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Back to the Moon for the sake of America and humankind

Home News Tribune Online 08/9/05

HAYM
BENAROYA
Be Counted

The Moon has, by virtue of its dominance of the night sky, embedded itself in humanity's psyche, as part of our lore, as the moonlight that has turned battles, and as the familiar "face" upon which we have all gazed many times. As a destination for people, it has been the focus of science and science fiction. Science fiction dreamt the impossible, and science made it possible, often much sooner than anyone could anticipate.

On July 21, 1969, at 0256 Greenwich Mean Time, Neil Armstrong and "Buzz" Aldrin of Apollo 11 walked for the first time on the lunar surface, to the amazement and cheers of most people around the world. These first steps were repeated with two men from each of Apollo 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17. These first expeditions were intended to mark the initiation of a permanent manned presence on the Moon, and eventually Mars and beyond. That dream had to be abruptly put on hold, until now.

With President Bush's visionary and very specific speech of Jan. 14, 2004, we were finally placed on track for the return to the Moon, this time to stay and settle, and then onward to Mars and beyond. The president resumed the journey abandoned more than 30 years ago. With this act, and assuming the goals are fulfilled, he will have initiated what can arguably be one of the most far-reaching efforts of humanity.

While most individuals support the vision and the need for humanity to return to space, the cry is often heard that there are still problems on Earth, and let us solve them first. This column is addressed to those people in particular.

The first thing I would like to say is that there always have been and always will be problems on Earth. I would add that perhaps, following this argument, we should not spend any money on museums and concert halls either. If we were to wait until all the problems are solved before going back to the Moon, then we, as a species, would end its life on Earth.

The more important answer is that expenditures on space result in a significant return to

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the civilian economy in the form of advanced technologies across all sectors of the economy. Particular examples include medicine, materials and electronics. The economy grows because of the advanced technologies that are derived from space development. In other words, space development increases the size of the pie.

There are numerous reasons to rebuild the space program around a manned return to the Moon, and these will be discussed in more depth in subsequent columns. These include the recovery of resources from the Moon, and to setting up outposts to monitor meteorite activity far enough in advance to deflect those that might approach Earth. But here I focus on the return to the Moon as a vision to excite our young people on how fantastic the future can be, and how they can play a role in creating that future.

We have a difficult time attracting enough of our young people to the disciplines of engineering, science and mathematics. Our society depends on there being enough technically versed people who are eager to address the problems we all face. Whether in medicine, environmental protection, agriculture, electronics, or the design of a multitude of products, we need enthusiastic and talented American engineers, scientists and mathematicians to spend the many years they must in college in order to begin to understand how to solve today's problems and to predict the potential problems of the next generation.

Just as Apollo brought thousands of Americans to the technical arts, President Bush's vision invigorates young people to study subjects that are the foundation and backbone of our modern civilization. This they do whether or not they become "rocket scientists." The goal is to be part of the larger community of people who can appreciate what it takes to do these enormous and profound tasks.

The nation needs its brightest in the technical arts. We are at risk in that fewer of us pursue such disciplines. Our competitiveness with nations who appreciate the importance of engineering and science continues to erode. The settlement of the Moon and then Mars, and the manned exploration of the solar system are an ideal focus for a nation that is used to forging its massive energies for the betterment of humanity.

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