

U.S. launched 1st satellite 50 years ago

January 22 2008

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the launch of the United States' first satellite to orbit the Earth.

Explorer 1 lifted off Jan. 31, 1958 -- slightly more than a year after the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. The White House had asked the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., and the Army Ballistic Missile Agency to launch a satellite as quickly as possible. JPL designed and built the satellite, the upper stages of the rocket and a tracking system. The Army's Redstone Arsenal produced the liquid-filled rocket.

The launch of Explorer 1 was followed by the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in October 1958 and transformed JPL from a producer of ballistic missiles to a center for robotic exploration of the solar system and beyond. Today, the California Institute of Technology manages JPL for NASA.

JPL and Caltech have produced a documentary video chronicling the story of Explorer 1 -- "JPL and the Beginnings of the Space Age." The documentary will be telecast nationally on the Discovery Channel's HD Theater, with multiple airings beginning Jan. 31.

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