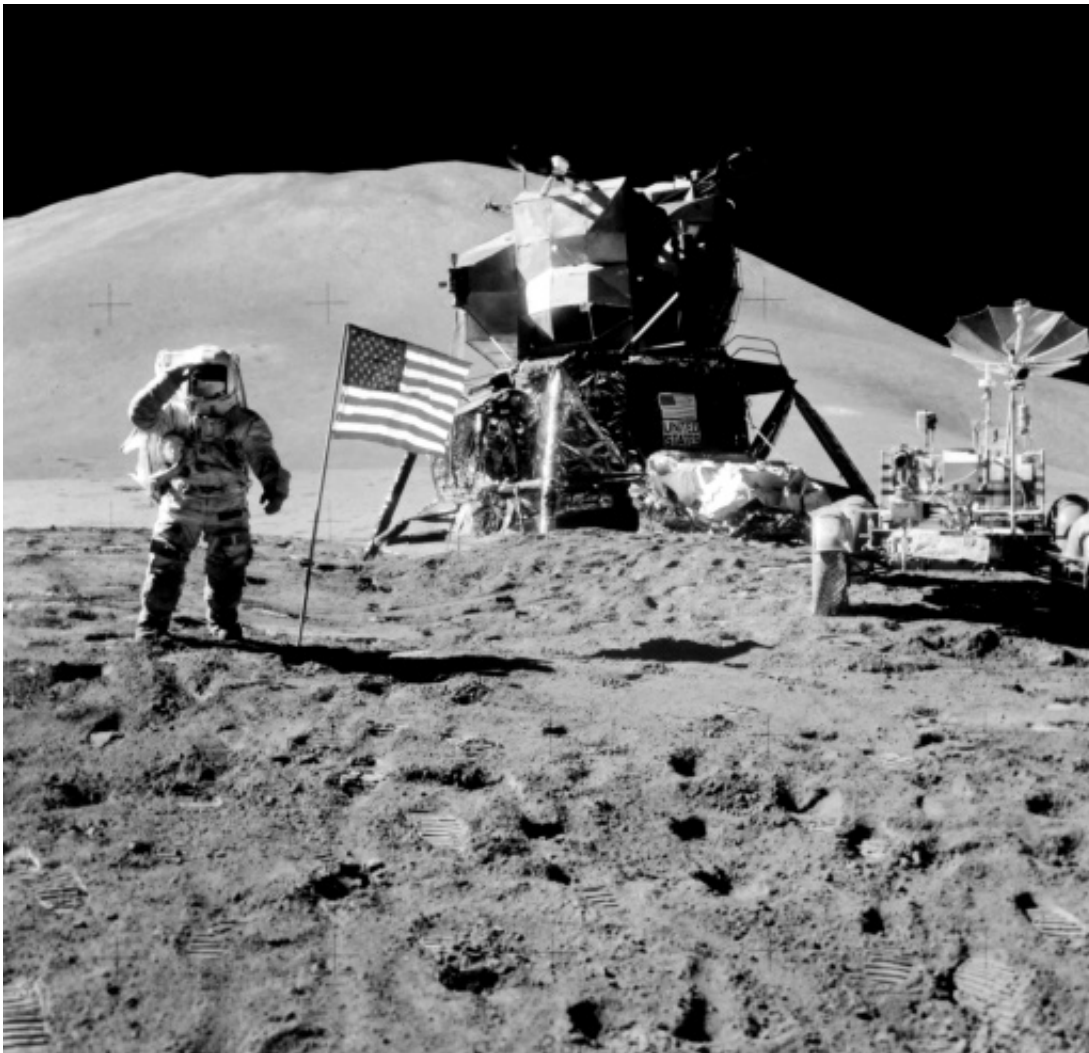


Pence vows 'new era' in US space exploration, but few details

July 7 2017, by Kerry Sheridan



US Vice President Mike Pence vowed to put astronauts on the Moon for the first time since the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 1970s—but gave no specifics

US Vice President Mike Pence vowed Thursday to usher in a "new era" of American leadership in space, with a return to the Moon and explorers on Mars, but offered few details.

Pence, who was recently named to head a government advisory body called the National Space Council, said the group would hold its first meeting "before the summer is out."

He also toured NASA's Kennedy Space Center to see progress in constructing a NASA spaceship destined for deep [space](#) and privately built capsules designed to send astronauts to low-Earth orbit in the coming years.

"Our nation will return to the Moon, and we will put American boots on the face of Mars," Pence told the cheering crowd of about 800 NASA employees, space experts and private contractors, but gave no specifics.

"We did win the race to the Moon," he added, recalling the Apollo missions of the 1960s and 1970s which sent men—one of whom, Buzz Aldrin, sat in the audience—to the surface of the Moon.

NASA earlier this year announced it is exploring a project called the Deep Space Gateway, which could send astronauts into the vicinity of the Moon using a massive new rocket, known as the Space Launch System, or SLS, being developed by NASA.

And propelling people to Mars by the 2030s was a key feature of US space policy under the previous administrations of Barack Obama and George W. Bush.

Shuttle era

The United States lost the ability to send astronauts to the International

Space Station when the shuttle program was retired in 2011.

Since then, Americans have been forced to hitch rides aboard Russia's Soyuz spacecraft, at a cost of more than \$80 million per seat.

SpaceX and Boeing are hard at work on space capsules that will start sending people to low-Earth orbit as early as 2018.

Pence, who spoke in front of a previously flown SpaceX Dragon cargo capsule and a Boeing Starliner spaceship model, said he would continue to foster cooperation with private industry to make space travel cheaper, safer and more accessible than before.

"It was heartening to see him allude to growing public-private partnerships, but the lack of policy details, personnel and budgetary priorities is concerning," Phil Larson, a former White House space advisor under Obama who also worked for SpaceX, told AFP after the speech.

"Usually you have a leader visit, tour and give a speech to roll out a detail-oriented policy after it's been developed. This is backwards."

President Donald Trump's proposed budget, released in March, called for \$19.1 billion for NASA, a 0.8 percent decrease from 2017.

It called for NASA to abandon plans to lasso an asteroid and cut several missions to study climate change and Earth science.

But NASA would emerge largely unscathed compared to deep cuts proposed at other agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency.

Lawmakers are still hammering out their adjustments to the proposed budget, which should be decided on later this year.

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