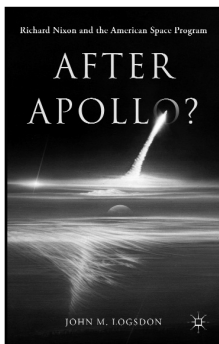


AFTER APOLLO? RICHARD NIXON AND THE AMERICAN SPACE PROGRAM



by John M. Logsdon

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John Logsdon, who made his name analyzing President Kennedy's space policy, opens his book with a judgment that may surprise some: Richard Nixon's decisions about what to do after Apollo have "had a much more lasting impact than did John F. Kennedy's 1961 decision to go to the Moon" [1]. One might qualify this a bit—JFK massively expanded NASA's human spaceflight infrastructure in a way that has proved difficult to reverse—but his new book amply demonstrates Nixon's central importance to the history of US human spaceflight. The 1971/72 Space Shuttle decision determined NASA's path for the next four decades, and the Shuttle was closely linked to the space station it was in part sized to construct and support.

Logsdon structures *After Apollo?* in two acts. The first was the collapse of the agency's ambitions in the early Nixon Administration (1969-70). The president determined that civil spaceflight was no longer a national-security super-priority; NASA would now be just another domestic program that had to compete with all other discretionary spending in a budget he was trying to cut in the face of Vietnam, Great Society programs, and inflation. Logsdon's assessment of Administrator Thomas Paine's tenure in this period is not flattering, and deservedly so. In Chapter 3 he calls Paine "rather tone deaf" [55] in his emphasis on Soviet competition when Nixon was pushing detente, "totally disconnected from political realities" [61] in NASA's submission to the Space Task Group that was supposed to determine the direction of post-Apollo policy, and "deeply flawed" [65] in his belief in Vice President Spiro Agnew's influence in the administration. By September 1970, the Nixon White House had cut NASA's budget to \$3.2 billion a year, rebuffed plans for a Mars mission or a space station, ended Saturn/Apollo production, and approved the agency's cancellation of two Moon landings. It was not sorry to see Paine leave. That left the Space Shuttle as the agency's default program, without any particular place for it to go.

Act Two is the Shuttle decision, mostly in 1971, already a well-worked topic from the NASA and technical side. Knowing that, Logsdon concentrates on understanding the

actions and motivations of the key players in the administration: White House domestic policy advisors, the leaders in the new Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and NASA's new top two, James Fletcher and George Low. As in the first act (and his Kennedy books), Logsdon's research sets the gold standard for space policy history. He has essentially done everything archivally possible when it comes to the administration and NASA leadership, including listening to, or having transcribed, hours of barely audible Nixon tapes. I will not belabor the description of the "fragmented and contentious" [213] decision-making process that led to the approval of the eventual shuttle, with the 15 x 60 ft payload bay and nominal 65,000 lb payload from Kennedy Space Center. But Logsdon adds many interesting details, including how much the decision to have this size shuttle, and not a smaller one, was fought almost to the last minute before Nixon's announcement on 5 January 1972. He also reveals how many times Nixon ordered the cancellation of the *Apollo 16* and *17* landings, fortunately without ever really trying to make it stick.

In NASA's long rear-guard action to defend a larger shuttle and what was left of Apollo, I instinctively felt sympathy for the agency's position. But Logsdon argues that, in hindsight, the White House advocates for a smaller and less ambitious shuttle were right. National security payloads and missions were the main argument for the keeping the big payload bay, although the Defense Department was lukewarm about the Shuttle, in his analysis. In the end, phasing out all other launch vehicles and committing all reconnaissance and defense satellites to the Shuttle was a major mistake. These policies cost the nation billions of dollars before they were discarded in the 1980s. He also argues that a shuttle that could lift larger space station modules predetermined the agency's path to a large space station, another gigantic mortgage on NASA's budget over decades. The result was a human spaceflight program stuck in low Earth orbit since the end of 1972. Its main function seems to be to support employment in the states where NASA centers or space industrial firms are located. Nixon set the precedent for this behavior, Logsdon argues, when he treated the Shuttle decision, in significant part, as a jobs program to support his 1972 reelection bid in California.

There is little I can quibble with in Logsdon's smoothly written, superbly researched and forcefully argued account. I am not convinced that separating Nixon's enthusiastic (and hypocritical) embrace of *Apollo 11* into a separate Chapter 1 works as well as interweaving it with the policy maneuverings of the early administration, but I understand that might be difficult to achieve in one narrative. And I think that the ending is probably too deterministic. In the last pages he asserts that the "Nixon space doctrine" set the course for US human

spaceflight for the next half century, which robs later administrations and NASA leaders of responsibility for their actions. Moreover, the public's lack of enthusiasm for an ambitious space program has a lot to do with why Nixon and all following presidents acted as they did. Yet his fundamental argument is correct: Nixon's space policy lasted much longer than Kennedy's, and in selecting the shuttle that it did, it set the fundamental conditions for the next several decades of human spaceflight in the United States.

Notes

1. T.A. Heppenheimer, *The Space Shuttle Decision* (Washington, DC: NASA, 1999); Dennis Jenkins, *Space Shuttle* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 2002).

2. *The Decision to Go to the Moon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); *John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

3 For the larger history of the NASA-DOD relationship over the Shuttle, see James E. David, *Spies and Shuttles* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), chaps. 6 and 7.

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