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The Decision to Go to the Moon (John Logsdon)

John Logsdon's book "The Decision to Go to the Moon: Project Apollo and the National Interest" is a thorough study of the process in which President Kennedy reached the decision to support America's lunar landing program during the 1960s. It examines many of the forces that influenced Kennedy's decision and then analyzes why Kennedy made certain conclusions based on American policy-making aspects. The main impetus for this book is to clarify how the decision was made and what major factors were considered by Kennedy before he made this decision. As Logsdon notes, other authors have suggested that President Kennedy made the decision based on minimal knowledge of the space program and that it was a hasty move on the part of the administration. Logsdon argues against this and asserts that in fact President Kennedy's decision had a thorough grounding in the technical issues required of space flight as well as clear analysis of the political implications that would be affected by the decision.

Logsdon breaks down his book into two parts, the first describes the factors influencing Kennedy's decision. These include a historical perspective and the origins of the US Space Policy before he was inaugurated. He also reviews some of Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's background with the US space policy. A major focus is on Johnson's strong advocacy for accelerating the US space program before the elections came around. Logsdon also reviews the technical background from the engineers and designers involved in preparing for space flight. This group is shown to have already been working on developing a plan for a lunar journey and all the steps involved. Several articles from prominent journals of that time are cited for their in-depth technical analysis of the technology, costs, and studies that need to be refined for a lunar excursion. Logsdon reviews several committees that were formed to help the Eisenhower administration determine what type of space program the US should embark on. The reason Logsdon

focuses on the results of these committees is to show the extensive research and thought that the science community had already done before the Kennedy stepped into office. It is clear from this plethora of studies that some foundation for the US space program was already put into motion.

Logsdon also provides some background into the Eisenhower administration and how they acted with “calm conservatism” towards the US space program. He cites some correspondence Eisenhower had with sub-committees to assess the military implications of the USSR space program. This administration was instrumental in setting-up NASA and keeping the space program a civilian program. Logsdon argues that it was due to this conservative viewpoint that kept NASA and generally the space program open to the public. Eisenhower also down played the Sputnik success because he thought it had little military implications. This background is useful in understanding what NASA’s status was like before Kennedy became president.

As part of understanding how NASA was viewed by different organizations, Logsdon explains some of the committees that were formed to analyze NASA’s management, as well as some of the disputes NASA faced with the Air Force. Logsdon presents some of the important changes of leadership in NASA that affected NASA’s efficacy. In particular he focuses on the new administrator James Webb as one of the main contributors to the impact of NASA in Congress.

The main decision that was made was Kennedy’s speech to the nation about landing a man on the moon and returning him safely before the decade was out. Logsdon builds up the main factors immediately affecting the decision came from strong political pressure. He argues that there was consistent support from Congress for a strong space program. Another factor was the flight of Yuri Gagarin which provided a strong impetus to make the space decisions quickly knowing that the Soviets were already far ahead with their space program. And the Bay of Pigs added to the pressure of improving the administration’s status in the eyes of the nation. These factors converged to allow the President to make the decision he thought would best improve this political status as well as the status of the nation. As Logsdon puts it “The politics of the moment had become linked with the dreams of centuries and the aspirations of the nation”.

Logsdon's book is a very thorough study of the events that affected Kennedy's decision to join the space race and pursue an invaluable goal. Many of Logsdon's sources are primary sources that come from direct interviews or from articles published at the time. At one point when Logsdon explains the dynamics between the Air Force and NASA, he quotes directly from James Webb which provides the perspective from NASA's side of how these two institutions felt about each other. Logsdon presents a clear picture of the political background of these decisions and shows that the decision seemed to be a logical and rational flow of knowledge that led Kennedy's decision. This interpretation expresses how the administration did an extremely thorough job of assessing the nation's overall status and that this critical decision was not made hastily, but instead with lots of research and studies that could clearly back-up his assertion.