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## Paper Session I-C - Project Apollo & the Cold War: Understanding the Space Race as Ritual Combat

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# Project Apollo and the Cold War: Understanding the Space Race as Ritual Combat

Hal Issen

Why did we go to the moon? Even the astronomers who worked on Project Apollo could not pretend that it was inspired by a driving love of science. It is hard to believe that the urge to explore was the motive; less than one-percent of the surface was ever explored by man. Three out of ten missions were canceled before the program was abandoned twenty-five years ago, with no plans to return. What did Project Apollo mean?

President Kennedy proposed Project Apollo at a special session of Congress on May 25, 1961 after only four months in office. His campaign claims of Soviet superiority in missiles and space

had raised alarms about declining American influence. While many of his claims about weapons were fabrications,

the public had not forgotten the panic caused by *Sputnik I*, launched by the USSR on October 4, 1957. President Eisenhower was bemused by all the hand-wringing and cries of doom, and impatient with the mad rush to drain the national treasury. Eisenhower knew that *Sputnik* was not a serious security threat because it could not be maneuvered in orbit, and that the US could have launched more sophisticated satellites before the Soviets. But the US had been concentrating its efforts on its missile system. Eisenhower was concerned with building a strong defense without getting deeply into debt. After that was in place he was interested in a modest space program, but insisted that it be strictly scientific. Perhaps in retrospect Eisenhower's vision can be appreciated as being more accurate, but Kennedy's hectoring of Eisenhower for a 'Missile Gap' and *Sputnik* was more persuasive, and probably was a decisive point in his election over Nixon. Why did the public believe Kennedy's interpretation of looming catastrophe instead of accepting Eisenhower's reasonable assessment of the facts?

The significance of the Soviet space program was shaped by a set of values encoded in the American national identity. Kennedy's interpretation proposed that the Soviet advances in space were not an actual threat to our defenses, but rather represented a decline in American superiority. This appealed to the American self-identity of

being strong, resourceful, rugged, and optimistic. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner was the first to tie this identity to the settlement of the American Frontier. Americans

*If The Soviet Union was first in outer space, that is the most serious defeat the United States has suffered in many, many years.*

John F. Kennedy  
1960 Presidential Campaign

*I cannot, for the life of me, see any reason why we should be using or misusing military talents to explore the moon.*

Dwight D. Eisenhower  
Presidential Press Conference  
November 4, 1959

*The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.*

Frederick Jackson Turner  
*The Frontier in American History*, 1920

proudly trace their heritage to pilgrims and pioneers. Turner proposed that the West was a place of clear opportunities and demands. He explained that the uniquely American character of individualism and practicality was strengthened by the challenges and ordeals of taming the Western frontier. The rugged individualists who settled the West were responsible for developing national resolve, and provided leadership for those who remained in the stagnant, institutionalized East.

Turner's work has since been re-evaluated by studying the institutions that made it possible to settle the Western Frontier. While there is no doubt that the pioneers needed perseverance and fortitude, it is also true that they could not have survived without bureaucratic institutions such as railroads and Army posts. The West was actually an outpost that funneled raw resources into the developed East. Those who settled the West were no more inherently endowed with virtue than those who stayed to build commerce in the East. But Turner's explanation for America's strength, as illustrated by stories of rugged frontiersmen such as Dan'l Boone and Davey Crockett, captured the public's affection. These stories became referential models to those who tried to understand America's power. The impact of Turner's thesis became greater than if all of his interpretation was factual. Turner's Frontier thesis became a myth.

Myths are stories that contain a value system. The word 'myth' is often used to mean 'untrue.' However, the value system within a myth has a significance to the people who know the story, even if the particular events of that myth never happened. The truth of a myth is in its power to motivate people towards particular action.

Myths are often associated with ancient cultures. For example, ancient Athens is remembered as much for the stories of the Olympian pantheon of gods as it is for its contributions to Western thought, such as scientific reasoning, theater, and democracy. For a brief period Athens was the center of a Hellenic culture that was united by a view of the world that had its origins in the Greek myths told by Homer and Hesiod. Honor was the highest virtue in that worldview, and the normal state of being was competing for honor against everyone else. One source for this structure of reality is in Homer's *Iliad*. This is the story of two great nations locked in a ten-year war to regain the honor of a king whose wife had run off with a foreign prince. The Athenians identified themselves as brave and noble people because they associated themselves with the heroes in those myths. We might wonder if it was a war worth fighting, but the Homeric myths explain why this was a legitimate cause in the Greek way of thinking. According to Homer the only way to regain honor after such a dishonor was to fight for it and win it back. The *Iliad* illustrates virtue in aggression, pride, loyalty, the ability to fight well, and it encouraged that type of behavior. Many of the activities in Greek life were spent acting out the value system contained in these myths. The many rituals honoring the gods, the countless wars between the city-states, election to public office, marriages and funerals were enactments of Homeric honor.

