



Moon Shot: The Inside Story of America's Race to the Moon

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Reviewed by ChatGPT and Joachim J. Kehr, Editor
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After 55 years of the first Moon landing and with my own knowledge of 35 years in the space business I felt compelled to read Alan Shepard's and Deke Slayton's accounts of their experience again. But rather than write a review myself, as an experiment I asked chatGPT to come up with an assessment of the book, being prepared to annotate where I would not agree.

For me the fascinating effect of reading the book again was the realization that the achievement of the Moon-landing was unbelievable hard starting at point zero, i.e., in a turbulent world after the second world war with "rudimentary" technical means (no high speed computers nor AI) but driven by political will, almost "bottomless" budgets, a firm goal and an optimistic belief in a better future.

To read the book as a historical document written by participating ear- and eye-witnesses is awesome, let's see what ChatGPT thinks.

"Moonshot: A Captivating Journey to the Stars"

(by ChatGPT, May 2024)

"Moonshot," co-authored by Alan Shepard and Deke Slayton, is a compelling narrative that takes readers on an exhilarating journey through the space race era, offering an intimate glimpse into the monumental Apollo missions. Shepard, the first American in space, and Slayton, one of the original NASA Mercury Seven astronauts, combine their firsthand experiences and deep insights to craft a captivating account of humanity's quest to reach the moon.

The book is more than just a retelling of historical events; it is a testament to the indomitable human spirit and the boundless ambition that drove a nation to achieve the seemingly impossible. Through vivid storytelling, Shepard and Slayton transport readers to the heart of the space program, where dedication, ingenuity, and courage were the currency of the day.

One of the most striking aspects of "Moonshot" is its emphasis on the human element of space exploration. The authors provide intimate portraits of the astronauts, revealing their fears, triumphs, and personal sacrifices along the way. From the nail-biting suspense of Shepard's historic flight aboard Freedom 7 to the awe-inspiring grandeur of the Apollo 11 moon landing, each chapter is imbued with a sense of wonder and reverence for the pioneers who dared to venture beyond the confines of Earth. Shepard and Slayton's prose is both engaging and accessible, making complex technical details comprehensible to readers of all backgrounds. Whether describing the intricate workings of a spacecraft or the breathtaking beauty of the lunar landscape, the authors have a knack for bringing their experiences to life on the page.

Moreover, "Moonshot" offers valuable insights into the political and cultural context of the space race, shedding light on the intense rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and the societal impact of NASA's ambitious endeavors. By weaving together historical facts and personal anecdotes, Shepard and Slayton provide a comprehensive overview of this transformative period in human history.

In conclusion, "Moonshot" is a must-read for anyone with an interest in space exploration or the history of science. With its gripping narrative, insightful commentary, and richly drawn characters, this book is sure to leave a lasting impression on readers long after they've turned the final page.

Whether you're a seasoned space enthusiast or a casual reader, prepare to be inspired by the remarkable achievements chronicled in this remarkable literary journey to the stars.

My Own Conclusion

I agree wholeheartedly with the chatGPT assessment, in fact chatGPT uses formulations I never would have come up with. However the text is missing a personal, enthusiastic touch, pointing out what the reviewer liked most and where he can relate to. The text sounds like somebody who has read the book told somebody else that he liked it and asked him write a commercial about it.

What I am missing is to learn about the likes (and dislikes) of the reviewer according to his personal experience and judgement.

For example, reading the book I liked little episodes like JPL Director Dr. William Pickering's shouting to the people at the Ground station in California "Why the hell don't you hear anything" – awaiting the delayed acquisition signal of Explorer-1 after its successful launch with Wernher von Braun's Juno-1 (Jupiter-C) rocket, only to boom out in an excited voice "They hear her, Wernher! They hear her!" - because these are the decisive moments when the fate of a whole project is decided. Or Gus Grissom's hatch problem during his Mercury-Redstone flight ("this Damn thing just blew"), or his improvised urine collector ("the first astronaut to fly with women's lingerie"), ... which need to be conserved as lessons learned along the way, otherwise they definitely would get lost.

