

# **To the moon and back: Apollo 8 and the future of lunar exploration**

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Astronauts James (Jim) Lovell, Frank Borman, and William (Bill) Anders pose for a portrait in their space suits on November 22, 1968, just less than a month

before they would orbit the moon. Credit: NASA

Apollo 8 was supposed to be a test flight, meant to simulate atmospheric re-entry from the moon but never meant to go there. Hurling toward Earth at 2,407.5 miles per hour is hairy business and NASA, having never done so before, needed practice. But then the USSR successfully launched two of its own moonshots (unmanned Zond 5 and 6) on the heels of President Kennedy's call for men on the moon by the end of the '60s. It felt to most like a matter of time before America lost its space race for good.

NASA's plan for Apollo 8 had to change.

Following a spark of ambitious vision, NASA reorganized, galvanizing a wild rush of fervor and late nights. In mid-August of 1968, astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and William Anders received a call telling them to cancel their holiday plans—they were going to the moon.

By December, the three men were suddenly farther away than any human had ever been from our home planet, traveling faster and seeing more than could be seen in the entire history of life on Earth. From prehistoric cephalopods to T-Rex to our ape-like ancestors to Alexander the Great, no single pair of eyeballs had ever been so far from Earth's gravitational influence until Dec. 21, 1968.

We were shooting for the [moon](#) and we got there, sure enough, but the real triumph of Apollo 8 was beyond nationalism, beyond the tumultuousness of an age that catapulted these three men into the dark unknown. Apollo 8 was the fruition of ancient Chinese stargazers, renaissance dreamers and mid-century physicists. It was, above all, our first good look at ourselves, with the best possible perspective.

Today, leading up to the anniversary of one of humankind's most audacious missions, we begin to celebrate 50 years of learning, inspiration, altitude and ingenuity not only about our nearest neighbor but also about Earth and where modern lunar exploration will take us next.

Provided by NASA

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