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Sending one person to Mars one-way may sound overly risky and audacious, but it may be the only way to rapidly develop a manned Mars mission and bootstrap space exploration. (credit: NASA)

“Spirit of the Lone Eagle”: an audacious program for a manned Mars landing

by

James C. McLane III
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There’s a distressing contradiction between commonly held expectations and public enthusiasm for sending humans to Mars and the daunting constraints that oppose such a proposition. We know how to get into space. We reached the Moon nearly 40 years ago. But now, we hesitate to fully commit to the next big step, a human trip to Mars. For a century, ideas about exploring the Red Planet have abounded, but even for our current spacefaring generation all these concepts remain impractical and unachievable. Nevertheless, there is one way that we might yet witness this feat. This essay describes that single option, a program concept I call the “Spirit of the Lone Eagle”.

The term “manned exploration” is not ambiguous. Flip through any National Geographic magazine and you’ll get an idea of what it means for humans to explore. I must borrow an expression from science fiction that space truly is our final frontier. History will record the first adventurous trips by humans into space as a pivotal moment in the maturity and evolution of our species. However, manned space exploration hasn’t really existed since the Apollo missions to the Moon. National goals in the decades after the lunar landings have not provided the same focus on exploration that characterized our early space program. Post-Apollo efforts seem to have been little more than technology experiments, design studies, international political maneuvers, and training for the aerospace and defense industry. The public’s enthusiasm for these boring endeavors is diminishing, especially among younger taxpayers who are generations removed from witnessing Apollo. They were born too late to experience the exhilarating and monumental leap of earthbound humanity into space. For them, the concept of humans living in space seems routine, unremarkable, and dull.

Back in 1962 President Kennedy had said, “We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone...”

Americans forget that Apollo succeeded in large part because the country knew that sending humans to the Moon within the short time frame of ten years would be exciting, difficult, dangerous, and perhaps even impossible. The goal was audacious and almost unbelievable. It demanded the highest priority and occupied the center stage of national attention.

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Kennedy believed that a non-military, manned space program could offer a way to refocus the magnificent aerospace resources of the US toward peaceful ends. Privately, he expressed concern to the NASA administrator that human lunar exploration might be so expensive it would require a cooperative venture with the Soviet Union, then our archenemy. After Kennedy’s death any idea of cooperating in space disappeared and the rush to reach the Moon became, in the mind of the American people, a competitive space race.

In the late 1950s the International Geophysical Year effort reinvigorated American science. The public was thrilled to hear about heroic and challenging research performed in remote and highly inhospitable places like Antarctica. A manned adventure on the Moon would be even more radical and daring than living on the ice beside a nuclear reactor at the South Pole. The Apollo program needed huge talented teams, but it also featured real individual heroes. It diverted public attention from the numerous bad-news topics of that era, like an unpopular war, the rise of a recreational drug subculture, civil rights unrest, the social liberation of women, and fears of global Communism.

In order for our present generation to put a human on Mars, we must return to an Apollo-type program that embraces cutting-edge exploration. To maintain project inertia, the concept must have a goal that accomplishes the manned landing within as short a time as possible. As with Apollo, a ten-year horizon would be ideal: any longer time (for example, a 25-year goal) and the program would be so underfunded it could not resist diversion of money to other places as political winds change. Very long time horizons would inevitably cause costly and frequent redesign and bureaucratic process paralyzes. These avoidable situations extended the first flight of the Space Shuttle and doomed the Space Station Freedom program.

A one-man, one-way trip

Any manned Mars program will incur substantial risk. As risk to human life increases, the program will bask in the light of popular public fascination and there will be more financial and political support. As in the old Apollo program, the human aspects of Mars exploration must form the core purpose, over and above any scientific returns. Though relegated to a secondary position, science will nonetheless reap huge benefits from major new space-related funding.

