

Reconnaissance of the Moon

A superlative feat of human history occurred yesterday, one that will deservedly become the subject of song, story and pictorial art in the decades and centuries ahead. Never before had men reached the neighborhood of another celestial body; never before had men seen with unaided eye the side of the moon that lies eternally hidden from earth; never before had a manned vehicle orbited earth's lunar satellite, moving under the primary control of that foreign globe's gravity.

The space age, no doubt, will produce many future heroes and many other historic accomplishments, but even now it is plain that yesterday Astronauts Borman, Lovell and Anders assured themselves of immortality as the first men literally to break the shackles of earth and travel successfully to another destination in this suddenly shrunken solar system.

Man is still too close to this staggering crossing of the space frontier to grasp the full significance of what has been accomplished. That is not a new situation. The contemporaries of the first men to use fire in a controlled fashion or to shape and exploit the wheel could have had no real idea of the significance of those milestones either.

Yet even at this early stage some implications of the path-breaking achievement of Apollo 8 are clear enough. If men can make a reconnaissance of the moon, they can also land there and then take off for earth again. There is now no reason to suppose that this feat is more than a matter of months away. It is conceivable, in fact, that in 1969 both American and Soviet astronauts will visit the moon's surface and explore it on foot as well as from space.

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After those first landings on the moon will come the permanent settlements—the bases for detailed exploration of the lunar body and for astronomical observation and experimentation in biology, physics and chemistry.

Eventually the moon will become a steppingstone to the wider vistas of space. Its low gravity and indigenous raw materials assure it an enormous future as the launching pad for expeditions to the planets—to Mars and Venus, to Mercury and Jupiter and Saturn and Neptune and even to distant Pluto.

These dizzying prospects were Buck Rogers fantasy until yesterday. Today they are sober and reasonable prospects for the decades ahead because of the accomplishments of those who flew Apollo 8, those who designed and built it and those from many lands who contributed the needed basic knowledge.

The precondition for turning these possibilities into reality is, of course, that men learn to live at peace with each other and to join their energies and talents for a cooperative surge into space. Apollo 8 has given the world an ennobling Christmas present; now it is the Christmas spirit of brotherhood and peace that is required to continue on the path these three courageous envoys of mankind have pioneered.