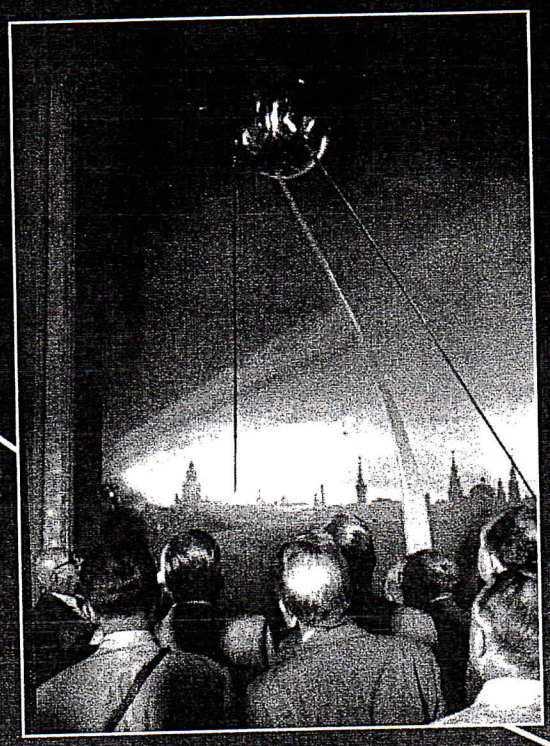
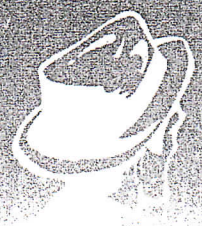
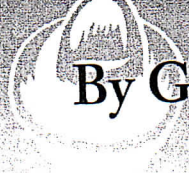
Sputnik 1957



Scientists marvel at a replica of *Sputnik*.

The Cold War got hot when the Soviets successfully launched the first satellite into space. To Americans who had spent the 1950s on a frenzied hunt for Communists, *Sputnik*—Russian for 'fellow traveler'—was a sure sign that their archenemies were bent on global domination.





By Gerard J. DeGroot

Back in October 1957, Little Richard was doing a concert tour in Australia. While performing on the Sydney quayside, he claimed he sighted *Sputnik*, launched a few days earlier, passing overhead. For the singer, the satellite was proof positive that the end of the world was nigh. "We're all going to die," he muttered. To the astonishment of his adoring fans, he stripped off his expensive jewelry and threw it into the harbor. He then marched off the stage, renounced rock and roll and declared that he would ask God for guidance. After much persuasion, he agreed to continue his tour, but refused to play rock. Instead of "Long Tall Sally," audiences were treated to melancholic gospel songs and long passages from the Bible, read with portentous solemnity.

Little Richard's reaction seems bizarre, but only when viewed from the vantage point of 50 years later. At the time, his behavior was simply one manifestation of a widespread tendency among Americans to panic. Thanks to comic books and science fiction films, many had come to believe that nothing nice exists in outer space. *Sputnik* meant that these fears were suddenly grafted onto latent anti-Communist paranoia. America's concerns about Communist infiltration had always been tempered by an assumption of technological superiority. *Sputnik* destroyed that. Whereas before outer space monsters had implied green, lizard-tongued aliens armed with death rays, the new fiends were fur-coated, vodka-drinking Russians.

Granted, not everyone panicked, or at least not immediately. Rocket enthusiasts of all ages put aside Cold War suspicions to celebrate a magnificent technological feat. Equally excited were American entrepreneurs who immediately looked for ways to turn space age wizardry into cold, hard cash. Within days, one confectioner came out with a Sputnik lollipop. Restaurants served Sputnik doughnuts and Sputnik burgers—the latter with an orbiting pickle suspended on a toothpick. In anticipation of Christmas, a toy manufacturer took an ordinary scooter and called it a "pednik." One clever designer came up with a spherical container that held ice cream. One antenna went into a Coke bottle and the other served as a straw. Presto, a Sputnik ice cream float. There was also a Sputnik lamp and a fly killer shaped like the satellite, not to mention the inevitable Sputnik dance and hairstyle, both suitably otherworldly.

