

Another Gift from Apollo: Calibrating the “Experts”

By James Oberg

[This is an on-going collection of quotations showing how wrong most ‘experts’ were about the Soviet Union’s secret push to beat Apollo to the moon]

Judging the trustworthiness of government intelligence agencies, private experts, and news media pundits is an ongoing challenge, but the Apollo program provides one calibration of credibility. Throughout the 1960’s, as the Moon Race between the United States and the Soviet Union was building up steam, numerous sources kept claiming that NASA had hoaxed the country with a non-existent race, and that the Russians were too smart to spend their time, treasure and talent on something as useless as manned space missions. Moscow made the same claim, after Apollo-11 landed, as the excuse for not getting there first. We now know the Soviets were in the race, wanted to win, came close to sending cosmonauts around the moon before astronauts, built and test flew a Saturn-V-class booster and lunar landing module, designed and built their moonwalk spacesuit, picked the cosmonaut crews for the landing mission, and pressed on with ambitious manned surface exploration plans for years AFTER the Apollo landings before canceling them in secret.

But how was this reported by leading Western experts? A review of statements from that era reminds us of the uncertainties of ‘technical intelligence’ and the limits of human intelligence, and to what extent top experts will let their personal biases shape their facts and arguments..

DAILY MAIL, London, Nov 3, 1963: "The race to the moon is off, and good riddance to it. Mr. Khrushchev's statement that Russia will withdraw is the one sensible decision since this lunatic contest between Russia & America began."

Senator J. William Fulbright, Congressional Record, November 19, 1963: "The probable truth is that we are in a race not with the Russians, but with ourselves...."

NEW YORK TIMES, editorial, "Debating the Moon Race", April 11, 1964: "There is still time to call off what has become a one-nation race and substitute a concerted international effort to search out the mysteries of space. By doing so, a portion of the money and manpower now earmarked for the moon shot could be diverted to more useful tasks."

"How Near The Moon", Newsweek, June 8, 1964: "No evidence has appeared that the Soviet Union is building a larger rocket to go to the moon.... Many observers believe that the U.S. is racing itself."

"Reds Hint Again They're Not In Moon Race", Stuart Loory, Moscow bureau, New York Herald Tribune, Sep 2, 1965, based on statements by Mstislav Keldysh and G. A.

Skuridin: "The assumption that the Soviet space program is not aiming in that direction [manned moon flight] is becoming more and more reasonable."

Doubleday Publishers, New York City, book jacket promotional copy for *Journey to Tranquility*, 1969. "The struggle to get an American on the Moon by 1970 thrived on an overwhelming fear of Russian space superiority, a fear which NASA still fosters as a challenge to American security and prestige. But by 1963 it had become clear that the Russians had little immediate interest in the Moon and that the race for space did not, in fact, exist."

John Noble Wilford, NY Times, Oct 26, 1969, "According to some observers in Washington and some American scientists, the Russians may never have had a high-priority goal and timetable for a lunar landing."

London Sunday Times, 1971: "It became obvious long before the Americans landed on the Moon that they were winning the space race hands down.... There was never the remotest chance that the Russians would get to the Moon first."

London Guardian, 1971: "Russia knew a long time ago that she cannot build a moon rocket.... 5 years ago, some Western observers were arguing that the 'Moon race' was a myth... This has turned out to be the case."

Walter Cronkite, CBS special report on Apollo's 5th Anniversary, July 1974: "It turned out that the Russians were never in the race at all."

Parade Magazine (Walter Scott), Aug. 11, 1974:

"Q: During the 1960's the Kennedy Administration conducted a crash program to beat the Russians to the Moon. Now we've learned that the Russians never even came close technologically to putting a man on the Moon. Who goofed and wasted all that money? - I.F., Huntsville, AL.

A: Whether putting an American on the Moon was a waste of money is of course arguable. That our intelligence of the Soviet space technology was faulty is not."

William Schauer (Illinois State University), *The Politics of Space: A Comparison of the Soviet and American Space Programs*, Holmes & Meier, 1976, pp. 172-3: "In retrospect it seems clear that by 1967 the USSR had largely abandoned whatever hopes it might have had of getting a man to the moon ahead of or shortly after the United States.... The USSR had evidently backed away from any hope for a manned lunar landing.... In March of 1968, cosmonaut Gagarin died in an air crash. This probably helped to quash any remaining plans for manned lunar landings."

Chicago Sun-Times, July 15, 1979, "America On The Moon: Ten Years Later", by John Camper: "As the decade progressed, it became obvious the Russians had dropped out of (or never entered) the moon race, but still we pressed on."

Richard Hutton (University of California at Berkeley), *The Cosmic Chase*, New American Library, 1981: "[In the mid-1970's] It became clear that the Soviet competition for manned space exploration had ended in the mid-1960's; since then, the United States had been racing alone.... As long as the United States still had the moon to shoot at, the illusion of a race could continue -- even if we were in it alone." (pp. 82, 93)

Time magazine TV special (ABC), 20th Anniversary, 1989: "Ironically, the Soviet Union never attempted to land men on the moon. They chose to concentrate on long flights."

NBC News Productions, Apollo 20th anniversary, July 1989, narrated by Leonard Nimoy: "The space race hadn't been a race at all."

Charles Murray, *Apollo: The Race To The Moon*, Simon and Schuster, 1989: "By 1968, NASA was no longer worried about the Soviets landing on the Moon before the Americans...."