



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 27, 2012

Armstrong Symbolized American Confidence, Achievement

Neil Armstrong was a quiet hero in an age of antiheroes. In an era that made cult heroes of amoral spies and cops who broke the rules, of James Bond and “Dirty Harry” Callahan, Neil Armstrong was the engineer who peacefully conquered a remote outpost of “the Last Frontier.” At a time when the country was torn over race relations and bitterly divided over a war in Southeast Asia, Armstrong planted the American flag on the moon and left a marker there proclaiming we had “come in peace for all mankind.” Americans were proud again, rejoicing in a peaceful triumph of science and the human spirit, one that did not require winning a war or bombing a third world nation “back to the stone age,” as General Curtis Lemay had recommended as the way to peace in Vietnam. Patriotism was back in fashion, if only for a little while, before our attention was turned back to our wars, campus riots, and the “high crimes and misdemeanors” that became the Watergate scandal.



The famous moonwalk in the summer of 1969 was not, of course, the singular accomplishment of Armstrong, who died August 25 at 82. His “one small step for man” was soon followed by the footsteps of Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, who joined Armstrong on the moon’s surface. A third astronaut, Michael Collins, continued to orbit in the mother ship that brought the Eagle within landing distance. And there were all those scientists and engineers at Mission Control in Houston, who could breathe again when they heard, “The Eagle has landed.” They were all part of an astronaut program that had been in place for more than a decade, under the aegis of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and backed with several billion dollars. Previous missions had brought men near to the moon, but not on it. Armstrong’s “giant leap for mankind” also represented the apex of American power, on earth and beyond.

Some might argue that height of our power came a little more than two decades later, when the breakup of the Soviet Union left America as the world’s “lone superpower,” the “indispensable nation,” as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright would say in the decade of the Nineties. But the Soviet’s downfall was their failure. The moon landing was our triumph. And it came at a dizzying pace, a mere eight years after our cause for celebration had been a short, sub-orbital flight by Alan Shepard, the first American in space. The following year John Glenn achieved hero status as the first American to orbit the earth. But in both of those achievements we were still behind, if only by a few months, of the Soviet Union. We would have to beat them to the moon, for reasons of both national security and national pride.



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It was President Kennedy who, less than three weeks after Shepard's 15-minute ride in space, declared the goal of landing a man on the moon and bringing him safely back by the end of the decade. It was a bold commitment, one columnist George Will later compared to Babe Ruth's famous "called shot" home run at Chicago's Wrigley Field in the 1932 World Series. (Though it remains in dispute, Ruth allegedly pointed to the center field bleachers a moment or so before hitting the ball there. History can neither confirm the "call" nor tell us if an irate Cubs fan threw the ball back.) It was, of course, even more remarkable. Ruth's shot took a few seconds on a flight of a few hundred feet. Kennedy's commitment covered eight years and 480,000 miles, roundtrip. No one imagined at the time that the president who set that ambitious goal would not live long enough to see its fulfillment at the end of the decade. Nor could anyone have foreseen that fewer than 48 hours before the moon landing, another Kennedy would splash down in the waters off Chappaquiddick. It was an amazing weekend.

A self-described "[nerdy engineer](#)" Armstrong was, in the words of a statement released by his family August 25, "a reluctant American hero who always believed he was just doing his job." While the astronaut was reticent about his celebrity status, the press and public were not. While he explored the surface of the moon, reporters surrounded his home in Wapakoneta, a small town in southwestern Ohio. Souvenir hunters pulled tufts of grass from his front lawn. With Aldrin and Collins, he received a hero's welcome reminiscent of the adulation poured on Charles Lindbergh after the "Lone Eagle" made the first solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927. The trio appeared in parades in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. But following a world tour of 20 nations, they quietly faded into history, while others took their place. A total of 12 Americans walked on the moon before the lunar mission was abandoned in 1972. But Armstrong will always be remembered as the first.

"When he and his fellow crew members lifted off aboard Apollo 11 in 1969, they carried with them the aspirations of an entire nation," President Obama said August 25, praising Armstrong as one of the nation's great heroes. "They set out to show the world that the American spirit can see beyond what seems unimaginable — that with enough drive and ingenuity, anything is possible."

Yet in a rare venture into public controversy, Armstrong voiced his concerns two years ago with the president's policy of turning attention away from a return to the moon and encouraging private enterprise in space exploration. Perhaps that policy is recognition that, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, not everything is possible, even to the richest nation on earth. Armstrong's flight came at a time when America barely begun to feel the budgetary strain of a "guns and butter" policy that called for expanded entitlements at home and maintaining a vast network of military bases abroad. America's space program began in the 1950's, long before America had gone from being the world's largest creditor to the world's biggest debtor nation. It was a time when Lyndon Johnson, then the majority leader in the U.S. Senate, would confidently [assert](#) that "what control of outer space means renders irrelevant the bookkeeping concerns of fiscal officers." It thrived in a decade when President Kennedy declared, in his [Inaugural Address](#), that we would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge — and more."

Promises like that are expensive. The previously unimaginable things impeding our vision today include trillion-dollar annual deficits and a national debt of close to \$16 trillion. If those numbers tell us anything, it should be that we may no longer dismiss as irrelevant the "bookkeeping concerns of fiscal officers" nor "pay any price" for the privilege of policing the world.

We are no longer exploring outer space as much as NASA and its astronauts would like, but we are still



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in the long painful process of discovering there are, after all, limits to our vast and awesome powers as a nation. That may be an even more important discovery than any Neil Armstrong and his fellow astronauts made on their trip to the moon.



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