As illustrated by these examples of the influence of the Homeric myths to Ancient Athens, all myths share these common characteristics:

1. *Myths offer ways of ordering existence.* They give a model for the basic structure of reality. Myths explain and give meaning to the outside events that affect a society.
2. *Myths inform man about himself.* People take on a self-identity based on historical events.

*The Homeric world owes its unity to its being a literary creation. Once it is submitted to a historical analysis, different, more or less compatible layers become apparent, detectable in the weaponry, the modes of combat, and the varying social and psychological status of the warrior.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

- Myths connect a group of people as a selected order of humanity.
3. *Myths express a saving power in human life.* Myths provide salvation. They give hope during hardship by illustrating the power to transform misfortune into triumph.
  4. *Myths provide patterns for human action.* Myths encourage particular behavior. Stories that embody ideal action illustrate the conduct that is valued and virtuous.
  5. *Myths are enacted in ritual.* The values in myths are expressed in symbolic acts.

President Kennedy used the myth of the American frontier to interpret the events of the Russian Space Program. The five characteristics of myth can be seen in Kennedy's speech to the Democratic National Convention during the 1960 Presidential campaign. He offers a model of reality as a world that is full of hazards, hardships, and perils, but also opportunities. He connected Americans to the historic pioneers who tamed the West. He offered the power of salvation through determination and sacrifice. He encouraged action to build a new world that was strong and free, regardless of the cost, and held this conduct up as being virtuous. Lastly, by using the American frontier as a symbol for his administration, Kennedy issued a mythic call to enact these values in his programs and plans.

*The pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. . . . They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships.... We stand today on the edge of a new frontier-the frontier of the 1960's-a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils-a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.*

John F. Kennedy  
Democratic National Convention  
July 15, 1960

The Frontier myth is a call for action, and Kennedy was expected to come up with bold, new initiatives after he had been elected. The Soviets and their communist surrogates were dealing embarrassing set-backs to the US, especially during the Bay of Pigs crisis. Clearly some action was required. But these activities involved confrontation and aggression against a heavily armed, capable, and belligerent adversary. While the Frontier myth included battles, the marauding Natives were seen more as a lethal menace than a threat to society. The Frontier myth only explains the virtues of expansion; some other myth was needed to explain the significance of war.

The Old Testament calls for the righteous to rise up in arms and rid the earth of the wicked. There cannot be co-existence with those who have not given themselves over to the highest moral authority because their mere presence is an abomination, and hateful to God.

The Cold War was an ideological struggle between the US and the USSR for political and economic world dominance. Both the US and the USSR were convinced of their alignment with the highest moral authority, and neither could tolerate each other's continued existence.

The *Communist Manifesto* preached the moral superiority of the socialist system and called for the over-throw of capitalism. Fueled by the rhetoric of Marx and Lenin, the Soviets saw themselves on a noble mission to eradicate capitalist exploitation. Even though it was officially an atheist state, the Soviet sense of righteousness can be seen as having roots in the Old Testament myth of war. The Western

*[In the Old Testament] God, the creator and sole governor of the universe, was absolutely and always on the side of a certain chosen community, and its wars, consequently, were Holy Wars, waged in the name and interest of God's will.*

Joseph Campbell  
*Myths to Live By*

nations saw communism as a creeping, subversive, insidious threat to all that was valued. A movement resembling a holy crusade to rid the planet of communism prevailed in the West. Complicating matters were atomic bombs and guided missiles; making it a possibility to annihilate an enemy. Full-scale nuclear war eventually had to be considered if the Old Testament was used to interpret the significance of war.

