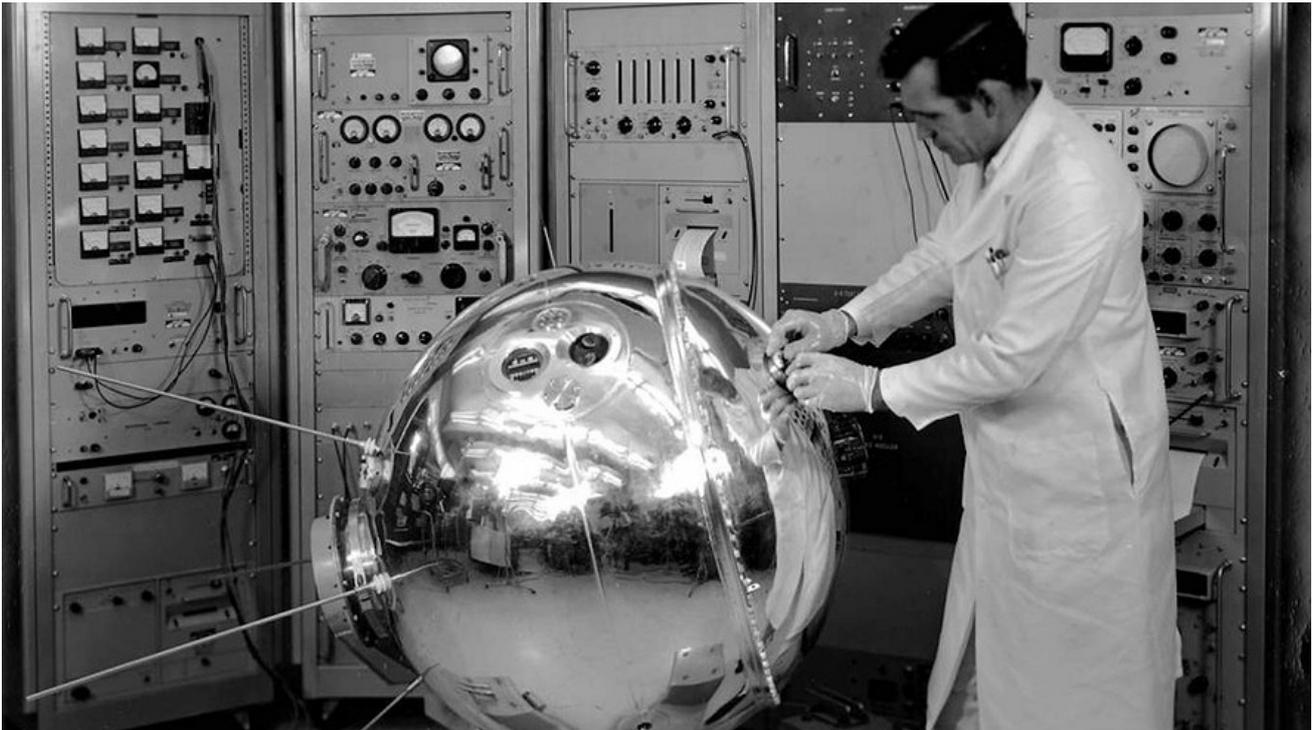


The Start of the Space Race

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

Word Count **495**



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

An important event happened in the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957. The Soviet Union was a giant country that included Russia and many other countries. On that day in 1957, the Soviets sent a satellite into space. The satellite was named Sputnik. "Sputnik" is Russian for "traveling friend." Sputnik traveled around the Earth. It sent beeping radio signals from space.

Americans were not celebrating, though. Sputnik had been launched using a missile that could travel very far. This terrified Americans. They thought it could also be used to carry a nuclear weapon. The Soviets showed they could send a satellite into space. Many believed they could also send nuclear missiles to the United States.

The United States was not getting along with the Soviet Union. This time was called the Cold War. There was no fighting. But the U.S. and the Soviet Union came close to war. The two countries were competing to be the most powerful country on the planet. Many Americans prepared for a Soviet attack with bomb shelters. At school, children had "duck and cover" drills to quickly hide under desks if a nuclear war happened.

Americans wanted to launch satellite first

Sputnik shocked the United States. Americans wanted to have a satellite in space first. The United States feared it had fallen behind in technology.

Soon after, the Soviet Union launched two more satellites. One carried a dog into space. Together, these circled the Earth. The Soviet Union tested a long-distance missile that same year.

The United States wanted to catch up. It poured money into the space program. Congress created a new space program called NASA.

The United States finally got its first satellite into space on January 31, 1958. It was called the Explorer. Explorer was smaller than Sputnik. It went deeper into space, though. The space race continued.

President sets goal to land on the moon

The United States still worried about falling behind. It sped up its space and weapons programs. In the late 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev bragged that Soviet technology was better than U.S. technology. He also bragged about the weapons the Soviets were making. The United States started making more of its own weapons. It wasn't just a space race anymore. Now, it was a race to build weapons, too.

John F. Kennedy became president in 1961. The United States fell farther behind. The Soviets had already sent a dog into space. Then in Kennedy's first year as president, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin went into space. He circled the Earth. He was the first person to do that.

Kennedy wanted America to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s. They made many steps while Kennedy was president. Alan Shepard became the first American in space. Then, John Glenn became the first American to circle the Earth.

Kennedy died in 1963. In 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first person on the moon. America had met Kennedy's goal.

Quiz

- 1 Which event in the article happened FIRST?
- (A) The Soviets put the first person in space.
 - (B) The Americans launched a satellite.
 - (C) The Soviets launched a satellite.
 - (D) The Americans put a person on the moon.
- 2 What is the MAIN reason why many Americans were afraid of the Soviets?
- (A) They believed that Soviet technology could hurt them.
 - (B) They believed that the Soviets would take over the U.S.
 - (C) They believed that the American government would help the Soviets.
 - (D) They believed that the Soviets were bad people.

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "President sets goal to land on the moon."

He circled the Earth.

Which word or phrase could replace "circled" WITHOUT changing its meaning?

- (A) went around
 - (B) spun
 - (C) moved
 - (D) went far away from
- 4 Read the sentence from the section "President sets goal to land on the moon."

Then in Kennedy's first year as president, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin went into space.

What is the BEST definition of "cosmonaut" based on the information in the sentence?

- (A) a pilot
- (B) a nuclear weapon
- (C) a Soviet person
- (D) an astronaut

Answer Key

- 1 Which event in the article happened FIRST?
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