The Apostles of Apollo

The Journey of the Bible to the Moon and the Untold Stories of American Astronauts

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Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Pen-L.com

The Apostles of Apollo: *The Journey Of The Bible To The Moon... And The Untold Stories Of American Astronauts*
Third Edition

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> "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."
>
> *– President John F. Kennedy*
> *Rice University, September 12, 1962*

Introduction

It began with a challenge when the Soviet Union foisted a 184-pound basketball-sized alloy sphere called Sputnik into an elliptical near-earth orbit on October 4, 1957. It ended when an astronaut by the name of Eugene Cernan took the last step by man on the surface of the moon. Cernan climbed the ladder and closed the hatch to the lunar module of Apollo 17. On December 14, 1972, the spacecraft launched for rendezvous with the command module silently approaching overhead. Not a single human being has been back since.

What so many thought was a prelude to interplanetary space exploration now reads like an epilogue. For several decades since, the world's gaze has been earthbound, fixed on the chaotic world earthlings inhabit and its many chronic problems. Generations have passed since American astronauts left the moon, so much time that some wonder why the country bothered to go there in the first place.

When President John Kennedy astonished the crowd and his own administration with his proclamation at Rice Stadium in 1962 to land a man on the moon, the public was immediately enthralled by the vision. What is not remembered as well is the veiled geopolitical explanation that immediately followed:

> . . . because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.

He did not mention the Soviet Union by name, nor did he mention the Cold War. He did, however, present the mission to the moon as a challenge to "win" with a deadline—which made it a race. This was the

second leg of the space race, and the prize was the alignment of the hearts and minds of people and governments around the world with the United States—hearts and minds that would be won by an astonishing display of courage and technological prowess. Were it not for this rivalry between competing political and economic systems, we would surely have stayed home.

But this was the Cold War and the high stakes space race was its high-minded and optimistic manifestation. A brutal proxy war in Southeast Asia was another. As the Vietnam War dragged on with no end in sight, the race to the moon became America's shining hope in the larger geopolitical contest. In the end, America won the race to the moon and abandoned the war in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union did exactly the opposite. After falling hopelessly behind in the race to the moon, the Soviets simply gave up on manned lunar missions, making the United States the first and last to voyage there.

But in the face of the U.S. "victory" of putting a man on the moon, the American public lost interest in heroic space exploration. As enamored as President Nixon had become with the moon missions, his administration was simply running out of money. The era of epic manned space exploration was over.

As a result, the Apollo missions now occupy a peculiar chapter in the human story. They remain an undiminished achievement towering above all others. To the United States in particular they are the subject of intense national pride and nostalgia. Yet plans for future missions were curiously abandoned and never revived.

This dichotomy is especially apparent in the post-mission lives of the Apollo astronauts themselves. Even today they are enthusiastically received when introduced at public events. People clamor to have pictures taken with them; their autographs are prized and costly. Meeting one of the men who walked on the moon is nothing less than a mystical experience for many because there have been only twelve. As of this writing, only nine are alive. Yet they move anonymously through our world, recognized by only a few when entering a restaurant or boarding an airplane.

This is not how it was for these men some forty years ago. Back then they were the center of the universe. Each had volunteered for a televised mission that was staggeringly dangerous, and in doing so were seen as the most romantic of warriors in the Cold War effort. By the time the Apollo missions reached fruition, the astronauts were seen to be doing something very different. They were altering and elevating human consciousness, and doing it in a way that commanded the attention of the

entire world. As they rocketed away, television cameras allowed their fellow earthlings an extended look at themselves and their home planet, a view that no other generation of humans had ever beheld.

As the first Apollo spacecraft entered lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, the world witnessed an "Earthrise" over a pale lunar horizon, a sight that electrified all of humanity. Within our field of view, against the infinite velvety darkness of space, was the composite setting of all human events both past and present. Looking at the world in its totality, we could see the place where the wheel was invented, the place where Christ lived and died, the place where Shakespeare dreamt of Hamlet, the place where the atom was first split, the place where every human being who had ever lived was born. It was a new and mind-bending sight, and it came at the dusk of a traumatic and mind-bending decade.