The space agency is notoriously averse to risk, especially with regard to human life. The likelihood of damaging or destroying costly exotic machinery is always a consideration, but very much secondary to the overarching concern for avoiding human loss. For an early example of NASA's risk tolerance, consider that countless test pilots died perfecting modern aircraft, yet all it took was one NASA fatality for the agency to decide to terminate the X-15 rocket plane program. When one of the three X-15s crashed, the program was involved in testing hypersonic ramjet engines. Perhaps we might be flying today on hypersonic transports if the X-15 program had continued.

Individual Americans aren't averse to taking risk. Over the past 30 years at least 500 people have died sport diving in Florida's underwater caves, yet this incredibly dangerous hobby remains popular. The thought of our yearly highway toll of some 40,000 deaths and millions of debilitating and life-altering injuries is not foremost in the minds of individuals when they climb into a car. In fact, Americans admire risk takers, including early astronauts and cosmonauts. We called them heroes and we memorized their names.

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To put a human on Mars within the lifetime of America's current generation, only one scheme is feasible, and this feasible concept challenges our traditional thinking about risk and the value of life. The mission must be a *one-way trip*. It's possible that the crew might consist of *only one person*. For the first manned landing on Mars, there can be no provision for the space traveler to return to Earth. We should call such a solo mission the "Spirit of the Lone Eagle" in honor of Charles Lindbergh, the original "Lone Eagle" who flew solo across the Atlantic. The manned Mars mission (which could be arranged to

occur in 2017, just 90 years after Lindbergh's famous flight) will require a person of special ability who can accept a great challenge.

Return to Earth from the Martian surface is a daunting technical problem for which current technology offers no obvious solution. Realistically, there aren't even any schemes based on futuristic technology that are likely to be perfected within the next 20 years. When we eliminate the need to launch off Mars, we remove the mission's most daunting obstacle. Huge engineering challenges remain, but without a Mars launch, we can reasonably expect to devise a program that may be accomplished within the scope of current technology.

This is an appropriate time for America to assume a more mature attitude towards space exploration. As the world's economic leader, we have successfully blended humans from many cultures into one highly productive and imaginative nation. We are at a point in history where we ought to demonstrate, by an audacious and unselfish national space policy, that exploration of the cosmos is a cooperative and universal human destiny. A manned Mars landing should admit contributions from all the world's peoples and represent a milestone for the whole human race.

From our global population of over six billion, it will be easy to find suitable astronaut candidates. We can take advantage of the variety of diverse human characteristics that have evolved on this planet to choose appropriate volunteers to be our Lone Eagle. The isolation would present significant potential for depressing loneliness. But, remember that early explorers of this planet often left their personal society with hardly any expectation of returning home. Archeology suggests that primitive people made long one-way ocean voyages or cross-country treks. Even in modern times, many voluntary human endeavors (for example, mountain climbing) are so dangerous the adventurer must accept the prospect that he or she may die in the attempt. Humans seem to naturally seek adventure and this may be exactly why our kind came to dominate the earth. Perhaps our species is genetically "programmed" to take on risky challenges.

The successful three-man Apollo missions set an unfortunate precedence for crew size. NASA's current return-to-Moon plans envision even larger groups. There is no reason for spacecraft crews to be so big. Hasn't NASA learned from the tremendous loss of life experienced when the shuttle carries its large passenger load? Note that the practical, but abandoned, Soviet manned lunar program was based on a concept where just one cosmonaut would land alone on the Moon.

The first human mission to Mars might even consist of a male/female team. Such a privileged couple would follow in the tradition of creation stories common to many human religions. The historic (they might even become legendary) pair would repeat, on an interplanetary scale, the early migrations that populated our world. Precedence exists, since genetic studies suggest that some current populations descended from very tiny groups, perhaps only one family of adventurous travelers.

Life on Mars

The crew (whether only one person or an “Adam/Eve” pair) could make the long transit to Mars resting, possibly in a state of metabolic depression induced by hypnosis or medication. No huge leaps in health science need be postulated to assume this could be perfected. The crew compartment might even rotate to provide simulated Mars gravity. These are hardly novel ideas.

