

Patrick Steffen

Professor Mary Pennington

English 327

13 November 2013

To the Moon: Kennedy's Motivations for a Nation

The early 1960's proved to be a challenging and exciting time in US history, but also tasked all Americans to rise to the occasion and contribute to the needs of the country. John F. Kennedy, then President of the United States, knew what it took to inspire Americans. He realized what was in the best interests for the nation as well as what would elevate America's military and scientific might. The Cold War with the Soviet Union sparked fear in all Americans as the threat of nuclear war was ominous and imminent. Additionally, the Soviets had just launched the first man into space. This catapulted President Kennedy into taking action; action which his address at Rice University convinced government members, Congress, and citizens to act and charge head on dealing with the various threats generated by the Soviet Union. In his speech, "We choose to go to the Moon," John F. Kennedy delivers an strategic message to the nation outlining reasons why the US should pick up such an endeavor at such troublesome times. However, besides winning the space race against the former Soviet Union, John F. Kennedy had other, multi-faceted motivations for presenting his speech before the nation and Congress for sending the United States to the Moon. President Kennedy's personal and political motivations for his "To the Moon" speech include the operation known as "Bay of Pigs," where Kennedy's presidential administration was tarnished due to failed mission in Cuba. Additionally, the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, which was on every US citizen's mind, and later, the Cuban missile crisis—both of which motivated Kennedy to give his "Moon" speech in order to

bind the nation together through technological and scientific advancement.

Why did we have to go to the moon? Kennedy had many possible motives, according to John Jordan of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, including the facts that “the Cold War was heating up, the Soviets were boasting about their technological achievements on earth and in space, and the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs had cut a deep gash into the optimism surrounding the new leadership” (209). Additionally, Kennedy approved of a CIA lead mission to overthrow Cuban dictator, Fidel Castro. The mission, code named “Bay of Pigs,” was a failure and one that marred President Kennedy’s resolve of the situation early in his office (Vandenbroucke 471-491). Lucien Vandenbroucke, of Brookings Institute, considers the Kennedy administration’s ‘finest hour’ to be the Cuban missile crisis, while its ‘worst hour’ is undeniably the Bay of Pigs (471). Therefore, it is apparent Kennedy’s presidency was in jeopardy from the very beginning due to the fact the mission Bay of Pigs was an abysmal failure so early in his presidency. Furthermore, it was imperative for Kennedy to find a method for fixing his administration’s faulty image. “To the Moon” was Kennedy’s answer, and it proved quite effective at redirecting bad press by placing focus on national advancement.

In order to redirect the shortcomings of the failed CIA mission, Bay of Pigs, and growing criticism from Congress and, ultimately, the citizens of the US, Kennedy ingeniously focused his efforts on the US space race against the Soviet Union. This was a natural political strategy for the President to take because it placed emphasis on science—the strengthening of the United States through achievement, rather than its military capability. This is interesting because before Kennedy entered office, he criticized the Eisenhower administration for its apparent lack of initiative in keeping up with the Soviet space effort and served as one of his campaign’s strongest cases against Eisenhower (Jordan 211). However, Kennedy, now President of the

United States, realized his political tactics against Eisenhower could backfire against him.

According to John Jordan:

Faced with an issue of his own making, he [President Kennedy] felt what has been called the 'two-edged' sword of political rhetoric, in which the freedom of expression on one day becomes the public record politicians must defend on the next. Now that it was he who occupied the Oval Office, instead of arguing about a lack of 'initiative, ingenuity and vitality,' Kennedy's task would be to endear the plan to the American people even if he could not forecast the possibility that the mission would succeed, what the astronauts would do if they got there, or what the program would ultimately cost (212-213).

Not only did Kennedy have to shift focus off his campaign's shortcomings in Cuba, but he had to give the "Moon" speech to deliver on the political initiative he presented to the American public before he became President, which was to challenge Americans to explore (Jordan 211).

The Cold War with the Soviet Union loomed in the minds of all Americans due to the fact nuclear war would undoubtedly spell certain doom for both nations and, in turn, spurred numerous political problems. Contributing to the political issues of the Cold War was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, in which Soviet and Cuban forces conspired to *and succeeded* in placing nuclear missiles in Cuba aimed solely for preemptively striking at the United States (Utz 1).