All those clever marketing spin-offs were an attempt to ward off the demons of despair—rather like whistling in a graveyard. Ice cream floats and Sputnik burgers could not, however, erase feelings of inferiority and fear. Americans struggled to make sense of the space age, and especially of the fact that the Russians had inaugurated it. The Soviets, after all, were not supposed to be good at technology.

Journalists went to work, stoking the fires of fear by speaking authoritatively on something they did not remotely understand. On October 6, *The New York Times* quoted an unnamed "naval scientist" who claimed that "the very fact that the satellite is whizzing around the earth would indicate that the Russians are ahead in rocketry....It means that the Russians must have the intercontinental ballistic missile." On the following day, the same paper suggested that the Soviet Union would soon have "enough...missiles to place every major United States city and base under threat of annihilation." *Newsweek* ominously asked: "Could the crushers of Hungary be trusted with this new kind of satellite, whose implications no man could measure?" Space was suddenly a domino that could not be allowed to fall.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took delight in fueling American fear. "Now we not only have a rocket that can fly to other countries but we have a satellite that flies around the world. I don't have to point to this with my finger—any idiot can see it...they might as well put bombers and fighters in the museum." He further predicted that within 15 years the USSR would surpass the United States in per capita economic output. Polls taken around the world showed that many people were inclined to agree, especially those in "domino" countries in Latin America and Asia.

PHOTO: HOWARD SOCHUREK/GETTY IMAGES

In response, John McCormack, speaker of the House, warned that the United States faced "national extinction" if it failed to respond quickly. "It cannot be overemphasized that the survival of the free world—indeed, all of the world—is caught up in the stakes."

The *Chicago Daily News* concluded that the Russians would soon be able to "deliver a death-dealing warhead onto a pre-determined target almost anywhere on the earth's surface." Taking up that theme, Lyndon Johnson, the Senate majority leader, warned that "soon, [the Russians] will be dropping bombs on us from space like kids dropping rocks onto cars from freeway overpasses." That was in fact ignorant, irresponsible bunk, but in their despairing mood the American people were inclined to believe any scare story.

President Dwight Eisenhower tried desperately to calm fears. "[*Sputnik*] does not rouse my apprehensions, not one iota," he claimed in that tranquil tone of his. "They have put one small ball into the air." His serenity, once his greatest asset, suddenly seemed old fashioned. In one dramatic act the Soviets had defined modernity, leaving the Americans looking old and tired—rather like their president.

Ambitious Democrats took advantage of Eisenhower's misfortune. Johnson, in particular, hoped to ride a rocket to the White House. Like the good Texan he was, he spoke endlessly about the "high ground," while presenting space as a battle between good and evil. "Control of space means control of the world, far more certainly, far more totally than any control that has ever or could ever be achieved by weapons, or troops of occupation," he argued. He went on to warn that mastery of space would give those evil Russians "the power to control the earth's weather, to cause drought and flood, to change the tides and raise the levels of the sea, to divert the Gulf Stream and change temperate climates to frigid."

For most of 1957, the Democrats had been mired in gloom. The segregation issue had split the party and seemingly destroyed all hope of regaining the presidency. Then came *Sputnik*, and the attendant threat of Russian missile supremacy. "The issue is one which, if properly handled, would blast the Republicans out of the water, unify the Democratic Party, and elect you President," an aide advised Johnson. He told the party faithful that they had "an incomparable opportunity to save the nation and the world."

