

TAKE THREE: THE MOON LANDING

Nixoning the Moon

Kathryn Cramer Brownell

On the cratered surface of the moon, a small stainless steel plaque commemorates the remarkable visit made by “men from the planet earth” who “came in peace for all mankind” in the summer of 1969 (Figure 1). It bears the name of the three men who made the journey, Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin, and Michael Collins. And it features the name of one man who did not: President Richard M. Nixon.

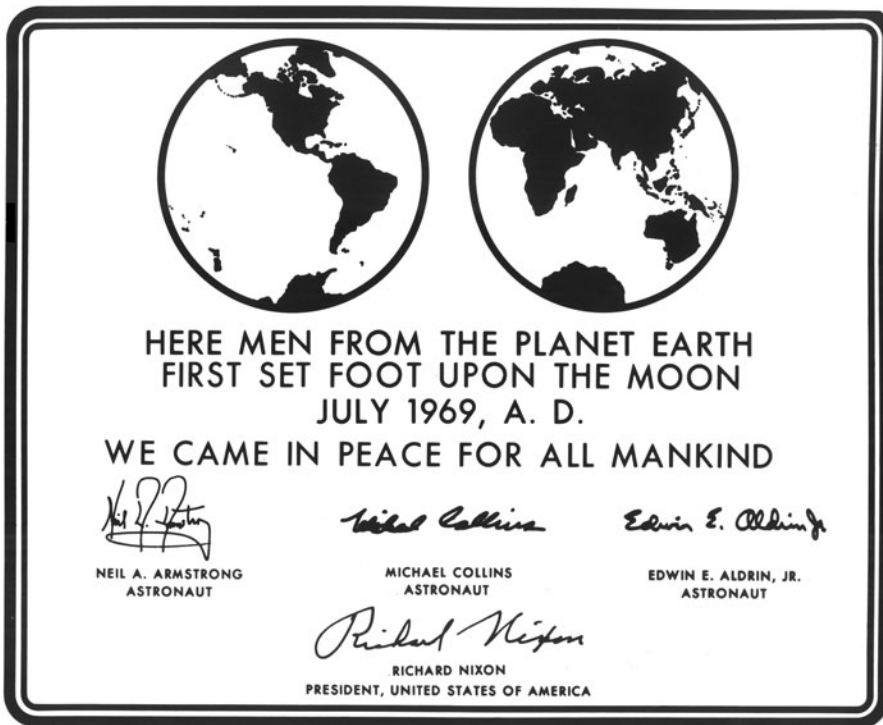


Figure 1. Photographic reproduction of the engraved commemorative plaque left on the moon. Courtesy of NASA.

This curious signature captures one earthbound president’s successful yet controversial effort to use the publicity surrounding the moon landing to promote his own political agenda. Since the New Deal, presidents had attached their name to federal infrastructure programs. But Nixon’s critics argued that this spectacular accomplishment was different. Because the endeavor reflected the vision and work of the two presidents before him, it “should not be treated like the kind of run-of-the-mill public works project,” argued one journalist. To do so would reflect a “narrow chauvinism.”¹ Nixon occupied center stage with the astronauts of Apollo XI even so. An editorial writer for the *New York Times* described the tactic as “Nixoning the Moon.”²

¹Article from the *Washington Star* reprinted in William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York, 1975), 145.

²“Nixoning the Moon,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1969, 24.



Figure 2. President Nixon speaking with astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin on the moon, July 20, 1969. Courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. The call was also filmed for posterity: <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/events/centennials/nixon/exhibit/nixon-online-exhibit-calls.html>

The moon landing thrilled Nixon, like it did millions of other Americans, even though it meant a fulfillment of his Democratic rivals' ambitions. The space mission began as a promise by John F. Kennedy to restore American pride and prestige in the race for technological prowess against the Soviet Union. Abetted by the growing scope of the Cold War presidency, the space program expanded further under Lyndon B. Johnson as a means to promote education and employment through the federal government.³ But the culmination of this bipartisan program would be distinctly Nixonian. More than an isolated publicity stunt, the moon landing encapsulated the thirty-seventh president's approach to politics—one that harnessed public relations and image as a central source of power. Nixon's lunar spectacle would be carefully crafted to cast himself as the star of the show, even if the show was physically out of this world.

On July 20, 1969, television screens flickered with the scene of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon as he proclaimed, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But the next television image, like that stainless steel plaque, sent a different message. A split screen juxtaposed the astronauts on the moon with the sight of Richard Nixon in the Oval Office, making the "most historic telephone call ever" (Figure 2).⁴ With millions glued to their sets, the president intoned: "As you speak to us from the Sea of Tranquility, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquility to earth."

