



# 81 JOHN F. KENNEDY

1917 - 1963

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts. He was President of the United States from January 20, 1961, to November 22, 1963, when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. I shall omit most of the other biographical information concerning Kennedy, partly because such information is generally well known, but primarily because most of Kennedy's personal and political activities have little relevance to his presence on this list.

A thousand years from now, neither the Peace Corps, nor the Alliance for Progress, nor the Bay of Pigs is likely to be much remembered. Nor will it seem very important what Kennedy's policies were concerning taxes or civil rights legislation. John F. Kennedy has been placed on this list for one reason only: he was

the person who was primarily responsible for instituting the Apollo Space Program. Providing that the human race has not blown itself to smithereens in the intervening time, we can be fairly sure that even 5,000 years from now, our trip to the moon will still be regarded as a truly momentous event, one of the great landmarks in human history.

I will discuss the importance of the moon program a little further on. First, however, let me deal with the question of whether John F. Kennedy is really the man who deserves the most credit for that trip. Should we not instead credit Neil Armstrong or Edwin Aldrin, the first men who actually set foot on the moon? If we were ranking people on the basis of enduring fame, that might be the correct thing to do, for I rather suspect that Neil Armstrong is more likely to be remembered 5,000 years from now than John F. Kennedy. From the standpoint of influence, however, Armstrong and Aldrin were completely unimportant. If by some misfortune those two men had died two months prior to the launching of Apollo 11, there were a dozen well-trained and highly competent astronauts who could have taken their places.

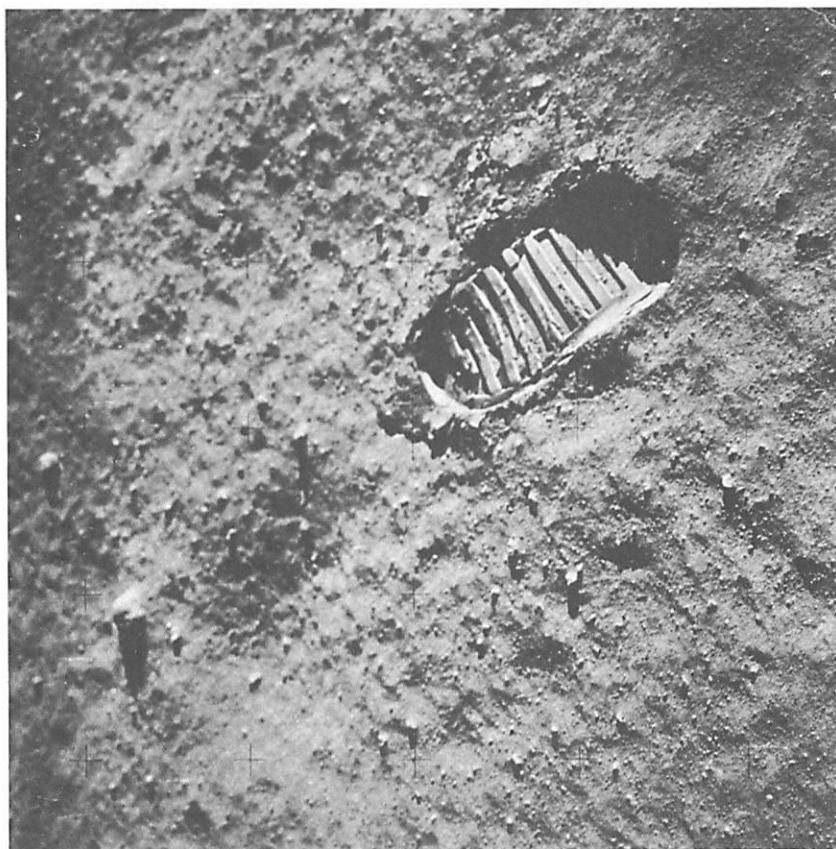
Should we then give the credit to Wernher von Braun, or to some other scientist or engineer who made an important contribution to the science of space travel? There is no doubt that Wernher von Braun did more than his share to advance space exploration (as did such important predecessors as Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Robert H. Goddard, and Hermann Oberth). Once, however, the political decision had been made to proceed with the Apollo project, no one scientist—nor any group of ten scientists—was crucial to its success. The crucial breakthrough in the trip to the moon was not a particular scientific advance, but rather the political decision to go ahead and spend 24 billion dollars on the project.

Well, what about the political decision then? Would not that decision have been made sooner or later, even without John F. Kennedy? I strongly suspect—although, of course, there is no way of being absolutely certain—that eventually some govern-

ment would have decided to finance a manned voyage to the moon. Certainly, John F. Kennedy did not force through the Apollo program over the objections of the public.

On the other hand, neither was there any great public pressure in favor of such a grandiose project. If in 1959 or 1960, the United States Congress had passed legislation setting up the Apollo program and appropriating the funds for it, and if the bills had then been vetoed by President Eisenhower, *then* it

*On July 20, 1969, the Apollo 11 astronauts left this footprint on the moon, fulfilling Kennedy's pledge of May 1961 to land a manned space-craft on the moon "before this decade is out."*



might be said that Kennedy was merely going along with the tide of public opinion. The actual facts, however, are quite different: many Americans wanted some sort of space program, but there was no great public clamor for a really large program. Indeed, even after the success of Apollo 11, there was considerable public argument over whether the project had been worth the expense. Since 1969, of course, the NASA budget has fallen drastically.

It is plain therefore that it was John F. Kennedy's leadership which was actually responsible for getting the Apollo project started. It was he who in May 1961 committed the United States to landing a manned spacecraft on the moon, "before this decade is out." It was he who obtained the appropriations from Congress, and it was under him that the program was set up. One may be convinced that a moon program would have been established sooner or later anyway (which is not completely certain); nevertheless, Kennedy is the person who actually did it.

Some people, of course, still feel that the Apollo project was just a gigantic boondoggle and not really important. So far, there has been little move to make the anniversary of July 20, 1969 (the date of the actual landing on the moon), a national holiday. On the other hand, we might remember that although Columbus Day was not celebrated in the sixteenth century, it is celebrated today as the dawn of a new age.

Even if the Apollo project is never followed up, it will be forever remembered as one of the greatest achievements of the human race. I suspect, however, that the Apollo program eventually will be followed up, and that space travel will play a far greater role in the future than it has in the past. If so, our descendants will feel that the voyage of Apollo 11, like Columbus's voyage across the Atlantic, was the start of an entire new era in human history.