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Book Review

Men From Earth

Buzz Aldrin and Malcolm McConnell

In his book, Men From Earth¹, Buzz Aldrin provides a broad overview of space history leading up to his moon landing on *Apollo 11*. The book begins with the launch of the first V-2 rocket by Werhner von Braun's German rocket team at Peenemunde and progresses systematically through both the American and Soviet space missions. In contrast to many of the astronaut autobiographies, Aldrin's book is not a tale of his heroism and bravery in the face of peril. Rather, it is a broad history of the space effort with interesting commentary by someone who played an important role, and of course there is a decent amount of information on Aldrin's own education and career.

The most interesting part of the book is the manner that the descriptions of the American and Soviet endeavors are intertwined. Aldrin and McConnell interweave the largely unknown Soviet story into the publicized American program by having an excerpt about the Soviet space program every few pages. At first, the reader wonders how knowledgeable the authors are about the Soviet activities. Aldrin does not profess to have substantial first-hand knowledge of the Soviet space program. Rather, he refers to several Soviet space historians both in the text and in the endnotes. The dominant Soviet historian referenced in the book is James Oberg, "the American expert on the Soviet space program"². The authors also cite the works of a half dozen other Soviet space histories. Additionally, Aldrin was briefed by senior Pentagon and US government officials during the fall of 1988 on the activities of Sergei Korolev's design team³.

When reading Soviet space histories, it is easy to lose sight of how the Soviet actions

¹ Aldrin, Buzz and Malcolm McConnell. Men From Earth. (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).

² Aldrin 49

³ Aldrin 240

coincide with the American program. However, in this book the parallel time lines are intertwined to inform the reader how the Soviet program was responding to the American actions. The conclusion I have drawn from Men From Earth is that NASA acted with little concrete knowledge about what the Soviets were planning, only hearing their official announcements and seeing satellite photographs. The only instance that is described as being potentially motivated by expected Soviet actions is the decision to send *Apollo 8* to the Moon. The Soviets, however, were able to observe the open actions of NASA. And in a few instances planned risky missions, such as Leonov's spacewalk, as a way of superceding a significant American accomplishment. Additionally, it appears that many of Korolev's most impressive accomplishments, including the first orbital "rendezvous" and the development of the Voskhod spacecraft, were technological farces. Khrushchev placed tremendous pressure on Korolev to make significant propaganda missions for events such as the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. This sort of pressure distracted Korolev's team from developing truly advanced systems that would work toward a lunar landing and forced them to make simple modifications to existing spacecraft to achieve technologically insignificant propaganda feats. For instance, the first orbital rendezvous by *Vostok 3* and *Vostok 4* involved simply launching the second spacecraft 24 hours after the first one. This placed the two vehicles in very close orbits, simply because the first spacecraft was passing over the launch site again. The two vehicles got within five kilometers, a tremendous distance compared to what was accomplished by *Gemini VI* and *Gemini VII*.⁴

Aldrin and McConnell cite a number of primary and secondary sources in his book. In contrast to many astronaut autobiographies, the book does not rely almost exclusively on the author's memory. Rather, Aldrin uses primary sources such as mission flight plans, post-flight debriefings, air-to-ground transcripts, and internal NASA memorandums. These sources are used primarily for specific details, with secondary sources such as memoirs and program histories providing the broad program events. For instances in the book involving Aldrin's education or personal experiences he relies primarily on his own recollection.

According to Aldrin, one of the greatest technological barriers to a successful lunar landing was orbital rendezvous. He presents the decision to use Lunar Orbit Rendezvous as a pivotal one in the development of Apollo. This is natural, since he played a key role in the development of the

⁴ Aldrin 98.

rendezvous techniques. After earning his doctoral degree from MIT working with Dick Battin on orbital trajectories, Aldrin was selected in the third group of NASA astronauts. His initial assignments included reducing the complicated orbital dynamics that he understood well to useful procedures that could be used by any astronaut. His academic nature earned him the nickname “Dr. Rendezvous,” because he was so interested in the subject. In fact, on *Gemini XII* the onboard computer failed and Aldrin had to rely on the procedures he developed to perform a successful rendezvous and docking with the Agena target vehicle. Aldrin recalls a successful manual rendezvous and his textbook EVA as crucial to proving the feasibility of the Apollo system. Other engineers or astronauts might believe that other aspects of the system were more crucial to mission success, but to Aldrin orbital rendezvous was king.

Based on his own experiences within NASA and his reflections in the twenty years since *Apollo 11*, Aldrin makes a number of observations about the organizational structure of NASA and comments on many of the problems inherent in the current system. Thus, Men From Earth is a combination history, autobiography, and criticism of current administration policies. Buzz Aldrin currently makes his living by traveling around the country giving lectures and appearing at public events. As with many other astronauts, he has a financial interest in portraying the Apollo program as a heroic undertaking in which hard-working Americans triumphed over nature and Communism to land a man on the Moon. I have spoken with Aldrin on a few occasions and he has always come across as proud of his accomplishments, yet respectful of the thousands of people who made it possible for him to become an American legend. Both in his book and in person, he is quick to point out that the flights were the culmination of years of planning and training by many people other than the astronauts.

When the book was published in 1989, Aldrin was displeased with the current NASA plans. He comments in the book that NASA has lost its focus and lacks congressional support to do anything really amazing in a reasonable amount of time. Part of Buzz Aldrin’s current activities involve operating Starcraft Boosters⁵, a company that promotes many of his visions for the future of space exploration. I do not believe the company was founded in 1989, but many of the ideas expressed in Men From Earth are very similar to the ideas proposed on the company website today.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in a broad overview of the American and Soviet space programs from the perspective of a true American hero. Men From

⁵ <http://www.buzzaldrin.com>

Earth provides the technical details and historical facts one would expect from a man who earned his PhD at MIT while still evoking emotions of pride and patriotism. Small anecdotes about things like Armstrong and Aldrin vigorously shaking hands after landing remind the reader of the human aspect of the massive Apollo program and give Men From Earth a flavor that could only be achieved by someone who experienced firsthand “the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.”⁶

Word Count: 1244

⁶ President John F. Kennedy. Speech to at Rice University. September 12, 1962.