That moment in time took the world aback. Apollo was no longer the greatest vicarious adventure in history. Suddenly it had become a spiritual odyssey with a vast population on the planet participating in the experience by live television. Seven months later, on July 20, 1969, a monochrome camera captured the ghostly image of a man walking on the moon and the American flag being planted on the lunar surface. That a particular nation had won the space race was at that moment strangely irrelevant; what mattered to people around the world was that a human being was standing on the moon. In that timeless moment something larger than geopolitics was at work. What began as a race was ending as a worldwide communion.

We now know that this singular, magical spell would prove surprisingly ephemeral. Within a few months after the first mission to the lunar surface, a consensus began to build in the country that would change everything. The race to land a man on the moon, so the American public's thinking went, had been an exceedingly worthwhile adventure. But the race had been won. It was now time to do in space what we were not prepared to do in Vietnam—declare victory and go home.

However, there was another story to the Apollo missions, one that went largely unreported at the time. It had little to do with geopolitics, technological prowess, or national bragging rights. The story represented what the missions came to mean to many of the men who went into space and to the moon.

These explorers were not only men of science, many were also men of faith. Some would take a moment to pray within the strict confines of their spacecraft, while others brought articles of their belief aboard.

The story is as unique as it is unknown. Overlooked by many

historians is the spiritual dimension of the men America sent into space. They were a spiritually diverse cadre and their journeys had a profound effect on how they understood themselves, the world, and their place in the cosmos.

Expressing their faith in space, however, put many of the astronauts and the government agency they worked for in something of a dilemma. The result was an extraordinary drama that unfolded behind the scenes as America rushed headlong to the moon.

From the vast ranks of NASA personnel emerged a chaplain and scientist named John Maxwell Stout with a vision of an organization dedicated to prayerful support of the astronauts and the success of each mission. The organization he founded came to be known as the Apollo Prayer League, and in time he and its membership resolved to ensure that a Bible made landfall on the moon.

This idea did not come out of thin air. The event that caused many within NASA, and the American public in general, to question the true essence of the lunar missions was the fire that took the lives of Gus Grissom, Ed White II, and Roger Chaffee on January 27, 1967, while docked on a launch pad at Cape Kennedy. The Apollo 1 tragedy was a defining moment, not only for the overall Apollo project management, but for the astronauts who would travel to the moon in their wake, and for the American public who underwrote the project.

The deaths of these three astronauts marked the moment that the American people would question the entire purpose of the space program. Up until that point, the price had been paid only in terms of monetary treasure. But at 6:31 p.m. on January 27 on launch pad 34, it was paid in the sacrifice of precious blood.

Before his tragic death, Ed White had said he planned to take a Bible to the moon. The fire that took the young astronaut's life had a profound effect on Reverend Stout. From that moment, one thing became clear to the reverend: we were not leaving earth merely to return with a cargo of knowledge. As mankind reached into the heavens they would be sure to take something with them—something that spoke of the eternal bond between mankind and its Creator. Although Stout had planned to resign his position in the Apollo program at that time, he resolved to stay on and see Ed White's dream realized.

The efforts of the Apollo Prayer League culminated in dramatic fashion four years later when, on February 5, 1971, the spindly legs of Apollo 14 lunar module *Antares* touched down on the powdery surface of the moon carrying the first lunar Bible. By the time the Apollo pro-gram ended in 1972, the Apollo Prayer League had grown to over 50,000

members in many foreign countries and remote outposts around the world.

From the retrospective of several decades, it is clear that the deaths of Grissom, White, and Chaffee changed everything, not only NASA protocols and procedures, but the Apollo spacecraft itself. More importantly, the tragedy caused everyone—from congressmen, to NASA flight technicians and contractors, to everyday American citizens—to ponder why we were reaching to the heavens in the first place. Were we going to the moon just to learn what it was made of? Were we going there to plant the stars and stripes on its surface before the Soviets planted the hammer and sickle? Or were we traveling there for altogether different reasons—reasons that, as one astronaut pointed out, nourished the human spirit.

