Walking on the moon, still warring on earth

The title of this essay both intrigued and confused me when I first read it. Although the idea of space in general evokes an atmosphere of quiet tranquillity in many people, my initial thoughts were of the space race and the tense, long-enduring conflict made up of proxy wars and ongoing competition for power that was the cold war.

It made me think- who was the first person to think of travelling to the moon? Some might look back at old fantasisers like H.G. Wells and others still further back, whose imagination reached to amazing heights yet surpassed the possibilities of their generation. Still others might say Kennedy; the president well-known for his assassination (an act of violence that shocked nations) who officially made The Decision To Go on May 25th 1961- just several months after entering office. At that time the pressure must have been on to fulfil the dream. The dream that was entangled almost entirely with the war of 'the superpowers' that had kicked off almost twenty years earlier...

After the Second World War, all the world could think of was bombs. That is, the USA and its new-found nemesis the USSR could only think of bombs (while lots of the rest of the world were just focused on the damage caused by the last war). Bombs that could tear apart whole nations. Bombs that could cause lasting radioactive damage like leukaemia and other cancers. Bombs that split an atom-something with a diameter of one ten billionth of a metre. Bombs that maimed and killed hundreds of thousands of people. By the end of 1945, just half a year after the detonation of the atomic bomb, over 74,000 people in Hiroshima had been killed.

And it wasn't just Hiroshima. There was Nagasaki. The Cuban missile crisis - a near miss. Later Chernobyl.

Atomic bombs. Hydrogen bombs. The Tsar Bomba.

Eventually, world leaders began to realise what the dangers posed by bombs would mean - not least after the moon landings in 1969, when suddenly all sorts of technological warfare became possible. At first, this only encouraged nuclear proliferation as the favoured policy was that of M.A.D. (mutually assured destruction), with countries like the USA and the USSR competing to ensure that they were 'safe' from nuclear threats by staying in the game and themselves threatening to fight back with equally destructive weapons. However, after the scare of the Cuban missile crisis, leaders felt real fear as it was such a narrow escape. In this way, relatively peaceful agreements were made to ensure that destruction could not occur so easily.

There were arms limitation treaties and nuclear non-proliferation treaties in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Notably, there was the Outer Space Treaty in 1967,

which ensured that space was treated as a common ground and not used for military gain - perhaps meaning that the cosmos was once more thought of as a peaceful place for scientific development to take place.

Of course that period of so-called 'détente' did not endure. There would always be leaders seeking to exploit humankind's power over space. Reagan's strategic defence initiative and 'Star Wars' fantasies, for example. And it didn't end there.

In fact, our whole culture associates technological advances in space with warfare and violence. Perhaps due to our ongoing history of links between space travel and competition, we all know about the destruction of the death star in the ongoing film franchise created by George Lucas, and we'd probably all recognise Mars as both the red planet and the Roman god of war. What we can learn from this excursion into the realms of the 20th Century, though, is that space wasn't always thought of like this. If we try to make it work peacefully, then it can.

Anna Pitt-Francis