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Meanwhile, down on the Red Planet, unmanned landers carrying living accommodations, stores, and communication equipment will have preceded the arrival of the first explorer. The manned spacecraft might set down in a sheltered low area on the planet, perhaps at the bottom of a deep canyon to take advantage of natural radiation shielding, protection from the weather, and also to experience the highest possible atmospheric pressure. It’s likely that natural caves could provide a home, just as they did for early man on Earth.

In some respects, life on Mars might prove more bearable than early lonely explorations on planet Earth. Constant communication would provide the comforting virtual presence and support of society. Back home, genuine concern and sympathy for the new Martian would consume the interest of everyone. The world would follow his or her every move via TV, relish struggles for self-preservation, and celebrate innovations, coping, and of course the bravery necessary for such a mission. When most of the world tunes in to this dramatic life-or-death situation, international tensions will naturally defuse. All humanity will become acutely aware of their common bond as earthbound brothers and sisters, a bond transcending culture or religion. It is not too much to believe that this singular event could well usher in a new age of international cooperation and new respect for humanistic values.

Earth’s people would hang on the Martian’s every word. Since the explorer can never return to the womb of earth and owes allegiance only to the family of man, his or her opinions would receive special consideration. Unprecedented separation would give the Martian a unique perspective on earthly affairs.

With a vulnerable and universally admired hero on Mars, support for resupply missions and space exploration in general would dramatically increase. As was the case during the extraordinary decade leading up to the manned Moon landings, a renaissance of scientific progress would ensue. In time, volunteers would join the original explorer and form a colony. It would be left to the Earth’s next generation to devise a practical way to return humans from Mars, but by then, would anyone there really choose to return?

The Apollo missions stimulated important new technology, and benefits rippled down through society. However, today’s public seems appallingly uncertain about the returns from our current manned space program. Are NASA’s efforts just scientific curiosities, supported only because they might lead to future military applications?

We live in blissful ignorance. Our Earth's ecosphere faces serious uncertainties and risks that are not clearly appreciated. Mars holds secrets that may help us understand the complex behavior of our home planet. Manned exploration is the quickest way to get this information.

Success will not be limited by our present technology. Success will only require bravery, confidence and audacity. All are qualities our nation has demonstrated before.

Apollo arrived at a propitious time. The country possessed a large cadre of creative and enthusiastic scientists and engineers. Arguably this was the best program-focused technical team the world has ever seen. But, now those folks are gone and the technical acumen of the US seems headed for a state of limbo, with more and more expertise going offshore. If we further procrastinate in returning to serious manned space exploration, it may soon be impossible to assemble enough domestic talent to mount another great human space adventure.

We must act quickly to embrace a Mars exploration challenge that will recreate the excitement, the enthusiasm and the glory of America's historic manned Moon landings. Now is exactly the time to support the "Spirit of the Lone Eagle" proposal. Success will not be limited by our present technology. Success will only require bravery, confidence and audacity. All are qualities our nation has demonstrated before. Let's do it again!

About The Author:

Just a couple of months before the first Apollo Moon landing, Jim McLane graduated in aerospace engineering from Texas A&M. Since then he has worked as a design professional in several fields, including private airplanes, sea water desalination, oil and gas pipelines, and for the last 20 years in NASA's manned space program. He is an Associate Fellow in the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics and holds a Professional Engineering license in the state of Texas.

Himmelfahrtskommando

Nasa-Ingenieur *James C. McLane III* plädiert für eine bemannte Mars-Mission. Ohne Rückflug. Das finale Abenteuer im All soll vor allem eins: Auf der Erde Frieden stiften.

Wir wissen, wie man ins Weltall kommt. Den Mond haben wir bereits vor fast 40 Jahren erreicht. Aber jetzt zögern wir vor dem nächsten grossen Schritt: der Reise eines Menschen zum Mars. Nach den Apollo-Missionen waren unsere Weltraumprogramme kaum mehr als technische Experimente, internationale politische Manöver und Trainings für die Raumfahrt- und Verteidigungsindustrie. Die Begeisterung der Öffentlichkeit für diese Unternehmungen schwindet vor allem unter den jüngeren Steuerzahlern, die nicht mehr Augenzeuge der Apollo-Mission gewesen sind.