According to Curtis Utz, who specializes in maritime history, "In the fall of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union came as close as they ever would to global nuclear war" (1). Though the events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis happened after Kennedy's "Moon" speech at Rice University, the President had good information that Castro was plotting with the Soviets about placing missiles in Cuba some weeks before he presented it. Jordan writes, "Soviet encroachment weighed heavily on Kennedy's mind at the time of the speech. Two weeks prior to

delivering the Rice University address, he received 'hard evidence' that offensive missiles were being installed in Cuba. A month after the address, Kennedy became completely embroiled in the Cuban Missile Crisis" (228).

This action by the Soviet Union acting in conjunction with Cuba, propelled Kennedy to act to convince Americans that their edge in science, technology and national safety were in jeopardy. Therefore, Kennedy's push to go to the Moon and execute a successful mission would definitively cement the United States as a leader of science, technology, and a nation not to be trifled with. Essentially, the threat of nuclear weapons in Cuba is all Kennedy needed for presenting a speech at Rice; convincing America going to the Moon was an absolute must to solidify the United States as a technological leader in the world. This need for space supremacy is apparent from Kennedy's speech when he states:

Yet the vows of this Nation can only be fulfilled if we in this Nation are first, and, therefore, we intend to be first. In short, our leadership in science and industry, our hopes for peace and security, our obligations to ourselves as well as others, all require us to make this effort, to solve these mysteries, to solve them for the good of all men, and to become the world's leading space-faring nation (lines 22-23).

From this, it is evident President Kennedy wanted not only to establish the US as a technological leader, but also to redeem himself for past failures. Additionally, Kennedy states: "We have had our failures, but so have others, even if they do not admit them. And they may be less public. To be sure, we are behind, and will be behind for some time in manned flight. But we do not intend to stay behind, and in this decade, we shall make up and move ahead" (lines 40-41).

Kennedy considered the US second to none and unquestionably viewed his own administration in the same light. Kennedy's aim was to prevent the US from perceivably being

vulnerable to attack; therefore, going to the Moon would reestablish the US as a strong nation, militarily and technologically. Kennedy's "To the Moon" speech, while binding the US in achieving a common goal also served to take the focus off his administration's pitfalls in Cuba. A settlement between the Soviets and the United States was finally reached, which resulted from Kennedy's address to the world outlining Soviet and Cuban build up of nuclear weapons aimed at preemptively striking North America. Additionally, overwhelming Naval blockades forced the Soviet Union's hand in conceding to United States' demands for stopping further buildup of nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Kennedy's "To the Moon" speech served the US in many ways; to establish the nation militarily, scientifically, and economically as a world leader. Additionally, the "Moon" speech served as an avenue out of Kennedy's own personal and political deficiencies plaguing his administration. Through these actions and this speech, Kennedy effectively established himself as a leading advocate of space exploration and propelled the US into being a world leader in technology and science. Many Presidents before and after Kennedy have employed similarly subtle motives in speeches that on the surface appear to be singularly purposed. Before Kennedy, President Roosevelt used a speech to tout the Panama Canal in an effort to strengthen the US and protect it from foes approaching from South America. And after him, President Obama touted affordable healthcare and now has to deliver on it in much the same way that Kennedy pushed Eisenhower on space and then had to deliver once he held office. President Obama also pushed against the Bush administration in the same fashion as Kennedy did with Eisenhower. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, then presidential candidate Obama said, "I will invest in programs, including loan repayment, training grants, and improved provider reimbursement, to give young doctors incentives to enter primary care. I will also renew our commitment to

investing in biomedical research, which suffered a major lapse under the Bush administration”

(1). In this way, it is easy to see how presidential speeches can influence the nation and perhaps, even fix entire presidencies and perceptions thereof.

Jordan, John W. Kennedy's Romantic Moon and its Rhetorical Legacy for Space Exploration. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6.2 (2003) 209-231. Print.

Kennedy, John F. "We choose to go to the moon." Rice University, Houston, TX. 12 September 1962.

New England Journal of Medicine. "Perspective: Election 2008. Modern Health Care for all Americans." *New England Journal of Medicine*. Web. October 9, 2008.

Utz, Curtis A. "Cordon of Steel: The U.S. Navy and the Cuban Missile Crisis." Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1993. Print.

Vandenbroucke, Lucien S. Anatomy of a Failure: The Decision to Land at the Bay of Pigs. *Political Science Quarterly* 99, No. 3 (1984) 471-491. Print.