

Michael J. Sepcot  
Professor Hunter  
HIST 380 – Aerospace  
Book Review #2

**James Schefter, *The Race: The Uncensored Story of How America Beat Russia to the Moon*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. 303 pages.**

James Schefter takes us behind the scenes at NASA for a look at the journey that would eventually land a man on the moon. The Soviets sparked our imagination with the first satellite in space, Sputnik, and Kennedy ignited our passion with by setting the ultimate goal, the Moon. The 1960's would be a stimulating decade for both countries, from the joyous times of successful flights in space to the painful moments in accidents and death. James Schefter does a wonderful job illuminating the events of the decade by grabbing the reader's attention as the mission countdowns approach zero. From the Mercury program through Gemini and ending with Apollo 11, Schefter describes every aspect of the historical race against the Soviet Union looking through the eyes of mission directors, astronauts, and their wives here in the United States and abroad.

From the start of *the Race*, the Soviet Union had always seemed to be one step ahead of the United States in the conquest for space. James Schefter analyses each step closer to the finish line explaining where and why the United States had fallen behind the Soviet empire. Schefter takes a look closer from the American view point than does Tom D. Crouch, author of *Aiming for the Stars: the Dreamer and Doers of the Space Age*. Crouch acknowledges Werner von Braun's Jupiter-C rocket, launched on 20 of September 1956, but fails to note that America could have been the first in space with an object orbiting Earth with the rocket well before the Soviets launched Sputnik. As Schefter notes, "General Medaris had sent technicians to the pad, where they disabled the Sergeant rockets and fill the [fourth] stage with sand" (page 18). Werner von Braun had discovered just days before that Jupiter's fourth stage would allow the rocket to reach the escape velocity of about 17,500 miles per hour. The United States had feared that if the first orbiting satellite had been a military nose cone that the Soviets would receive the message as a threat. As the book goes on, we find out that this would not be the first

time the American government would cause the United States to be second in accomplishing a task in space.

After two successful tests of the Mercury-Redstone rockets 1 and 2 with primates on board, NASA personnel declared the MR-3, which would carry Alan Shepard into space, would be ready to launch on March 24. “Wernher von Braun said no” (page 128). Flight surgeons at this time still felt that additional monkey flights should take place, because, even after two successful monkey tests, they believed that even a few minutes at zero gravity would render a person unconscious. Schefter explains how this event had played right into the hand of the Soviet Union and their mysterious Chief Designer. Pending a White House review, the MR-3 flight was pushed back until the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, just about two weeks after Yuri Gagarin had completed his trip around the Earth in the Vostok 1. Following the successful MR-3 mission, Schefter explains, is where the United States finally accepted that there was a race going on, and that we were behind. Bob Gilruth informed the President that if they wanted to pick a target in the Space Race that they would need “to pick a job that’s so difficult, that’s so new, so they’ll [the Soviets] will have to start from scratch. They just can’t take their old rocket and put another gimmick on it and do something we can’t do” (page 143). And with that, Jack Kennedy would go on to announce to the world, the ultimate goal of the space race: “I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth” (quoted page 144). And with that, the Gemini program was born.

The Gemini program would finally demonstrate the determination of the United States in the space race. With Sergei Korolev becoming ill, ultimately leading to his death, the Soviet Union accomplished no space feat during the 21-months of the Gemini program. Aside from the first spacewalk, the first woman in space, and orbiting three men in a Voskhod before the Gemini missions, the United States had shown their command of space. Rendezvousing, docking, and space walking, methods to combat stress and fatigue, and endurance trails would all be accomplished by the Gemini crew members over the 21-month program. Schefter identifies these feats as the stepping stones necessary for the Apollo missions to finally begin.

The Americans did eventually reach the Moon and return safely, but not without its problems. With the fire that broke out in the cabin of Apollo 1 and the untimely death of Astronauts Grissom, White, and Chaffee, the entire Apollo program shut down for a few months. Investigations into the cause of the fire lead NASA to find and fix thousands of design flaws in the Apollo rocket. And it wasn't for the Soviets lack of trying to upstage the United States, Schefter makes note of the Luna 15 probe that was intended on collecting Moon soil samples and return to Earth in the days before the launch of Apollo 8. The Soviet Union also attempted to launch a crew on a mission to the Moon in early July, but the N-1 booster exploded, killing the crew and the Soviets attempt at the Moon. It was the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Al Shepard's suborbital flight that put America back on path for the Moon. Al Shepard announced, "The time for recrimination is over. We have digested enough historical evidence. There is much to be done. Morale is high. Vision is still clear. And I say, let's get on with the job" (quoted page 253). America would get on with the job, and on July 20, 1969, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins would make history by being the first crew to reach and set foot on, the Moon.

The stories of the astronauts' wives, and the reporters who would commit their time covering the space race were also told within the pages of *the Race*. Tom D. Crouch had done a good job at detailing the Soviet advances in space, but James Schefter, who was a *Life* and *Time* reporter assigned to cover NASA internally, tells the American side of the Cold War battle for space between the Soviet Union and the United States. The *uncensored story* identifies the hidden failure of the Soviets and the postponements of the United States. Both countries had casualties along the way, but the strength of the citizens would carry their nations to the end. The advances made by both countries would ultimately lead to the creation of advanced satellites, the space shuttle, and space stations used the world over for the purpose of understanding the universe in which we live.

**Reference:**

**Tom D. Crouch, *Aiming for the Stars: the Dreamers and Doers of the Space Age*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1999. 338 pages.**