Sen. John Kennedy was alarmed at the way his Texas rival had beat him into space. Like Johnson, Kennedy wasn't particularly interested in space, and privately admitted that the whole escapade was a waste of money. He nevertheless knew the rewards to be reaped from a frightened electorate. "If the Soviets control space they can control the earth, as in past centuries the nation that controlled the seas dominated the continents," Kennedy argued. "We cannot run second in this vital race. To insure peace and freedom, we must be first." In another speech, he argued that the Soviet Union was "on the march," while Americans were "standing still." While they sipped beer and ate potato chips in front of television sets, the lean and hungry Soviets were taking over the world. "That is what we have to overcome, that psychological feeling...that maybe our high noon has passed and that now we are going into the long, slow afternoon."

The American standard of living suddenly became an indicator of cultural inferiority. Sen. Styles Bridges of New Hampshire urged his countrymen to "be less concerned with the depth of the pile on the new broadloom rug or the height of the tailfin on the new car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat and tears if this country and the free world are to survive." Publicity-seeking "experts" provided evidence to show that the Soviets were investing money in the future, while the Americans were spending theirs on frivolities. "I

Opposite from left: Lyndon Johnson questions General John Medaris of Redstone Arsenal—home to the army's rocket and missile program—about a U.S. missile gap. Scientists set up a field lab to measure *Sputnik*'s signals. The satellite launch spawned a craze for space-themed food such as the Sputnik ice cream sundae.

OPPOSITE: TIME LIFE PICTURES /GETTY IMAGES; EXCEPT BOTTOM LEFT: BETTMANN/CORBIS

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Many thought *Sputnik*'s continuous beep, in the key of A-flat, contained coded messages. Everyone from ham radio operators to defense experts listened intently for clues.

think it is going to take even more emphasis on the need for sacrifice, belt-tightening and renewed dedication, if the American way of life is to be preserved," the Rev. Billy Graham argued. "We Americans are growing soft."

American panic left Eisenhower in a state of despair. He was a pragmatist; for him, rockets were simply tools, useful only for two practical purposes: intercontinental ballistic missiles and spy satellites. Eisenhower knew that the United States was comfortably ahead in ICBM development. Secret missions by U-2 spy planes had shown that the USSR had very few operational ICBMs, contrary to what Khrushchev boasted. But Eisenhower could not reveal that information to the American people and tell them that they were safe. His administration had instead to sit back and patiently absorb accusations of a "missile gap." To his great misfortune, the ability to put a shiny ball into space had become confused with national security.

As for satellites, Eisenhower thought them pointless unless they provided something useful back on Earth. In other words, he had no interest in esoteric space exploration. A spy satellite, on the other hand, could provide accurate pictures of Soviet military capabilities, thus enabling the United States to spend its defense budget wisely, without wasting huge sums on challenging phantom forces. Flying over another nation's territory without permission was, however, illegal under international law. What wasn't clear was whether the law applied to satellites. For Eisenhower, *Sputnik* seemed to set a useful precedent. Though he never admitted it publicly, he welcomed the fact that the Soviets were first in space. By doing so, they had created a loophole through which future American spy satellites could fly.


THE PROGRESS

Russians Launch Man-Made Satellite

U. S. Scientists Compute Orbit For Satellite

Newspaper headlines around the country confirm that the Soviet Union had won the first leg of the space race.

Eisenhower was not, therefore, too bothered by *Sputnik*, except for the fear it caused. Fear, he understood, was the enemy of reason. Reflecting on the *Sputnik* crisis in 1965, he remarked: "Under no circumstances did we want to make the thing a competition, because a race always implies urgency and spectacular progress regardless of cost....This kind of thing is unnecessary, wasteful and violates the basic tenets of common sense." The president's plan was measured, sophisticated and mature. It was also futile. As far as the American people were concerned, the only important issue was to be first in space, and that accolade had already been won by the Soviets.

