The Start of the Space Race

By NASA, U.S. State Department and USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.20.17
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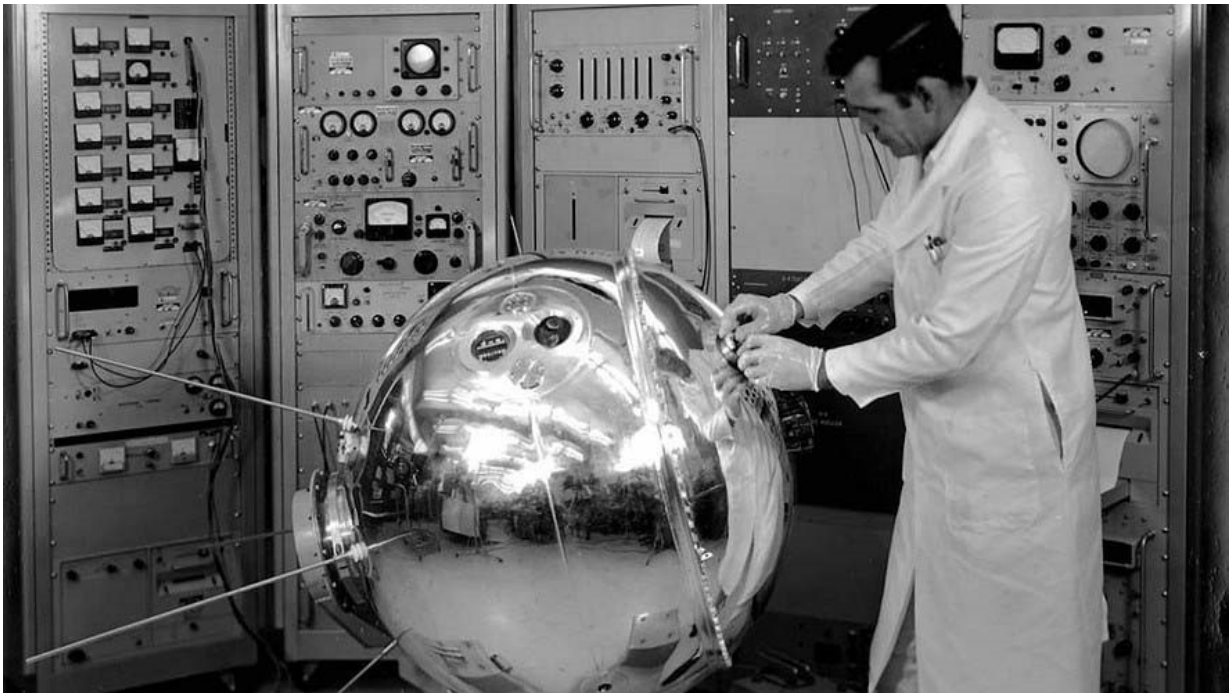

This is a photo of the Explorer XVII satellite. Weighing 405 pounds, this 35-inch pressurized stainless steel sphere measured the density, composition, pressure and temperature of Earth's atmosphere after its launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, on April 3, 1963. Photo: NASA

On October 4, 1957, Americans looking at the night sky may have noticed an object crossing above. They may have heard “beep, beep, beep” coming from a radio. An important event had happened in the Soviet Union, which was a giant country made up of Russia and several other countries. The Soviets had launched a satellite into orbit around the Earth. The satellite was named Sputnik. “Sputnik” is Russian for “traveling companion.” It sent beeping radio signals as it traveled around the globe.

Americans were not celebrating this big achievement. Sputnik had been launched using a missile that could travel a great distance. This terrified Americans. If the Soviets could launch a satellite into space, many thought they could launch nuclear missiles that could reach the United States.

Thousands rushed to stores to purchase bomb shelter kits. Congress created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). It also set aside money for science education.

During Cold War, Americans feared attacks

The United States was not getting along with the Soviet Union. This time was called the Cold War. There were no battles; it was mostly a war of threats. Still, many prepared for a Soviet attack with bomb shelters. At school, children had "duck and cover" drills and would hide under desks to prepare for a nuclear war.

The successful Sputnik launch shocked the United States. Americans had hoped that the United States would launch a satellite first. The Soviets' success fed fears that the U.S. military had generally fallen behind in developing new technology. As a result, the launch of Sputnik intensified the Cold War.

During the 1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union were working on new technology like missiles and satellites. Throughout the 1950s, the United States had tested several kinds of rockets and missiles. All of these tests ended in failure.

U.S. tries to catch up in technology

At 184 pounds, Sputnik was much heavier than anything the United States was developing at the time. Soon afterward, the Soviet Union launched two more satellites. One carried a dog into space. Together, these orbited the earth every 90 minutes. The Soviet Union tested a long-distance missile that same year. The United States feared that it was falling far behind in technology.

President Dwight Eisenhower poured money into the space program in an effort to catch up. Congress created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The United States suffered a severe setback in December of 1957. Its first satellite exploded on the launch pad. The explosion reminded the country how far behind the Soviet military it was.

The United States finally launched its first satellite on January 31, 1958. It was called the Explorer. Explorer was smaller than Sputnik. It went deeper into space, however. The Soviets responded with yet another launch. The space race continued.

President Kennedy aims for the moon

Sputnik had a big effect on the Cold War. The United States feared falling behind. It sped up its space and weapons programs. In the late 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev boasted about Soviet technological superiority and the weapons they were making. The United States worked to develop its own weapons to counter. In this way, the launch of Sputnik fueled both the space race and the arms race.

When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, the United Space fell further behind. The Soviets had already placed a dog in space. Now in Kennedy's first year, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to orbit the Earth.

Kennedy challenged America to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s. Congress responded enthusiastically. It set aside a lot of money for the effort. While Kennedy was president, Alan Shepard became the first American to enter space. Then John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth. In 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first human being to set foot on the moon. It was just in time to meet Kennedy's challenge.

Quiz

1 Based on the section "President Kennedy aims for the moon," which of the following statements is TRUE?

(A) The Soviet Union has always had more advanced technology than the U.S.

(B) The U.S. competed with the Soviet Union for the best space technology.

(C) President Kennedy was determined to destroy the Soviet Union.

(D) President Kennedy hoped to make peace with the Soviet Union.

2 Based on the article, why were nuclear weapons important during the Cold War?

(A) because it was a way for the Soviet Union and the U.S. to threaten each other

(B) because the Soviet Union and the U.S. used nuclear weapons frequently

(C) because nuclear weapons helped scientists make nuclear power plants

(D) because nuclear weapons were important for creating peace between the two countries

3 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

> *The satellite was named Sputnik. "Sputnik" is Russian for "traveling companion."*

Which phrase from the section helps you understand what a "satellite" is?

(A) the night sky

(B) important event

(C) giant country

(D) orbit around the Earth

4 Read the paragraph from the section "U.S. tries to catch up in technology."

> *President Dwight Eisenhower poured money into the space program in an effort to catch up. Congress created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).*

What does NASA refer to in the paragraph?

(A) the joint Soviet-U.S. space programs

(B) the international space program

(C) the Soviet space program

(D) the American space program