

On 40th anniversary of Apollo 11, space program still vital

—by Rachel Friedman

In 1961, when President John F. Kennedy told Congress we'd put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, he knew that the journey of discovery would yield more value than simply beating the Russians to the moon.

Now, as we near the 40th anniversary of achieving that landmark with the Apollo 11 lunar landing, the country's space program is at a crossroads. Our Space Shuttle program no longer captures the imagination of our people, and we are even retiring older spacecraft—a reflection of the fact we are scaling back on our missions into space. Our economy is in tatters, and the federal government is looking for places to cut the budget, and NASA is looking like an easy target.

But now is not the time to cut back, according to Tahir Rahman, author of *We Came in Peace for All Mankind: The untold story of the Apollo 11 Silicon Disc*.

As it was in the 1960s, when we faced an unprecedented military build-up in the Cold War and a struggling economy, the purpose and need for a space program has not changed—discovery.

"Discovery," Rahman said, "has always been the primary practical application of the space program. Alexander Fleming wasn't looking for penicillin when he discovered it. He was researching something else. We didn't have a clue what an electron was until J. J. Thomson saw the first one in 1897. Now, we have a whole infrastructure based on electronics. Why should we continue to explore space during a recession, when money is tight? Discovery. It was one of the founding principles of this country, and we must not forsake it because it's convenient or expedient."

In researching his book—which contains never-before-told inside stories of the flight of Apollo 11—Rahman spoke with many of the original NASA engineers who worked on the Apollo program, as well as astronauts like Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, whose view was that the exploration of space is important not because of what we can find out there, but rather, what the journey can help us find within ourselves.

"We will see a manned scientific base being built on the Moon," Armstrong said shortly after the first lunar landing. "It'll be a scientific station manned by an international crew, very much like the Antarctic station. But there is a much more important question than whether man will be able to live on the Moon. We have to ask ourselves whether man will be able to live together down here on Earth."

Concurring with Armstrong's view, Rahman believes that space travel should be a more paramount concern today than it was when President Kennedy first set the Moon landing goal. "With more wars, climate change, and environmental concerns spotting the globe than when we first launched the space program, there has never been a more important time for us to explore space," Rahman said.

"There are few moments when all of us who live on this spinning rock can actually see ourselves as one people, one race. When we look back at ourselves from the cold outreaches of the abyss, and see the Earth as it really is, without the borders shown by maps, without the differences outlined by ideologies and national concerns, we can finally see ourselves simply as human beings. I can think of nothing more basic, more necessary than that."

Tahir Rahman is a space historian and enthusiast who has meticulously researched the goodwill messages, the historic plaque, and memorial items from the Apollo 11 mission from July 16-24, 1969. Rahman has handled hundreds of space-related items and has met several astronauts and space authors over the years. He lives with his family in Kansas City.