Today Apollo remains as the pinnacle of American space exploration and a testament to the human spirit at a time when the nation was badly in need of hope. America needed heroes and Apollo provided them. The unbridled success of Apollo brought the Russians to their knees and Americans to their feet.

But the spiritual legacy of faith began well before the Apollo program. It began even before President Kennedy's bold proclamation in 1962. The call for the nation's first space heroes came from an unassuming infant space organization that possessed no organized plan, no cohesive infrastructure, and no viable technological platform from which to launch such an audacious endeavor.

It began in 1959 with seven good men.

> "In the glory years of space, what the country kept forgetting was that we were people. Each of us was, in fact, four people: adventurer, social lion, would-be business tycoon, and political object. The one thing we were not was heroes."
>
> *— Walter Cunningham, Lunar Module Pilot, Apollo 7*
> *The All American Boys*

1
The "Original 7"

There was no doubt that Alan Shepard was unhappy.

"I didn't sign up to be a [expletive] specimen or test subject!"

Shepard's voice reverberated throughout the halls of the astronaut offices in Hangar S at Cape Canaveral, Florida. Shepard didn't mind the cramped working conditions in the astronaut living quarters. He didn't mind the long hours or the cafeteria food. What he did mind were the *chimpanzees.*

NASA solicited military test pilots to become America's first astronauts because test pilots were trained to think quickly in dangerous situations. What they acquired in the first round of the astronaut selections were seven such pilots, along with six feisty chimps. On April 7, 1959, out of nearly 5,000 applicants, the space agency announced the names of the "Original 7"—America's first Mercury astronauts. Alan Shepard was one. Others were Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Walter Schirra and Deke Slayton. The seventh man was Gus Grissom.

As a member of the first group of astronauts, Shepard became an overnight icon, and having monkeys throw food at him as he passed by their cages was not his idea of proper respect for a new American space hero. The monkeys didn't like the quarters any better than Shepard did, and the encounters escalated into something akin to a turf war. A chimpanzee named Ham was especially adept at hitting his mark with a discarded apple core—or fecal matter if his cage hadn't been cleaned recently.

For two years NASA had been training chimps and monkeys as part

of their test pilot program. The plan was to launch “monkeynauts” in the early Redstone rockets before strapping a human in the seat. The chimps were temporarily housed adjacent to the astronaut quarters in a two-story cinderblock building known as Hangar S, subjecting the astronauts to raucous howling and screeching each time they walked down the hall. The astronaut crew quarters were smelly, military, uncomfortable, and too close to the chimpanzee colony to suit Shepard. The chimps’ reprehensible behavior finally took its toll on his nerves, and he demanded that the astronauts be moved to another location. NASA reluctantly obliged.

The seven astronauts were given permission to stay in nearby Cocoa Beach at the Starlight Inn. The motel was run by a man named Henri Landwirth, a Holocaust survivor who came to America looking for a fresh start. The Starlight Inn proved to be a story all its own. The foul odors and screaming chimps were replaced with happy times and a string of attractive women. Months later when new management assumed control of the Starlight, Landwirth moved down the beach to manage a new Holiday Inn and contacted NASA to ask if the astronauts could switch to his new motel. A NASA representative called the next day to say they would accept the offer, but only if the astronauts could be guaranteed a room whenever they were in town. Landwirth agreed and even gave them a ridiculously reduced rate of $8 a night. Coincidentally, on the same day the new Holiday Inn opened, the Starlight burst into flames and burned to the ground.

The astronauts had expected to train hard for space, but the storm of media as red-white-and-blue heroes, fighting for American supremacy in the new frontier of space. The press descended upon the astronauts and to set up an arrangement so that the astronauts wouldn’t be “pecked to death by ducks” by offering exclusive coverage to the highest media bidder.