Damit es für unsere heutige Generation möglich wird, einen Menschen zum Mars zu schicken, müssen wir zu einem Apollo-ähnlichen Programm zurückkehren, das eine pionierhafte und aufregende Entdeckungsreise verspricht. Damit ein solches Programm auch Bestand hat, muss es zudem eine baldige bemannte Mars-Landung anvisieren. Wie bei der Apollo-Mission wäre dabei ein zeitlicher Horizont von 10 Jahren ideal. Jede längere Zeitspanne – 25 Jahre zum Beispiel – würde dazu führen, dass das Programm derart unterfinanziert wäre, dass man nicht widerstehen könnte, die Ressourcen anderweitig einzusetzen, sollte der politische Wind drehen.

Wenn wir noch zu Lebzeiten unserer Generation einen Menschen auf den Mars schicken wollen, dann ist nur eine Strategie denkbar. Und diese Strategie stellt eine Herausforderung an unser herkömmliches Denken über Risiken und den Wert des Lebens dar: Eine solche Mission zum Mars müsste nämlich als eine Reise ohne Rückkehr geplant werden.

Wie die früheren Entdecker

Ein Rückflug vom Mars zur Erde stellt ein gewaltiges Problem dar, für das beim heutigen Stand der Technik noch keine Lösung in Sicht ist. Wenn wir also davon absehen, dass ein Rückflug vom Mars notwendig ist, dann ist das grösste Hinder-

James C. McLane III, 61
Wenige Monate vor der ersten bemannten Mondlandung schloss James C. McLane III sein Studium als Raumfahrt-Ingenieur in Texas ab. Danach arbeitete er im Flugzeugbau und als Konstrukteur von Meerwasser-Entsalzungsanlagen und Gaspipelines. Während der letzten 20 Jahre war er am bemannten Raumfahrtprogramm der Nasa beteiligt. Sein Plädoyer («Spirit of the Lone Eagle») erschien diesen Sommer im Online-Magazin «The Space Review».

nis der Mission aus dem Weg geräumt und das Programm kann im Rahmen der heutigen Möglichkeiten realisiert werden. Es ist ein Konzept, das ich «Spirit of the Lone Eagle» nenne – als Hommage an den «einsamen Adler» Charles Lindbergh, der allein über den Atlantik flog.

Wir stehen heute an einem Punkt in der Geschichte, an dem wir aufzeigen sollten, dass die Erforschung des Alls eine gemeinsame Aufgabe der Menschheit ist. Es dürfte ein Leichtes sein, unter den mehr als sechs Milliarden Erdbewohnern passende Astronauten für diese Mission zu finden. Auch in der heutigen Zeit lassen sich Menschen freiwillig auf gefährliche Wagnisse ein (beispielsweise Bergsteigen), bei denen sie in Kauf nehmen müssen, ihr Leben zu verlieren.

Die mit einem langen Flug verbundene Isolation der Astronauten würde zwar ein grosses Potenzial für eine deprimierende Einsamkeit in sich bergen. Aber man darf nicht vergessen, dass frühe Entdecker oft ihre bekannte Welt hinter sich gelassen haben, ohne damit zu rechnen, ihre Heimat jemals wieder zu sehen. Archäologische Erkenntnisse deuten darauf hin, dass primitive Völker lange Reisen über den Ozean oder quer durch ganze Kontinente unternommen haben, von denen sie nie zurückgekehrt sind.

Die erfolgreichen Drei-Mann-Missionen mit der Apollo geben ein schlechtes Beispiel für die Grösse der Besatzung. Bei den gegenwärtigen Plänen der Nasa für einen erneuten Flug zum Mars sind sogar noch grössere Gruppen vorgesehen.

Es gibt jedoch keinen Grund, weshalb die Besatzung eines Raumschiffs so gross sein muss. Offenbar hat die Nasa keine Lehre aus der Vergangenheit gezogen und realisiert nicht, dass bei Shuttles mit vielen Passagieren eben auch viele Menschenleben verloren gehen können.