Unlike the Old Testament, the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad* had nothing to do with the righteousness of God. The Greeks and the Trojans recognized the same gods, who might intercede on either side depending on factors that had nothing to do with righteousness. The gods were only concerned with honor, and war was one way to gain honor. The accomplishments of the Russian space program were interpreted by Kennedy as representing a decline in American superiority. Because this concept of national honor was so important for his decision, looking at the structure of war in the *Iliad* might provide a better understanding of why the public endorsed Kennedy's proposal, and how Project Apollo owed its construction to the ancient Greek myths.

The Greeks of the classic period lived in city-states that were proud of their independence and self-determination. While the Greek city-states defended themselves against foreign invaders, such as the Persians in 479 BC, they also constantly fought wars against each other. The object of Greek city-state warfare was different from that of defending against foreign invaders. These wars were intended to demonstrate superior technical skills on a battlefield. Obviously this involved killing, but the primary goal was not to wipe out the opposing army. It was to make it turn tail and abandon the field. The battlefield might not have any particular strategic value, and may even be abandoned after a victory monument had been erected. The competing armies would only fight for a fixed period, although later battles involving the same antagonists would inevitably follow. In summary, the idealized structure of Greek city-state war was to show up at a designated place within a fixed time and secure victory by demonstrating a superior mastery of the technical skills of warfare. The significance of war, in this context, was to gain honor.

President Kennedy's proposal to Congress for Project Apollo has the same structure as the idealized Greek city-state war. He established a time limit of "before the decade is out." He had chosen the battlefield and set a criterion for victory, that of "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth." By claiming that "no single project in this period will be more impressive to mankind," he explained the significance of the proposal as gaining honor in the international community.

*War was quite natural to the Greeks of the classical period. Organized, as they were, into small cities, all equally jealous of their own independence and equally anxious to affirm their supremacy, they saw warfare as the normal expression of the rivalry that governed relations between states.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

*The war has a time limit set upon it, for a campaign normally takes place during the summer and ends before the onset of winter. The decisive battle is fought on chosen ground, a pedion, where it is possible to deploy the two phalanxes of heavy infantry. Each of the cities waging war seeks not so much to annihilate its adversary, or even to destroy its army, but rather to force it to acknowledge its superior strength as the outcome of a test as rule-bound as a tournament.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*



Kennedy's proposal was a challenge to Congress and the American people to share his vision and fund Project Apollo, but it was also a declaration of war against the Soviets. It was not a call for all-out annihilation as in the Old Testament model of war, but a challenge to gain honor by demonstrating technical excellence. The Soviets understood the declaration for what it was and accepted it, as proven by the recent disclosures of their own lunar landing program that was designed to beat the US. The international community also recognized the significance of Project Apollo, as shown by the overwhelming praise and congratulations given to the Apollo crews after their successful missions.

Kennedy gave a structure for Project Apollo that equated technological excellence with cultural superiority; this is a mythic structure in accord with the first characteristic of myths. Unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy interpreted Soviet advances in space as a challenge to the American self-image of optimistic and determination. This self-identity, connected to the American pioneers, fulfills the second characteristic of myths. He claimed that the impressive accomplishment of Project Apollo had the power to regain international honor and save America. Apollo's power to save agrees with the third characteristic of myths.

If the Space Race was a mythic structure of war, than the astronauts and cosmonauts were the warriors who gained honor for their people. The ancient Greeks believed that the strength and abilities of their warriors represented the collective virtue of their societies, and that victory in battle by their army was an indication of the superiority of their city-state. The astronauts were given hero status. While there were certainly benefits to being a hero, the scrutiny that was put on their personal conduct was sometimes puzzling, annoying, and even chafing to them. They were men who had been selected based on their skills as pilots, and not necessarily for their virtuous personal conduct.

A myth encourages certain behavior per the third common characteristic. In the Homeric structure of war, victory by the astronauts was symbolic of the supremacy of American society. The American public's self-image as virtuous people could not be validated by degenerate astronauts. Because virtue is supposed to triumph in the Homeric myths of honor, a victory by immoral astronauts would be a confusing mixed signal at best, and perhaps even a defeat. The "all-American" image of the astronauts was an important part of the mythic structure of Project Apollo.

