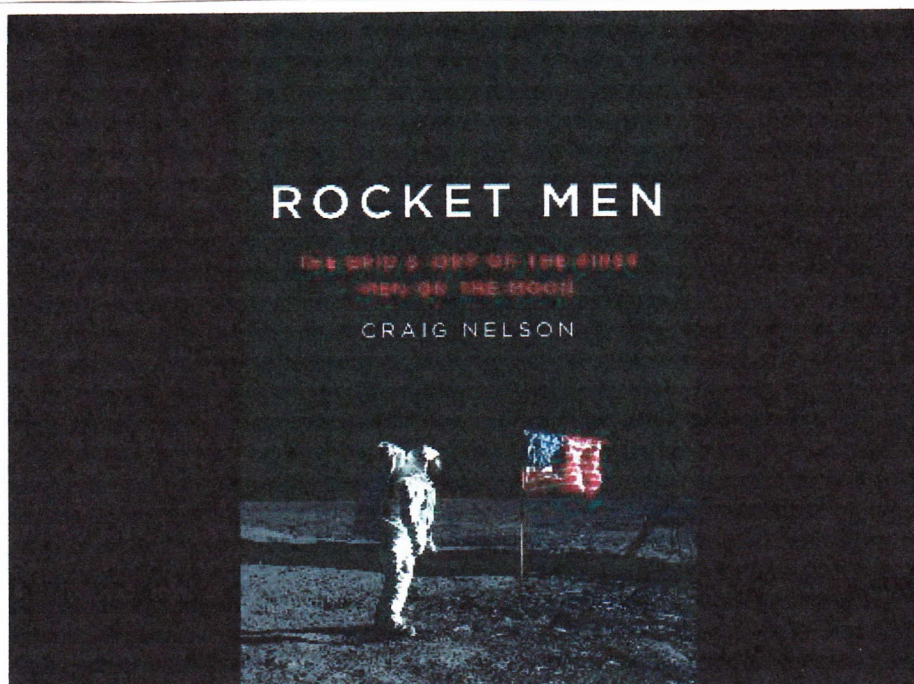


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Author Craig Nelson poses on January 27, 2009. "Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon" is the latest work by Nelson and is published by Viking. Photographer: Kathryn Millan/Viking via Bloomberg

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The cover jacket of the book "Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon". The book is the latest work by author Craig Nelson. Source: Viking via Bloomberg

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