

# Armstrong's small step a giant leap for humanity

August 27 2012, by SETH BORENSTEIN

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In this July 20, 1969 file photo, a footprint left by one of the astronauts of the Apollo 11 mission shows in the soft, powder surface of the moon. Commander Neil A. Armstrong and Air Force Col. Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. became the first men to walk on the moon after blastoff from Cape Kennedy, Fla., on July 16, 1969. The family of Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, says he died Saturday, Aug. 25, 2012, at age 82. A statement from the family says he died following complications resulting from cardiovascular procedures. It doesn't say where he died. Armstrong commanded the Apollo 11 spacecraft that landed on the moon July 20, 1969. He radioed back to Earth the historic news of "one giant leap for mankind." Armstrong and fellow astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin spent nearly three hours walking on the moon, collecting samples, conducting experiments and taking photographs. In all, 12 Americans walked on the moon from 1969 to 1972. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP)—When man first harnessed fire, no one recorded it. When the Wright Brothers showed man could fly, only a handful of people witnessed it. But when Neil Armstrong took that first small step on the moon in July 1969, an entire globe watched in grainy black-and-white from a quarter million miles (400,000 kilometers) away

We saw it. We were part of it. He took that "giant leap for mankind" for us.

Although more than half of the world's population wasn't alive then, it was an event that changed and expanded the globe.

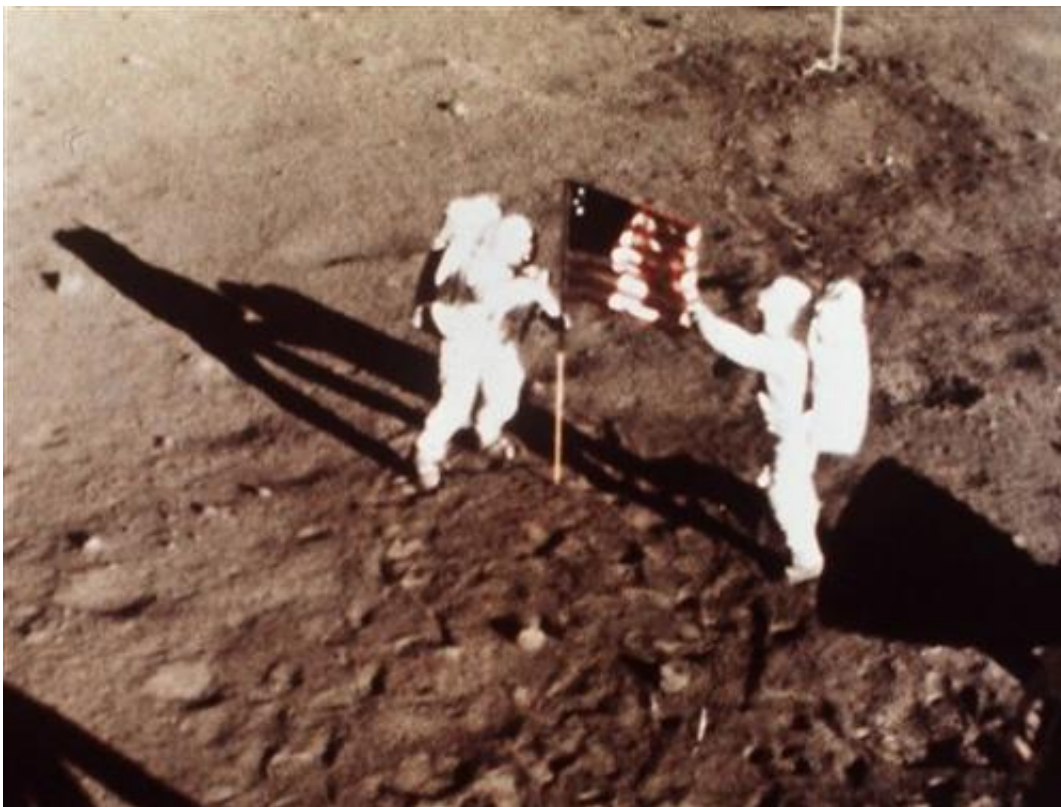
"It's a human achievement that will be remembered forever," said John Logsdon, professor emeritus of [space policy](#) at George Washington University. Those first steps were beamed to nearly every country around the world, thanks to a recently launched satellite. It was truly the first global mass media event, Logsdon said. An estimated 600 million people—1 out of every 5 on the planet—watched.

The two historical events likely to be long remembered from the 20th Century are the [moon landing](#) and the first atomic bomb, said Smithsonian Institution space curator Roger Launius.

"There is no way to overestimate that significance in human history and he is forever linked to that," Launius said of Armstrong, who died Saturday at age 82.

Just as the voyage of Christopher Columbus split historic eras 500 years ago, so will [Neil Armstrong](#) and Apollo 11, said Rice University historian Douglas Brinkley, a specialist in 20th Century history.

"We may be living in the age of Armstrong," said Brinkley, who conducted oral histories for NASA, including sessions with Armstrong.



In this July 20, 1969, file photo, provided by NASA, Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, the first men to land on the moon, plant the U.S. flag on the lunar surface. The family of Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, says he has died at age 82 on Saturday, Aug. 25, 2012. Armstrong commanded the Apollo 11 spacecraft that landed on the moon July 20, 1969. He radioed back to Earth the historic news of "one giant leap for mankind." (AP Photo/NASA, File)

The late science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke wrote that the Apollo 11 moon landing was "one of the great divides in human history; we are sundered from it forever by the moment when Neil Armstrong and [Buzz Aldrin](#) stepped out on to the Sea of Tranquility. Now history and fiction have become inexorably intertwined."

Since that day, there's been a common phrase: "If we can send a man to the moon, why can't we ... ?" with the blank filled with a task that seems far less difficult.

Armstrong's small step was that leap in confidence telling the world "if we can do this, we can do anything," said Howard McCurdy, a professor of space and public policy at American University and author of the book "Space and the American Imagination."

"He took something that 20 years earlier was pure fantasy and turned it into reality and if we could do that for space we could do it for anything," McCurdy said Saturday.

The Apollo 11 moon landing was the finish line in a decade-long space race started by the Soviet Union. And so the first steps on the moon coming from an American had many meanings. Getting there first showed American technological superiority, but Armstrong mentioned mankind—not Americans—demonstrating that this was a moment for the people of Earth, McCurdy said.

Armstrong and Aldrin left a plaque on the moon that read: "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot upon the moon. July 1969 A.D. We came in peace for all mankind."

For all mankind. And that's how the world took it.

"The success for America (is a) success for every living man" reported the Swahili-language newspaper Nguromo of Dar.

And if that wasn't enough, Armstrong and Aldrin also left a patch to commemorate NASA astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts who had died in pursuit of space.

"It was special and memorable but it was only instantaneous because there was work to do," Armstrong told an Australian television interviewer this year.

The Cold War may have slightly muted the significance of the event at the time, but over the years the importance of the moon landing has only grown, Logsdon said.

It's permeated into culture. The moon landing is in movies, television, books, songs and it was even Michael Jackson's signature dance step. That's probably because in some ways that moonwalk touched something that has been hard-wired into humanity: the need to explore. For 25,000 years, humans have been migrating and pushing into new places. Armstrong took it to new heights.

John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, noted it was "the first time any human being set foot on a place other than Earth, and that's a pretty big step."

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Citation: Armstrong's small step a giant leap for humanity (2012, August 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-armstrong-small-giant-humanity.html>

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