The last characteristic of myth is that it is enacted in ritual, and the Greek structure of city-state warfare incorporated this aspect of myth. Setting limits on the time and location for battle and criteria for victory resembles an athletic competition more than combat. Some battles were even

*I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single project in this period will be more impressive to mankind.*

John F. Kennedy  
Special Address to Congress  
May 25, 1961

*Armies, through the energy, discipline, and stanches of their respective fighting men, are the measure of the power and cohesion, the dunamis, of the two civic communities confronting each other.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

arranged to be fought as tournaments between individual champions or small teams, while the rest of the army watched from the sidelines without interfering. The ancient Greeks used this same structure in the famous Panhellenic games, which we have adapted as the modern Olympic games. The astronauts were applauded because they represent our country as Cold War warriors in ritual combat in the same way that we cheer on our athletes. A tournament structure requires a set of rules; the US and the USSR signed United Nations agreements on peaceful uses of space that served as the tournament rules during the Space Race.

*Those who take part in the Games confront each other in the name of the same city-state as those that go to war against each other.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

The Athenians were particularly successful in naval combat, which was another use of the tournament structure. Ancient Greek warships were triremes; long, thin, and low-draught vessels that were powered in combat by oarsmen in three ascending levels. Each trireme had a crew of 200, of which 170 were rowers and the rest were officers, provisioners, archers, and combat marines. The objective of battle was to ram the enemy ship; maneuverability was very important and the steering oarsman's skill was critical. But collective discipline was also important because each rower's strokes had to be coordinated with those ahead and behind, as well as any above or below. The crews trained constantly to master these skills. Athens has a fleet of over 400 ship at its peak and had to hire professional rowers to fill the 68,000 slots. On top of the rower's pay, the large fleet was expensive to build and maintain. Taxes from the state treasury paid for the large fleet, and commerce was developed as a result of all the spending. The port-town of Piraeus thrived as a ship-building and shipping center.

*What is most important in naval warfare is maneuverability of the craft and all that this entails in the way of training, experience, and inventiveness, and adequate state funds.*

Jean-Pierre Vernant  
*Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

Project Apollo was also a large-scale publicly funded project that stimulated commerce, provided jobs, and contributed to national pride. The project was supported by large numbers of anonymous workers who were sometimes mercenaries looking for employment. Local communities, such as Brevard county, thrived as a result. The engineers managing their systems during a launch sequence had to be as coordinated as the banks of oars sweeping the water to bring as a trireme

around to ram another warship. All this effort supported one individual responsible for guiding the vessel, and victory or defeat depended on his skill. Just as the Greeks built a ritual structure for their naval warfare based on the Homeric myths of honor, the superpowers also constructed the Space Race into ritualized and symbolic actions.

## Summary and Conclusion

Project Apollo was symbolic action that had a mythic structure of honor similar to Greek city-state warfare. It satisfied the needs of the American people to challenge and defeat the communists. Eisenhower's pragmatic vision could not see the value in ritual combat, while Kennedy successfully used the Space Race as a symbolic competition for honor. The US and the USSR was engaged in other struggles at the same time as the Space Race. The threat of nuclear warfare hung over the military confrontations in Korea, Cuba, Berlin, and Vietnam. Apollo's value continues to be questioned, but its cost and results could be compared to any one of these activities. The value of Apollo might be considered in terms of it being a safe and productive area for the US and the USSR to act out their competition for honor.

Project Apollo's acceptance was due to its particular structure that addressed specific Cold War tensions. However, the same tensions no longer exist, and the same construction is no longer appropriate for the human exploration of space. But because of its success, Project Apollo has become the referential model for all space exploration. Images from Apollo are engraved in our culture; the pictures of the earth rise and Buzz Aldrin on the surface of the moon are two great icons of our time. There is a resurgence of interest in Apollo, and space exploration as the 'final frontier' is a recognized formulation in books, television specials, and movies. The drama and grandeur of the space program have renewed interest in seeing its accomplishments as a bold and noble time in our nation's history. The lunar landing program is in the process of becoming a narrative about the development of American character and fortitude. Project Apollo is creating mythic proportions of its own.

*For some of those involved in the lunar landing decision, space activity appeared to be a 'surrogate' for [military] capacities, involving them in space-related work rather than for military developments.*

John Logsdon

The Decision To Go To The Moon

*I talk to people who say, "Gosh, John, all we gotta do is think back twenty-five years ago and we can go to Mars the same way." I say, "No, you can't. It was a unique set of circumstances that lined up all those dominoes."*

John Aaron

Apollo Flight Controller

*The opinions expressed are my own. They do not represent those of either the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or the United Space Alliance.*

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