Die Adam-und-Eva-Besatzung

Für die erste Reise von Menschen zum Mars könnte auch eine Mann-Frau-Besatzung ausgewählt werden. Ein solches Paar stünde in der Tradition der Schöpfungsgeschichten, wie sie vielen Religionen gemeinsam sind. Dieses Paar – das zu einer Legende werden könnte – würde auf einer interplanetaren Ebene die frühen Migrationen nachvollziehen, durch die unsere Welt besiedelt wurde. Präzedenzfälle dazu existieren, denn genetische Studien



James C. McLane III neben einem Raumanzug: Wenn es nach dem Nasa-Ingenieur geht, geniessen in zehn Jahren Menschen das Panorama auf dem Mars.

weisen darauf hin, dass heutige Populationen von kleinen Gruppen abstammen, vielleicht sogar nur von einer einzigen Familie von abenteuerlustigen Reisenden.

Die Besatzung (ob nur eine Person oder ein Paar im Stil von Adam und Eva) könnte sich auf dem Weg zum Mars ausruhen, vielleicht indem ihr Stoffwechsel durch Hypnose oder auch Medikamente herabgesetzt würde. Zudem könnte man die Besatzungskapsel rotieren lassen, um die Schwerkraft auf dem Mars zu simulieren.

Unterdessen wären vor der Ankunft der ersten Entdecker bereits unbemannte Landeraketen mit Material für Unterkunft und Unterhalt eingetroffen. Das Raumschiff könnte in einer tiefen Gegend des Planeten landen – vielleicht auf dem Grund eines tiefen Tals. Damit könnte die



ständige Kommunikation hätten die Marsbewohner die tröstliche virtuelle Präsenz der Weltbevölkerung.

Zu Hause auf der Erde würden Sorge und eine Anteilnahme am Wohlergehen der Marsmenschen das Interesse aller fesseln. Die Welt würde jeden ihrer Schritte über das Fernsehen mitverfolgen: Man würde den Überlebenskampf dieser Pioniere geniessen, sich über ihre Ausdauer freuen und sie für den Mut hochleben lassen, den es für eine solche Mission braucht.

Wenn sich ein Grossteil der Welt auf diesen Kampf um Leben und Tod konzentrierten würde, könnten sich auch internationale Spannungen auf natürliche Weise verflüchtigen. Die ganze Menschheit würde sich klar bewusst werden, dass sie hier auf der Erde als Brüder und Schwestern miteinander verbunden sind – und dass diese Verbindung wichtiger ist als jede Kultur oder Religion. Es ist nicht

vermessen zu glauben, dass dieses kühne Vorhaben ein neues Zeitalter der internationalen Zusammenarbeit und des neuen Respekts der humanistischen Werte auf unserer Welt einläuten könnte.

Die Menschen auf der Erde würden gespannt auf jedes Wort der neuen Marsmenschen warten. Weil sie nie mehr in den Schoss der Erde zurückkehren können und nur der Familie der Menschen verbunden sind, würden ihre Ansichten ein besonderes Gewicht erhalten. Durch die Trennung von der Erde würden die Marsianer eine einzigartige Sicht auf die irdischen Angelegenheiten gewinnen.

Mit einem verletzlichen und weltweit bewunderten Helden oder einer Heldin auf dem Mars würde auch die Unterstützung für Raumfahrtmissionen ganz allgemein wachsen. Bald einmal würden Freiwillige diesen ersten Entdeckern folgen und auf dem Mars eine Kolonie bilden. Es wäre dann den nächsten Generationen überlassen, eine Möglichkeit zu finden, wie diese Menschen wieder vom Mars auf die Erde zurückkehren könnten. Aber würde bis dahin überhaupt irgendwer hierher zurückkommen wollen? ◀

ALLE MENSCHEN WÜRDEN SICH BEWUSST, DASS SIE MITEINANDER VERBUNDEN SIND.