

## Walking on the Moon, Still Warring on Earth

Since the dawn of civilisation, history has been dominated by unceasing warfare and violence, showing, as John Steinbeck said, 'man's failure as a thinking animal.' Yet this failure has helped us to succeed in reaching out towards space, making us realise how insignificant our actions on Earth really are. Now, as we commemorate fifty years since people first stepped onto the moon, there is hope that our collaborations in space can lead to us to take steps towards the cherished dream of peace.

The Greek Philosopher Plato said, 'only the dead have seen the end of war' and it appears that this is true. Throughout history, mankind's violence has dominated the world. The earliest evidence of warfare comes from circa. 9000 BCE, when a 15-foot-tall defensive wall was built around a settlement in Ancient Jericho, near the present-day West Bank. The first recorded war, circa. 2700 BCE, took place in Mesopotamia between Sumar and Elam. The Roman Empire was built on warfare. The Roman God of War, Mars, was the father of Romulus and Remus and, thus, father of the Romans. Remus was murdered by Romulus, which people believe to be a sign of the violent success of the Romans. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at least 187 million people died due to wars.<sup>1</sup> The war in Afghanistan took the lives of 35,941 people in 2018, has claimed over 16,000 more this year and, sadly, this number is still rising. Currently, there are 38 wars raging across the world.<sup>2</sup> The dream of abolition of war seems remote and beyond our reach as this history of violence continues.

At 20:17 (Coordinated Universal Time) on July 20, 1969, the world was watching, with bated breath, as Apollo 11 landed on the moon. However, behind this achievement, lie the same conflicts. Arguably, the Space Race started in World War Two when the Nazis launched the V-2 which was effectively the world's first space rocket. At the end of the war, both the US and Soviet Union, the leading countries in space exploration, took control of Nazi manufacturing sites and scientists to use for research for their space exploration programs. The Cold War saw the Space Race taking off, as both the US and the USSR wanted to prove that their technology was superior, starting with Russia's launch of Sputnik 1, the first satellite to orbit Earth, in 1957, then the Vostok spacecraft, the first manned spacecraft, in 1961. The US rocket, Apollo 11 then successfully landed on the moon carrying Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong. The Apollo 11 crew left on the moon an Apollo 1 patch to commemorate the crew of Apollo 1, who died in a fire during the testing of the spacecraft; importantly, they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/timeline-of-20th-and-21st-century-wars>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/maps-and-graphics/2017/04/04/updated-mapped-world-war> - 24/5/19

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also carried with them two Soviet medals to honour Vladimir Komarov, who died in the Soyuz 1 spacecraft in 1967 and Yuri Gagarin, the first man to orbit the Earth, who was killed in an aircraft crash in 1968. The seemingly contradictory messages here – and in every human achievement – perhaps demand the realisation that human achievements are sparked by conflict just as they promise to heal it. How appropriate then that the US missions are named after the God Apollo, God of plague but also of healing.

There is, therefore, glimmering hope that as we look to the stars, we are helping to solve problems on Earth. The International Space Station is just that, ‘international’. The two countries that have had the most people on the ISS are the US (149 people) and Russia (47 people)<sup>3</sup> telling us that these two countries can collaborate. However, on Earth, rising political tensions between these countries since the Cold War and, more recently, over the war in Ukraine, the US elections and so forth, tell us a completely different story. Why do we have to move further away from Earth to come closer together?

The famous ‘Blue Dot’ image<sup>4</sup> taken of Earth from space depicts Earth as 0.12 pixels wide. As Sagan wrote in his 1994 book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, ‘that’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it is everyone you love... every creator and destroyer of civilization... every corrupt politician... in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.’ To put it another way, Edgar Mitchel, an Apollo 14 astronaut, said, ‘From out there on the moon, international politics look so petty.’ Nevertheless, war is - and has always been - at the heart of humankind’s achievements in space, destroying the lives of many people across the world not just now, but across Earth’s history. As H G Wells said, ‘if we don’t end war, war will end us.’

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/visitors-to-the-station-by-country/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/resources/536/voyager-1s-pale-blue-dot/>