

Review of Logsdon's The Decision to Go to the Moon

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In The Decision to Go to the Moon, John Logsdon explores the events and strategic decision making that led to President Kennedy's conclusion and national challenge that the United States should send a man to the moon before the end of the 1960's. Logsdon argues that through analysis of this decision, insight is gained into the factors required for a country to commit to a program that needs significant resources. This review of the book will first give a brief summary of the book's layout, and then delve into a critical analysis of one of Logsdon's conclusions and the sources supporting it. Finally, the significance of this book to "the history of Apollo" will be discussed.

Brief Summary and the Author's Stimulus

In the beginning, Logsdon relates that Vernon Van Dyke's 1964 analysis of the American space program motivated his own study. Van Dyke suggested that Kennedy's decision was "in the same general category" of other monumental national decisions. However, he did not "make a meticulous effort to determine precisely how much influence specific individuals have had on decisions and precisely what their personal thought processes have been ..." ¹ From this work, Logsdon saw the opportunity to delve deeper than Van Dyke into the philosophies and decision-making processes that resulted in the "largest single use of technological means to achieve a significant foreign policy goal in American history." ²

In the first part of the book, Logsdon builds a historical reconstruction of the events leading to Kennedy's decision to go to the moon. After giving this detailed account, Logsdon develops an analysis of the Apollo decision for the second part of the book. He utilizes Huntington's theory of strategic decision-making processes and Paige's theory of decision-making during a crisis. Logsdon provides a study of how Kennedy's presidential philosophies were more conducive towards drastic new policy than those of Eisenhower. Then, Logsdon analyzes what factors must be in place for the "Apollo approach" to be successfully applied to other national and world challenges. He ends with a final conclusion that ties together much of

¹ Quote from Van Dyke. John M. Logsdon, *The Decision to Go to the Moon* (MIT, 1970), p. ix

² John M. Logsdon, *The Decision to Go to the Moon* (MIT, 1970), p. ix

the discussed events and theories. The following section of this book review will analyze this conclusion and its supporting material and sources.

Discussion of the Political Decision, Critical Examination, and Sources

Logsdon identifies four circumstances that provided the foundation for Kennedy's lunar-landing decision, and may be required for the instigation of future large-scale applications of technology for national purposes.

First, "*the objectives sought must be known to be feasible, with a high degree of probability, at the time the decision ... is made.*"³ The most revealing piece of material that supports this conclusion is Kennedy's memo to Vice President Johnson following Yuri Gagarin's flight. This memo is discussed in Part I of the book. Kennedy wrote, "Do we have a chance of beating the Soviets by putting a laboratory in space, or by a trip around the moon, or by a rocket to land on the moon ..."⁴ In this memo, Kennedy was seeking the information of what undertaking was feasible and had the highest probability of success. NASA's response was that "there is a chance for the U.S. to be the first to land a man on the moon and return him to earth if a determined national effort is made ... A possible target date ... is 1967, with an accelerated U.S. effort."⁵ NASA was able to make such a conclusion based on years of studies for lunar-landing missions before Kennedy's memo, as discussed in Chapter 2. These studies provided the background needed for an accelerated effort. Also, they showed that there were no radically new technological developments needed. With solid evidence from government memos and research reports, Logsdon shows that the president would only undertake a project that had a high probability of success, and the technology was developed to the point that such a project was feasible.

Second, "*the objective must have been the subject of sufficient political debate so that the groups interested in it and opposed to it can be identified, their positions and relative strengths evaluated, and potential sources of support have time to develop.*"⁶ The basis of this argument is found in Chapter 3 and analyzed in Chapter 5. Logsdon discusses the Air Force's attempts to become the lead governmental agency in space technology, especially during the change in

³ Ibid., p. 181

⁴ Ibid., p. 109

⁵ Ibid., p. 113

⁶ Ibid., p. 181

presidential administration.⁷ Partially because of James Webb's negotiations with the Air Force, NASA was given the assurance that it would manage the manned space program. Logsdon discusses several other group interests. Vice President Johnson and other politicians had the opinion that the United States space policy should have been more aggressive than it was during Eisenhower's presidency. On the other hand, the majority of the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) believed that manned spaceflight did not contribute enough to science and technological advances to justify its cost. The sources with which Logsdon made these conclusions include newspapers and journal articles, memos, and many personal interviews and letters. With various sources and discussion with those who experienced Apollo's leadership "first-hand," Logsdon's sources are strong for this information.

Third, *"some dramatic 'occasion for decision,' such as a crisis resulting from an external or domestic challenge, must occur to create an environment in which the objective and the policies to achieve it become politically feasible."*⁸ The analysis for this argument is primarily in Chapter 5, referring to events discussed in Chapter 4. Logsdon argues that Yuri Gagarin's flight instigated a crisis situation. He then shows how the crisis theories of Paige map onto the decision-making process of Apollo. For example, crisis situations "evoke a goals-means complex" in which the leader specifies desired goals and the means to achieve them. Logsdon discusses that Kennedy linked the goal of "national prestige," and set space achievement as the means. Also, according to theory, "the greater the crisis, the greater the interdepartmental collaboration."⁹ Logsdon refers to how there was little disagreement between NASA, the Defense Department, and the Bureau of the Budget when preparing responses to Kennedy's memo. This third circumstance needed for an "Apollo Decision" is based mostly on Paige's decision-making theory, developed from the "Korean Decision." Because it is based on theory, its validity can be disputed and strong counter-arguments can be made. On the other hand, Logsdon gives good examples of how the theory applies in this case.

Fourth, *"there must be in leadership positions in the political system individuals whose personalities and political philosophies support the initiation of new large-scale government activities aimed at long-term payoffs and who have the political skill to choose the situations in*

⁷ Ibid., p. 77

⁸ Ibid., p. 181

⁹ Ibid., pp. 149-150

which such activities can be initiated successfully."¹⁰ Logsdon's main support for this argument is in Chapter 5, in which he discusses Kennedy's political philosophy. With the need to show himself in good light during the first few months of his presidency, with the failure of the Bay of Pigs, with no political stake in the last administration's space policy, and with the public's reaction of the Soviet orbital flight, Kennedy was more likely to initiate a dramatic change in space policy than Eisenhower.¹¹ The most direct source of information for this argument would have been Kennedy. Unfortunately, because of Kennedy's death, Logsdon was unable to learn directly from him about his presidential philosophy and decision-making motivations. So, the information in this section of the book is "second-hand," based on interviews with those who worked closely with President Kennedy and on Sidey's President Kennedy, which Kennedy reviewed for accuracy.

Relevance to Larger Apollo Project

The Decision to Go to the Moon serves as a post-Apollo analysis of the events, people, and policy that laid the foundation upon which the program was started. It contributes to our larger understanding of Apollo by exploring how the project that had concurrently reached its "technological sweetness" and its "political sweetness"¹² was sparked into motion by a crisis and a presidential decision. The book's study of President Kennedy's motivations for making the lunar-landing decision shows the political meaning of the program. Also, it serves as an analysis of what circumstances can incite an Apollo-like decision, which may prove informative in future national or world situations and crises.

Word Count = 1,366

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 181

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 155-157

¹² Ibid., p. 179