Roger D. Launius, *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race*

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Looking at Roger D. Launius' new monograph *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race*, one might ask, why another book on the moon landing? After all, many publications on this topic have been published since this historic achievement, and the year 2019 alone—the 50th anniversary of the event—brought a flood of new titles. Nevertheless, this “short history” stands out because of its richness of perspectives, which the former NASA chief historian Launius presents in an attractive, concise, and easily readable form. He leads the reader through the history of the race to the moon, following not only American but also Soviet space endeavors from the beginnings in the early postwar period up to the completion of the Apollo program. While doing so, he masterly shifts the perspective between personal memories of the people involved in the space program and explanations of the political and social contexts that reveal the “big picture.”

The prologue focuses on personal stories of four outstanding individuals who made tremendous efforts to make spaceflight in the second half of the 20th century possible. While the American-Soviet rivalry, the so-called space race, is well known, Launius also reveals the complex relationships within the national space programs on both sides. He presents the story of rivalry and symbiosis between the German émigré Wernher von Braun and American engineer Robert R. Gilruth as the American counterpart to the “frenemy relationship” (p. 5) between Soviet rocket builders Sergei Korolev and Valentin Glushko. However, already the rather short prologue indicates some difficulty to do justice to the claim of placing American and Soviet space programs on equal footing, as the book cover promises. The description of the American space pioneers is more multifaceted than the Soviet story, which mostly summarizes the events.

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The first chapter entitled “Sputnik Winter” strikingly demonstrates Launius’ ability to shift the perspective smoothly from a personal narrative of the events to a deep analysis of their causes and effects. Through the eyes of the director of the American Vanguard program, Dr. John P. Hagen, it looks at a reception at the Soviet embassy in Washington, where the news about the launch of the Soviet satellite was announced. It continues with the hysterical reaction in the United States and identifies its roots in the nature of the Cold War competition. At the same time, Launius relativizes the widespread belief that the American public felt threatened by Sputnik and points out that the publicly articulated concerns were rather politically driven and resulted from the efforts to put pressure on President Eisenhower. These political interests coalesced with the scientific interest in the exploration of outer space, and together, they formed the basis for an unprecedented mobilization of resources in order to beat the Soviets in a moon race. In contrast to the detailed depiction of the American path to an extensive space program, Soviet motivations and decision-making processes are addressed rather briefly, but still, it becomes clear how important the commitment of Soviet chief designer Korolev was.

The second chapter helps to understand the focus of most of the efforts on moon landing by pointing out the fascination the moon has always exerted on people’s imaginations. It also draws attention to the generally less known “first race to the moon,” when both space rivals undertook steps toward robotic lunar exploration. Yet, the actual final point of the moon race became a manned lunar mission, and the preparations for it stand at the center of the following chapters. First, Launius describes the selection of space voyagers on both sides, the heroic status of astronauts and cosmonauts in their respective nations, their training, and the first human flights into space. Apart from many similarities, there were also significant differences resulting mainly from different public information procedures.

Then, the narrative shifts to the political context of the decision to go to the moon. While Launius analyzes in-depth the American decision against the background of the Cold War and discusses several explanatory approaches, he gives only brief treatment to the Soviet decision-making. Nevertheless, the short subsection on the Soviet space policy indicates a major weakness of the Soviet efforts to land on the moon—the rivalry between competing factions within the Soviet space program and the scattering of resources. The comparison between the Soviet and the American space program continues in the fifth chapter titled “The Game of One-Upmanship,” in which Launius explains in detail the different approaches of the two rivals to launch technology and describes their capabilities and space missions preceding the moon landing and paving the way for the lunar mission.

Up to this point, the book follows both space programs quite simultaneously, albeit with a stronger focus and a more detailed description of the American efforts. In contrast, the next two chapters are almost completely dedicated to the Apollo program with only a few references to the Soviet development, and those are all aimed at explaining the reasons for American success and Soviet failure (p. 169). Launius sheds light on various aspects of Apollo such as budget, management, tests, and realization of the moon landing missions. He also points out the enthusiastic reactions to the moon landing around the globe, including the Eastern bloc. However,

the reactions in the Soviet Union itself, which might be especially interesting for the reader at this point, are mentioned only very cursorily.

In the final chapter “Revelations,” Launius provides some instructive reflections that place the moon race in the larger context and illuminate the far-reaching consequences of the efforts to reach the moon for the rival nations as well as for humanity as a whole. It becomes clear that despite the fact that these efforts were driven by rivalry and national interest in gaining prestige rather than some concerns for the benefit of humanity, they undisputedly contributed to new understandings and perceptions that changed the course of the 20th century on a global scale.

Launius’ *Reaching for the Moon* does not present new sources and findings on the moon race. This could also be the reason why he does not include bibliographic references in the text, but instead gives a very useful, commented reading list at the end. The book draws mainly on existing knowledge—including already published research by Launius himself. Nevertheless, its strength lies in the fact that Launius skillfully integrates different aspects and perspectives and explains the complexities of the moon race, its roots, and outcomes in an exceptionally readable and easily understandable form, which makes the book a fascinating read not only for historians but also for a broad audience interested in space history.

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