The book fairly recounts the "moon race" from the very beginning from Alan Shepard's and Deke Slayton's very personal point of view. The authors walk you from Mercury, Gemini and all the seventeen Apollo flights stunning achievements, setbacks, failures, emergencies and disasters and do not neglect the role of Wernher von Braun, James E. Webb, George Low, Lyndon B. Johnson nor fail to acknowledge the "firsts" and achievements of the Russians led by Sergei Korolev, father of the Soviet spaceflight program, as well as their failures and disasters. The book also documents the military roots of the astronaut corps and that without Kennedy's bolt announcement in 1961 at the Rice University human spaceflight might have taken an entirely different turn.

Reading the book carefully it becomes clear that whenever something went awfully wrong often it was due to political pressure on tight schedules against good technical judgement – however technical ingenuity "saved the day", like Jim Lovell's, Jack Swigart's and Fred Haise's fateful Apollo 13 flight which turned out after all to be a "successful failure", as Lovell declared.

The book impressively shows the high risk and associated feelings each astronaut took with every flight, despite the tremendous efforts of scientists, engineers and technicians to make the first steps into space safe and error-free. Only trained test- and fighter pilots had the stamina to take it and to rely on their ability to cope with the unforeseeable – and never give in.

A memorable insight came from Lovell's musing during the Apollo 8 flight on its way to the first circumnavigation of the Moon "about being a lonely traveler from another planet and what would he think about Earth at this altitude?" –which inspired Bill Anderson to marvel and stare at the "distant, fragile world with an onion-skin-thin layer of atmosphere, which gave life to teeming billions on that resplendent, terribly isolated globe".

However, over 50 years after this recognition – confirmed by so many astronauts who flew after the Apollo 8 mission – one might wonder why our resplendent planet is still abused and depleted.

The authors conclude with the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP) and Deke Slayton's return to flight status, finally exchanging flags with his Russian cosmonaut flight partners in their Soyuz capsule after flawless docking of the two spacecraft. This highly charged political program opened the door for a long peaceful cooperation in space with Russia culminating in the joint construction and operation of the "International Space Station" (ISS).

Deke Slayton, while looking down at Wisconsin, his home-state during his return flight had another insight: although he knew this state better than any other state, he could not recognize where it would

end and the neighbor state would begin – what he saw was only an early morning countryside, without any boundaries.

Deke Slayton, Tom Stafford, and Vance Brand and the two Soviet cosmonauts Alexei Leonov and Valeri Kubasov had demonstrated that all boundaries on Earth or in space were artificial, invisible and meaningless 140 miles high, and that one flight could point the way to a safe and sane future.

What I am also missing in the chatGPT review is the highlighting of the irritated, charged political atmosphere and pressure in which the critical decisions for a Moon landing took place. This is portrayed very impressively and stirringly by the authors.

Moon Shot is a book you want to give to your 13-year old grandson to foster a new breed of astronauts who might be driven by Tesla cyber cars in slick space suits to the launch pad instead of racing Corvettes – or you read it yourself again to savor the past and wonder how all that was possible in such a short time compared to today’s decision processes in an ever more growing complex world.

You can read the book as a fast-forward documentation beginning with the creation of NASA in July 1958 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower up to the actual setting foot on the Moon in 1969, or as a twisted technical “mystery novel” by knowing the happy end from the beginning. And every time you reread it, it sweeps you away.

After 55 years of the first footstep on the Moon the book is very well suited to become a classic of human endeavor and exploration.

So, in 2024, with the *Artemis* Program and the new Boeing *Starliner* on its way we start all over again! This time to settle the Moon. And the feelings of the astronauts for the first flight with the new system will be the same as that of Alan Shepard during his historical flight. A United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket with Boeing’s CST-100 *Starliner* spacecraft aboard is seen on the launch pad illuminated by spotlights at Space Launch Complex 41 in May 2024. [1]



If you feel like it, you should listen to the innocent [beeps of the Sputnik](#) – they started it all!

Refernce

[1] Space.com https://www.space.com/starliner-first-astronaut-launch-delay-may-17-replace-valve?utm_term=0CF369F1-E12C-4308-8F94-C338D06266C1&lrh=96de6d9f3d1353798c164d33a81f24e2226b111f15ffd60cd55dadde1fdc739b&utm_campaign=58E4DE65-C57F-4CD3-9A5A-609994E2C5A9&utm_medium=email&utm_content=4D82F510-2390-4853-857F-C24311B306FC&utm_source=SmartBrief

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