January 28, 2011 12:00 A.M.

The Sputnik Fallacy

False analogies can be costly.

Pres. Barack Obama made the "Sputnik moment" the organizing theme of his State of the Union address, and he chose wisely.

Not because the tiny Soviet satellite and the ensuing space race have any bearing on the challenges of today. They don't, except perhaps in how the Sputnik panic of the 1950s tracks with today's overwrought alarm over a rising China.

No, the Sputnik analogy is apt in what it says about Obama and his hubristic faith in the wisdom and powers of a technocratic elite. The Apollo program put a man on the moon, creating a shining moment of national pride. It also fed liberalism's disastrously simplistic view of how progress happens — spend a lot of federal money, put a lot of experts in a room, and wait for the wondrous results.

From Lyndon Johnson on, this has been a central element in liberalism. Obama believes in it deep in his bones. His contribution in the State of the Union was to plug this vision yet again, although decked out in red, white, and blue bunting and accompanied by the joyful cacophony of a John Philip Sousa march. The patriotic rhetorical trappings don't make it any less arrogant or foolish.

"If we can put a man on the moon, we can . . . " is one of the more tiresome tropes in American public life. What putting a man on the moon proved is that we can put a man on the moon. It was a feat of engineering. With time, resources, and expertise, it could be done. But it tells us as much about our ability to reform society, cure diseases, or manage markets as building the Golden Gate Bridge or the Hoover Dam did.

In the wake of the moon landing, liberalism failed to understand that society is not an enormous engineering project. As Walter McDougall documents in his Pulitzer Prize–winning The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age, one of the heroes of the Apollo project, NASA administrator James Webb, fed the misunderstanding. He thought the space program constituted a breakthrough in the management of large systems that could be widely replicated.

McDougall writes that "the James Webbs had, by their talent and energy, made command innovation look easy — and 'American.'" In a letter to LBJ, Webb told the president, "The space program lies in your first area of building the Great Society." And build it he did. "A new political symbolism had arisen," McDougall notes, "to discredit the old verities about limited government, local initiative, balanced budgets, and individualism."

LBJ himself remarked on the catalyzing effect of the space program. According to LBJ, people said, "'Well, if you do that for space and send a man to the moon, why can't we

do something for grandma with Medicare?' And so we passed the Medicare act, and we passed 40 other measures."

Most of this didn't end well. "It [had] become obvious in the 1960s and 1970s that 'planned invention for the future' through federal mobilization of technology and brainpower was failing everywhere from Vietnam to our inner cities," McDougall writes.

Andrew J. Coulson of the Cato Institute reminds us that even the signature federal initiative of the post-Sputnik era, the National Defense Education Act, failed to improve math and science scores. Once it had achieved its important and inspiring propaganda coup against the Soviets, the space program itself sputtered into a line item in the federal budget searching for a mission. NASA's follow-up act was the white elephant called the space shuttle.

This is the history President Obama has at his back as he promises the federal government will lead the way on innovation, pick winners and losers in the energy sector, and transform education. We have seen this future, and it doesn't work.

A new cliché about the Apollo program deserves to get currency: "If we can send a man to the moon . . . we can waste lots of money based on false analogies." It's a Sputnik moment, indeed.

— Rich Lowry is editor of National Review. He can be reached via e-mail: comments.lowry@nationalreview.com. © 2011 by King Features Syndicate.