

The Democratic Party and Space Exploration

The Democratic Party led the first great age of space exploration. Although the actual Moon landings occurred during a Republican administration, the Democratic Party deserves the majority of the credit for that achievement. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson inspired, promoted, and did most of the political heavy lifting for the Apollo program.

It is time for the Democratic Party to embrace a bold space program again. Such a program will not just impact a few scientists and engineers—it will have a full societal impact. It has the power to transform our society in the following ways:

Education: Space Exploration can revitalize American education. During the Apollo program, the number of scientific and technical degrees issued by American universities doubled. Many of the people who created the computer and communications revolution in the 1980s and 1990s were “children of Apollo.” If we engage in a bold new program that will send people to the Moon, Mars, and beyond, it is likely to have the same inspirational effect. People often ask why we are not graduating as many engineers and scientists as we once did. Children need to be inspired. They need to see that they can work toward a goal larger than themselves. A bold space initiative will provide that inspiration and create an environment that will make our education dollars far more effective.

Science: The possible scientific gain of such missions is unfathomable. Although robotic missions provide wonderful science, their contributions pale compared to what a human explorer can achieve in a fraction of the time. Humans have the best chance to find out whether humans can live on other planets, and if life ever existed on Mars and elsewhere in space. Learning about other planets can also potentially provide a plethora of information on how to better understand Earth.

Technology: Since its inception, the space program has driven technology. Our society and economy has been transformed by technologies created by or enabled by the space program. We need to guarantee that our nation remains the technology leader.

National Morale: National morale is often not taken seriously. In reality, it is one of the most important factors in determining our prosperity. Unlike most federal agencies, the American public has an emotional bond to NASA. It is seen as a symbol of American know-how and success. If NASA is engaged in ambitious, challenging goals, it will serve as a tremendous catalyst for national self-esteem.

National Security: All of the items listed above have a dramatic impact on national security. We have been leaders in space since the Apollo program, so we have never considered the implications of the disadvantaged state we would be in if we fell behind. In addition, our space program is highly beneficial in promoting our image around the world. Regardless of how people in other nations regard our foreign policy, NASA is still viewed with awe and admiration around the world.

Returning to the moon, sending humans to Mars, and truly exploring the solar system is a goal that is worthy of the Democratic Party and the American people. In 500 years, do we want to be remembered as a civilization that shrunk away from our pioneering heritage or one that dared to explore—dared to innovate—and dared to finally achieve that “giant leap for mankind” that Neil Armstrong referred to in 1969.

Those who came before us made certain that this country rode the first waves of the industrial revolutions, the first waves of modern invention, and the first wave of nuclear power, and this generation does not intend to flounder in the backwash of the coming age of space...

John F. Kennedy, Rice University, 1962