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Apollo 11 an achievement worth remembering

By Richard Eckstrom Contributing Columnist

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July 21 marked the anniversary of one of America's great triumphs.

Forty-five years earlier, the eyes of a nation were transfixed to their black and white TV sets to watch history unfold as an American astronaut stepped foot on the grey lunar soil. Neil Armstrong became the first man to stand on ground not of this Earth.

It was a remarkable feat, one which is unparalleled in world history. Since the beginning of mankind, humans had gazed at the bright sphere hundreds of thousands of miles away, wondering what it was like. At 10:56 pm on July 21, 1969, a human was walking on it.

So uncertain was the Apollo 11 moon-landing mission that President Nixon had a speech-writer prepare for him an address to the nation in case catastrophe occurred. The contingency plans included phone calls to the wives of Armstrong and fellow astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. But three days after Armstrong's historic steps, the men returned home safely, splashing down in the Pacific Ocean near Hawaii. They received a hero's welcome.

Our space flights and moon-landings have yielded great knowledge which has helped us understand our solar system, as well as monumental advancements in science, technology and innovation.

But perhaps the real value in space exploration lies in its power to inspire. It reminds us that nothing's out of reach... that there's little we can't accomplish when we put our minds to it.

Striving for the impossible often brings out the best in people.

At the time of the Apollo 11 mission, America was a nation in tumult. Among other things, we were mired in war in Vietnam. But the success of the Apollo 11 mission rekindled a sense of national pride. Our young country – which had gained independence from Imperial rule less than 200 years earlier – had become the first to put a man on the moon. We had beaten our Cold War adversary, Russia, in the race to do so. And with just months to spare, we had fulfilled the 1961 promise of President John F. Kennedy, who had vowed to send an American safely to the lunar surface and back before the end of the decade.

Even during a turbulent period, space exploration gave Americans something to cheer about.

In many ways, America remains a troubled nation – beset by polarization, partisan gridlock and anxiety about the future. Our leaders can't seem to agree on how to solve our many problems. Late last year, as many federal offices shut down for 16 days, I couldn't help but reflect on how a society that once sent a man to the moon couldn't even operate a functioning government.

Given the tremendous challenges we face, perhaps the key to our future lies in our ability to rediscover the ideals that made America great... the ideals of reaching high to achieve great things, of continually striving to improve, and of pulling together to overcome shared obstacles.

Maybe what's needed, now more than ever, is a renewal of the American spirit – the spirit that built a nation from scratch, and that put a man on the moon.

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