Life magazine, a widely-read direct connection to the heartland of America, was the high bidder, offering to buy the astronauts’ exclusive stories for a half-million dollars spread over three years, at the time a tidy sum even when split seven ways. The agreement was inked on August 5, 1959, and the following September issue of *Life* featured an 18-page cover story lionizing the Mercury Seven. The astronauts were immediately thrust into the public spotlight, their images continuously embellishing the covers of *Life* magazine. The press followed them everywhere from local restaurants to the sidewalks of their homes.

Together, they were about to soar irretrievably away from their military peers into their own exclusive seven-man fraternity—and a whole new brand of Cold War celebrity.

NASA groomed the astronauts, told them to wear socks that covered their legs up to the knee so as not to show their hairy legs when they were seated. They learned to stand with their hands in their pockets, thumbs pointed to the rear like fighter jocks. Their attaché cases were to be carried low at their sides, never hugged to the chest.

Public Affairs Officer Paul Haney oversaw public relations at the Manned Spacecraft Center and understood all too well that the basic nature of a jet jockey was not necessarily one of discretion. At the first scheduled press conference in Washington, D.C., Haney cautioned the seven about the magnitude of the press coverage and the need for diplomacy. But when a reporter asked John Glenn what it was that surprised him most about his indoctrination into the space program, he responded, "They checked orifices I didn't even know I had!" Such candid expressions were a shade of things to come for Haney.

But even as the seven settled into the program, history was unfolding on the other side of the globe. The Soviet Union had been operating in stealth mode and was rapidly gaining ground in the space race.

Friday, October 4, 1957, is a date not well remembered by most Americans. Newspapers on that day announced that the Milwaukee Braves trounced the New York Yankees 13–5 in the second game of the World Series, the new 1958 Chevrolet Bel-Airs debuted at $2,195, and Sears advertised Jamboree underwear on sale for a penny. *Leave it to Beaver* was premiering on American televisions. But on this otherwise ordinary October day, an event occurred that would change the course of history: Russia made a flanking attack in the new and uncharted frontier of space.

The launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, put into orbit a visible, blinking reminder of the Soviet Union's domination of space. Chirping in the key of A-flat from outer space, which the press called "deep beep-beep," Sputnik zoomed over America's horizon. The chirp lasted three-tenths of a second, followed by a three-tenths-of-a-second pause, repeated over and over again until it passed out of hearing range of the United States—a recurrent painful reminder that the Soviets had taken the lead. The chirp, emitted by a one-watt battery-operated transmitter, could be easily detected from a short-wave radio.

Not only could you hear Sputnik, you could see it with the naked eye.

The satellite was silver in color, about the size of a beach ball, and weighed a mere 184 pounds. Yet for all its simplicity, small size, and inability to more than orbit the earth and transmit meaningless radio blips, the impact of Sputnik on the United States was enormous and unprecedented. It was a stunning technical achievement that caught Americans off-guard. In a single weekend, Americans were wrenched out of a mood of social comfort and postwar lethargy.

One month later, the Soviets struck again with Sputnik 2, promptly renamed "Muttnik" by the U.S. press in reference to its canine passenger, a mongrel dog named Laika. Many feared that Russia might already have an operational intercontinental ballistic missile. If the Russians could thrust a dog into orbit, they could certainly do the same with a nuclear warhead. Next on the Russians' space timetable, U.S. officials speculated, would be a Soviet rocket landing on the moon.

"The United States," said U.S. Admiral Felix Stump, "simply cannot afford to *lose* any more*."*

The advent of Sputnik set teeth to grinding in Washington and captured public imagination throughout the world. Though no one knew at the time, it ushered in another player who would become a key figure behind the scenes of the United States' race into space. That was Professor John Maxwell Stout, a young Texan who was in the right place at the right time—the Brazilian mountains of Minas Gerais in October 1957.

