The Space Race
1957–1975

The Space Race was a race to see whether the United States or the Soviet Union would be the first to explore outer space. The Soviet Union launched the first man-made satellite, Sputnik, on October 4, 1957. This worried American officials. They were surprised the Soviets were able to launch a satellite. The United States attempted to launch a satellite. After many failures, an American satellite, Explorer, was launched on February 1, 1958.

The most important goal of the Space Race was to be the first country to accomplish a successful, manned moon landing. Successful manned orbits were the first step toward this goal. The first space travelers were animals. In 1957 the Soviets were the first to do this. They launched a dog named Laika into space on the second Sputnik. The United States launched chimpanzees into space to test equipment and technology.

The Soviets won the race to launch a human into space. The first man in space was Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin. On April 12, 1961, he flew on the first Vostok. He traveled for one hundred eight minutes in space. The first American in space was Alan Shepard. On May 5, 1961, he flew the Freedom 7 into space. On February 20, 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit the earth.

The Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union became even more heated. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) led the United States efforts. NASA began the Apollo program. This program’s mission was to attain a successful manned landing on the moon. The Soviets also wanted to put a man on the moon. They did not achieve a manned landing, but they did launch unmanned probes that reached the moon.

The first man on the moon was an American. Traveling on Apollo 11, Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon on July 20, 1969. Armstrong’s first words on
the moon were, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” The other astronauts on the mission were Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. Aldrin followed Armstrong onto the moon’s surface; and Collins piloted the lunar module, which orbited the moon during the mission.

The Soviets claimed to have won the Space Race because they sent the first man into space. Americans claimed to have won the race because an American was the first person to step onto the moon. After the American moon landing, the Space Race slowed.

President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev wanted to demonstrate American-Soviet cooperation. As a result, the Apollo-Soyuz mission was launched in 1975. The Apollo was an American spacecraft, and the Soyuz was a Soviet spacecraft. The two ships linked in orbit, and American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts conducted experiments together.
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Discussion Questions:

1. What was the first satellite in space?

2. Who was the first man in space?

3. What program did the United States create to achieve a manned moon landing?

4. Who was the first man to walk on the moon?

5. What was the joint mission between the United States and the Soviet Union?