Image had become as important as power. Eisenhower, a practical man, had little interest in symbols. Prestige, he argued, provided a thin shield. He feared that the pursuit of space glory would ruin what was good about America. Rampant science, allied to an alarmist military, would bankrupt the economy and bleed American spirit. "There is much more to science than its function in strengthening our defense," he counseled his countrymen, "and much more to our defense than the part played by science. The peaceful contributions of science—to healing, to enriching life, to freeing the spirit—these are [its] most important products....And the spiritual powers of a nation—its underlying religious faith, its self-reliance, its capacity for intelligent sacrifice—these are the most important stones in any defense structure." America, in other words, did not need to prove its greatness by shooting balls into the sky. For Eisenhower, the tragic dilemma of the Cold War was how to preserve security without destroying good at home. He never solved that dilemma.

Sputnik forced Eisenhower to change direction and to pursue shallow gestures. He imitated the Soviets, though not as enthusiastically as his people demanded. In order to compete in space, the United States built a vast technocracy, the precise goals of which were never clearly delineated. Research and development was man-

aged for purposes of propaganda. Congress threw money at an imaginary problem of American technological backwardness. Legislators were only too happy to spend, spend, spend, especially when their districts benefited from the largesse.

On November 3, 1958, the Soviets launched *Sputnik II*, a capsule weighing about 1,100 pounds. Inside was Laika, an unfortunate little dog on a one-way trip into space. Americans immediately dubbed it Muttnik, and one enterprising café owner offered a "Sputnikburger with small dog at no extra charge." Humor could not, however, hide the logic of Russian intentions: Where dog went, man would follow. *Life* responded with an article titled "Arguing the Case for Being Panicky," in which it called for "a national renunciation of trivialities and a solemn dedication to serious purpose." The magazine claimed that the American fondness for luxury was jeopardizing the right to "live in freedom."

"People of the whole world are pointing to the satellite and saying that the U.S. has been beaten," said 1957's Man of the Year Nikita Khrushchev.

Laika fundamentally altered perceptions of space. Before her mission, the important issue was the ability to launch heavy objects. That capability threatened U.S. security, given its application to ICBMs. Putting a dog in space, however, was nothing but a circus stunt. It did not remotely worsen the threat to America. It did, however, complicate the space equation. If, as Laika's flight implied, the future lay in manned missions, that meant capsules would have to include life support systems. What went up would have to come down—safely. The exact point of it all was not immediately apparent beyond the obvious propaganda advantage. The Russians embarked on manned space travel before anyone had realistically discussed whether man had a useful purpose in space. Where the Russians went, Americans followed—rather like a blind man being led by a dog.

Laika was a huge victory for the Soviets, but they paid dearly for it. By changing the ground rules in the space race, they gave the Americans a contest they could win. Shooting ever-larger satellites into the air suited the Soviets perfectly, since they had powerful rockets. The complexity of manned space travel, however, suited the Americans, since they were the wizards of technology. After Laika, only those achievements carried out by living, breathing things mattered. The Russians had set the terms of the race, but the Americans gladly went along, because they understood that interest in space could only be sustained if it became a human adventure. As space enthusiasts realized, money would flow only if space had a face.

In January 1958, the Mutual Broadcasting System transmitted an editorial called "Thank You, Mr. Sputnik." The piece summarized the complex mix of emotions that had buffeted America since early October:

> You will never know how big a noise you made. You gave us a shock which hit many people as hard as Pearl Harbor. You hit our pride a frightful blow. You suddenly made us realize that we are not the best in everything. You reminded us of an old-fashioned American word, humility. You woke us up out of a long sleep.

Sputnik roused Americans from their slumber, but when they awoke, they started running without deciding which direction was best. The great capitalist nation henceforth imitated the Communists. Americans decided to go into space not because good things could be achieved there, but because the Russians were there. Americans also thought that a great space crusade would cure them of their shallowness. Shooting men into space would be good for security, the economy and the soul. In the excitement of the moment, it was so easy to ignore the father figure Eisenhower who desperately tried to point out that, in all the things that really mattered, America was still the greatest nation on earth. Forget the pursuit of happiness, the spacious skies, the amber waves of grain. Good God, the Russians have a dog in space! ❑

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