At the time, John and his wife, Helen, held teaching positions at the University of Lavras in Brazil. Childhood sweethearts, they had walked away from undergraduate studies at Texas A&M and gotten married as soon as they learned John would be shipping out for service in World War II. John's first taste of missionary work came while serving as an executive officer in an artillery battalion on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. It was there that he saw the unit's chaplain fall wounded. Asked to fill in for the chaplain until a replacement came, he willingly accepted. His conservative Baptist upbringing in the rural town of Handley, Texas, afforded him a good footing for the call. The experience in Hokkaido would have a marked affect on his life.

When a serious war injury while handling a Japanese explosive device sent him home with a dismal prognosis of only ten years of active life, Stout was offered retirement as a full colonel if he would serve only

three more years of his ten remaining. But Stout declined. "If I only have ten years to live," he said, "I would rather spend it in service to God."

He and Helen returned to the U.S. to complete their degrees at Texas A&M, where John earned a Bachelor Degree in Petroleum Engineering and a Masters in Chemical Engineering. They then shipped out together again, this time for a missionary life of academia in the jungles of South America. John accepted a position at the University of Lavras in Brazil where he chaired the Analytical Chemistry and Engineering Design Department and eventually earned a Doctorate in Informologia (information communication) at the University of Pelotas.

John's military service left him with a passion for humanitarian work, and when a yellow fever epidemic broke out at a nearby mission, he and Helen stepped in to help. Their missionary outreach expanded and before long they were operating four primary schools, a hospital, a clinic, three churches, and an Indian orphanage.

Although his war injury left him with an intermittent enduring pain in his leg, he was determined to defy the prognosis. Seeing the desperation around him, he began forays into the great forest of Brazil to provide humanitarian aid to the indigenous tribes. The experience intensified his long-held feeling that he had been called by God to be a minister. So during their first furlough home to Texas, he and Helen completed seminary work at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and in 1957 John became an ordained minister. It was an interesting choice. As both a professor and minister, he now had one foot firmly set in scientific academia and the other firmly set as a man of faith.

During this furlough, he and Helen stopped at a restaurant in Austin where a chance meeting with George Reedy, public affairs manager for then-Senator Lyndon Johnson, led to an introduction to the senator and his wife at a local church service. Johnson's duties at the time included chairmanship of the Senate Space Committee, and the dialog between the two quickly turned to a discussion of Brazil's ambitious space program and its unique capability for satellite observation, a subject John was intensely interested in.

"Let me put you in touch with the American Society of Professional Photographers," Johnson offered. "They're going to cover the tracking of satellites."

The purpose of the photograph society was to establish surveillance for potential Russian space activity, and Senator Johnson made arrangements for John to receive their orbital mechanics data for use in

tracking objects in space. Armed with his study of celestial mechanics in high school, John would then be able to convert the agency’s coordinates to his own azimuth direction in the remote mountains of central Brazil and determine where a satellite would be passing over his missionary location. John and Helen returned to Brazil where John agreed to include a celestial mechanics class in his teaching plan.

And so, in October 1957, unaware of the impending Russian Sputnik launch, John erected a tripod in the jungle near his home and mounted a homemade camera on it for use by his celestial mechanics students at the University of Lavras in photographing Venus. In order to photograph moving objects, he devised a series of rotating wooden wheels that would move the film past an Angus lens to automatically track a meteor or satellite through an arc in the sky for roughly five minutes. It was a technique he had learned in high school known as “smear” photography. Searching around for something to power the wooden wheels, he connected the apparatus to an old Westclox alarm clock that would rotate the entire mechanism at an adjustable speed.

To complete the bizarre device, a friend of John’s from Columbia loaned him a 30” telescope with a finely ground parabolic lens which he mounted on the side of the camera. The resulting contraption cost less than $10 and had all the characteristics of a fifth grade science experiment. In truth, it was a structure of sheer genius.

