

## The first step

*Moon was just the first stop on a long journey*

July 19, 2019

Neil Armstrong's "one small step for (a) man" has turned out to be "one giant leap for mankind." Where we will wind up because of it, we can only imagine.

At 10:56 p.m. Eastern Standard Time July 20, 1969, Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon. Fellow Apollo 11 astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin would be the second. Michael Collins, the third member of the crew, remained in lunar orbit — much as a parent stays at home while a child goes out on its first date.

Collins was long the forgotten man, but that has changed. He's 88 and returned to Cape Canaveral for a hero's celebration. Aldrin is 89 and canceled his appearance. Armstrong died in 2012 at age 82.

Maybe it was appropriate for Collins to be at The Cape by himself. He was alone, doing his duty, while the world was watching the other two. His unheralded and largely unappreciated job was just as important as theirs.

Collins said, "Apollo 11 was serious business. We, crew, felt the weight of the world on our shoulders. We knew that everybody would be looking at us, friend or foe."

The foe was especially interested.

In a last-ditch attempt to beat America to the moon, the Soviet Union launched Luna 15 three days before Apollo 11 took off.

The Russians knew they couldn't execute a manned mission, so they sent an unmanned vehicle to land and collect lunar soil before returning to Earth. This was designed to obscure the glow of any success America might achieve. A previous Soviet attempt along those lines had failed because the rocket and its payload failed to achieve Earth orbit.

The Soviets never told anyone what they were doing in space until after they knew it would succeed, but Apollo 11 forced their hands. They announced that Luna 15 was on the way and would get there ahead of the Americans.

Luna 15 did beat Apollo 11 to the moon, but got stuck in lunar orbit. The Americans went past it and landed. Two hours before Apollo 11 lifted off to come home, the Russians tried to land Luna 15, but it crashed. Even if it had accomplished its mission, it would have returned to Earth at least two hours after Apollo 11 splashed down.

America still would have won the race to the moon.

Still, no race is over until the finish line is reached, and nobody knew that better than Collins. He said his worst fear was that if catastrophic circumstances had forced him to return to Earth without Armstrong and Aldrin, he would have been “a marked man.”

It would have been history’s longest ride home. He wouldn’t have been the loneliest man on Earth, but the loneliest man in the universe, with humankind’s most infamous case of survivor’s guilt.

Half a century later, moon orbiter Collins is remembered alongside moon walkers Armstrong and Aldrin as one of America’s greatest heroes.

At the time, not everyone cared. Many said money spent on the space program could have been better used to create jobs and feed poor people. The same argument is still being made.

Estimates from the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation are that between \$15 trillion and \$22 trillion has been spent on anti-poverty programs, including welfare payments, since President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. Even so, the number of Americans living below the poverty line has grown from 24.3 million in 1969 to 39.7 million in 2017. Johnson’s goal was to overcome the causes of poverty, but that hasn’t happened.

Since its creation in 1958, NASA has spent \$1.32 trillion. Directly, or indirectly in private sector businesses and industries, America’s space program has created countless jobs and led to advances in science, medicine and technology that might otherwise be unknown.

NASA keeps expanding human knowledge with manned and unmanned research missions and is working with the space agencies of other nations to achieve even greater results than any of them could accomplish alone.

If America ever stops looking outward toward what is possible and turns its attentions completely inward to problems that might never be resolved, THAT is when it will cease to be great.

To hear them talk, the latter seems to be the direction some of our wannabe leadership apparently favors. Given free rein, they quite possibly could turn America into another Venezuela.

America has always had its problems and shortcomings, as well as dissidence, dissatisfaction and detractors who try to convince anyone who will listen that claims of its greatness are overstated, but it continues to be successful and make progress.

Why haven’t we gone back to the moon? It’s simple: We’ve been there six times and done that, picked up a few souvenirs, taken pictures and come home.

The moon will make a fine staging area on the way to the rest of the universe, which is lying out there just waiting for us to come and be a part of it.