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Remembering the Space Age: Proceedings of the 50th Anniversary Conference (The NASA History Series)

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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There is no doubt that the last 50 years have witnessed numerous accomplishments in what has often been termed “the new ocean” of space, harkening back to a long tradition of exploration. Earth is now circled by thousands of satellites, looking both upward into space at distant galaxies and downward toward Earth for reconnaissance, weather, communications, navigation, and remote sensing. Robotic space probes have explored most of the solar system, returning astonishing images of alien worlds. Space telescopes have probed the depths of the universe at many wavelengths. In the dramatic arena of human spaceflight, 12 men have walked on the surface of the Moon, the Space Shuttle has had 119 flights, and the International Space Station—a cooperative effort of 16 nations—is almost “core complete.” In addition to Russia, which put the first human into space in April 1961, China has now joined the human spaceflight club with two Shenzhou flights, and Europe is readying for its entry into the field as well. After 50 years of robotic and human spaceflight, and as serious plans are being implemented to return humans to the Moon and continue on to Mars, it is a good time to step back and ask questions that those in the heat of battle have had but little time to ask. What has the Space Age meant? What if the Space Age had never occurred? Has it been, and is it still, important for a creative society to explore space? How do we, and how should we, remember the Space Age?

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