Using the azimuth conversion and coordinates provided by the U.S. photographic society, John and his students improvised several makeshift “satellite predictors” made of cardboard and celluloid. The predictors proved remarkably accurate in class exercises for determining when and where a satellite would appear.

“They beat us!” one of his students rushed over to tell him that fall afternoon. “The Russians beat us!”

With word of the Russian launch of Sputnik, John hurried through the brush to the tripod and wound the clock connected to the camera. The satellite predictor told Stout that Sputnik’s orbit would carry it overhead from the northern horizon of Mato Grasso. It was then that something fortuitous happened. As if to reserve his place in history, the city of Lavras had a complete blackout that night.

And so it was that on the night of October 4, 1957, John Stout stood alone next to his tripod in utter blackness in the dense forest of Brazil, waiting for the tiny blinking sphere. As Sputnik came into view, the

wooden wheels began rolling; and in the ensuing moments Stout snapped one of the first clear photographs of Sputnik ever taken.

In fact, Stout's calculations proved more accurate than the Russian's in tracking their own satellite. "Radio Moscow would sometimes be five minutes off in its predictions of Sputnik times," Stout said. "But our calculations seldom missed by more than 30 seconds."

Local news journalists were incredulous over Stout's results. The *Journal of Brazil,* the largest newspaper in Rio de Janeiro, was downright skeptical and decided to check with the Rio national observatory to confirm if such a thing were even possible. In the meantime, a reporter from a small obscure newspaper in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, sought John out, snagged the story, and ran it on October 12 as front-page news.

When the director of the *Journal of Brazil* was finally convinced Stout had actually accomplished the feat, he called Stout back and offered to buy him his own observatory in exchange for an exclusive on the story. A friendship developed between the two, and on October 18 the story hit the headlines in Rio de Janeiro newspapers. Eventually, the media mogul offered John control of all the media's space and religious broadcasting stations on twenty-three networks throughout Brazil. For a man such as John, bent toward ministry and celestial science, it was a godsend.

News of John's Sputnik photo circulated rapidly, elevating his name in both Brazilian and U.S. scientific circles; and in 1958, he was asked by the U.S. International Observatories of Satellites to oversee all of Brazil's observatories as a part of a network of satellite tracking stations around the world.

By now John was fluent in the native language of Portuguese and adept at moving on horseback among the oppressive, sometimes hostile, Indian tribes. In spite of advice to the contrary, he never carried a weapon. Although he was captured more than once, his very nature enabled him to be released unharmed.

As he continued his missionary work, he became increasingly fascinated with the emergence of the space race. With the push of an energetic young president, John F. Kennedy, the U.S. was preparing to enter into a new frontier, one that appealed to a man such as John, inclined to scientific endeavors. When John Glenn, the third American astronaut in space, captured the world's attention by successfully orbiting the earth, Stout was inadvertently caught up in the limelight. Local Portuguese natives, mistaking their own John for John Glenn,

hoisted him up on their shoulders and carried him around in celebration until he managed to convince them otherwise.

“I had to bathe my ego for awhile,” Stout said. “So I didn’t stop them too soon.”

As an ordained minister and now an acclaimed satellite authority, Reverend Stout’s thinking began to turn against two strong currents of scientific and religious dogma. As an ardent believer in freedom of thought, he saw both science and religion as mankind’s noblest attempts to understand God and His creation. It was a philosophy he put to practice in his personal life as well as in his classroom at the University of Lavras, where he said, “I felt perfectly comfortable with God looking into a test tube alongside my students.”

This seeming paradox lay at the very heart of Stout’s personal philosophy. He was as well versed in scripture as he was in science, which made him something of an outlier in both communities. Over the years, it was a role he came to relish. And one that would eventually lead him from the small village in Brazil to a position at NASA’s Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston—and a place in history he would never have imagined.

But in 1961, John Stout was still in the jungles of Brazil. And the space race in America was only beginning to awaken in the heartbeat of Project Mercury. A handful of astronauts called the Original 7 were the personification of that awakening.

The question now was: which astronaut should be the first?