

worldview

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WE CHOOSE TO GO

The story of the British explorer George Mallory is familiar. Asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, the mountain which was eventually to claim his life, he answered "Because it is there." claim his life, he answered simply, "Because it is there."

President Kennedy recalled this story when, in his recent address at Rice University, he pledged that the United States, during his term as President, would commit itself to seizing the lead in the exploration of space. One of the reasons that our nation has given this goal a high priority, he said, is that space is there and we have the means to explore; it presents a challenge and we have the desire and will to meet it.

But this could not be the full or adequate reason, and the President spelled out some of the more mundane, though still exciting, reasons. This country has, from its earliest days, ridden the waves of industrial and technological progress and does not now intend to founder. If we do not make the attempt others will, and our own relative strength and security will be swiftly diminished. From our space probings we will gain new knowledge concerning our global environment and the entire universe. Further, there is less likelihood, if we succeed, that the vast reaches of space will become simply an enlarged and extended battlefield in which we will continue our terrestrial conflicts.

The President's address indicates the distance we have travelled since a recent Secretary of Defense dismissed the first satellite as an iron bauble and described research as "when you don't know what you're doing." But there is a great distance yet to travel, for it is still common to hear, at various levels of our society, expressions of indifference or even hostility to our national space program.

This is accompanied at times, even among intelligent and sophisticated people, by expressions of distrust toward the scientist and all his works, as if it were science—and not man's use of it—that has brought us to this crux in our history; as if man, born on this earth, were fated to re-

main on it and that any action which questions this is an affront to the gods. Africa, Berlin and Cuba are the ABC's of our national purpose at this time, we are told, and it is foolish to attempt to leave this planet until we have settled our major problems here. We need all of our collective strength, intelligence and will to counter and overcome the forces that now threaten our very survival.

Such reasoning is not completely without basis. It is an obvious truth that if we do not solve the urgent and recurrent problems which are now centered in Cuba, Berlin and Africa—if, in other words, we do not avoid a great military conflict—then all our present efforts to explore outer space will be for naught. But it is equally true, if less obvious, that if we do not venture into outer space it will not matter, in some years time, if we have successfully coped with the international crises that now beset us. For we will have relinquished what we will increasingly need to sustain ourselves in any world that we can readily foresee.

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We have heard a great deal in recent years about national purpose and national goals and national will—all of which we were supposed either to lack or to be confused about. But conclusions in this area are difficult to arrive at and none is to be readily accepted. For national purpose is not composed of a list of things only; it is composed of some recognizable, if not easily defined goals, imbued with a sense of purpose or achievement, with the ability and desire to take risks. It is this that the President represented when he said our space program "is, in some measure an act of faith and vision, for we do not know what benefits await us," and when he added that we will go to the moon because "we choose to go to the moon." In terms of our national purpose this impractical, apparently non-rational basis for our space program, may well be the most important.