Although Nixon may have uttered noncontroversial platitudes that evening, many balked at his self-imposed prominence during the event. The White House scene created a "discordant note," complained cultural critic Jack Gould. "The occasion was a world triumph," he argued, "not a time for injection of nationalist considerations."⁵ The *New York Times* editorial that

³Roger D. Launius and Howard E. McCurdy, eds., *Spaceflight and the Myth of Presidential Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997).

⁴Walter Rugaber, "Nixon Makes 'Most Historic Telephone Call Ever,'" *New York Times*, July 21, 1969, 2.

⁵Jack Gould, "TV: An Awesome Event," *New York Times*, July 21, 1969, 67.

harangued the president for wasting time and resources saw a split screen television appearance as “unworthy of the President of the United States.”⁶ Another *Times* reader called the way Nixon had “horned in” on the event “frightening.”⁷

President Nixon fumed at this criticism. Angered by the “Nixoning the Moon” editorial, Nixon instructed his chief-of-staff, H. R. Haldeman, to put the White House press ban back on the *New York Times*.⁸ Speechwriter William Safire called the piece a “classic case of refusal to recognize Nixon’s legitimacy by people who hated to see Nixon—even as President—sully a ‘Kennedy project’ with his presence at the fruition.”⁹ The White House instead distributed to its staffers a more favorable editorial from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* to remind them of the “epochal achievement” that had just occurred. “Only a bad case of Nixonphobia,” this approved column argued, would lead someone to view the president’s phone call as nothing more than a “publicity stunt.”¹⁰

Nixon’s response to the event’s coverage—punishing critics and rewarding allies—exposed how central image and warring with the press had become to the larger goals of the Nixon administration. Over the course of his career, Richard Nixon had become well-known for animosity toward journalists, whom he believed doggedly pursued negative coverage of him.¹¹ In 1968, he waged a remarkable political “comeback” in his White House quest by relying on the expertise of media advisors—notably the advertising executive Harry Treleaven and the television producer and future Fox News founder Roger Ailes—all of whom agreed that Kennedy had defeated the candidate in 1960 by mastering the mass media and casting himself as a celebrity to gain political power.¹² Nixon took their advice, followed in Kennedy’s footsteps to take control of the media narrative, and transformed his campaign into a successful electoral bid. As president, he tapped into these same ideas about the intertwined relationship between public relations, celebrity, and political power to govern.

The moon landing fit perfectly into Nixon’s strategy. H. R. Haldeman noted how “intrigued” the president was “with his participation in the whole thing.”¹³ Knowing that the eyes of the world would be on the astronauts, Nixon seized as many opportunities as he could to choreograph stock footage of presidential leadership that could be used to prime foreign leaders for his upcoming trip to Asia and to assert his authority over a divided electorate at home (Figure 3). Ailes, who President Nixon had called to Washington to advise on the television optics of the historic phone call, also produced the first ever televised state dinner to welcome home the astronauts. The paparazzi captured the evening’s Hollywood glitz and glamour as the president and the astronauts along with their wives arrived via helicopters to Beverly Hills where they dined on beef perigourdine and Inglenook cabernet sauvignon. The *Los Angeles Times* pronounced it the “Dinner of the Century.”¹⁴

On the surface, the televised “leap for mankind” celebrations seemed universally appealing, sweeping viewers up in shared enthusiasm regardless of gender, color, or creed. But important political subtexts were at work. William Safire recognized the moon landing as a special opportunity for Nixon to connect to his political base, the “square” people of the Midwest and the

⁶“Nixoning the Moon,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1969, 24.

⁷Gertrude Mertens, Letter to the Editor, “Nixon’s Horning In,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1969, 46.

⁸H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries* (New York, 1994), 74.

⁹Safire, *Before the Fall*, 149.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 150.

¹¹David Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow: A History of an Image* (New York, 2004).

¹²Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), 195–207.

¹³Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 71.

¹⁴Fred Ferretti, “Nixon May Speak to Men on Moon,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1969, 1; Dinner menu for Century Plaza, August 13, 1969, Folder 4, Box 79, Neil A. Armstrong Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN; Gabriel Sherman, *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News—and Divided a Country* (New York, 2014), 63.



Figure 3. En route to Asia, President Nixon speaks to the Apollo XI astronauts on board the USS *Hornet* through the glass door of their Mobile Quarantine Facility. NASA.

Sunbelt. It contained an “us-versus-them” lesson, he thought, about the achievements of “Southern and Midwestern hicks” and how they had gotten the better of “the New York intelligentsia.”¹⁵ Similar to his celebration of that year’s hit Merle Haggard song “Okie from Muskogee” and his use of the newly coined phrase “silent majority,” Nixon held up the astronauts as wholesome, traditional American heroes, the kind who appealed to his white rural and small town supporters, while he stood at their side, siphoning off of their accomplishments.

As contracted government employees, the spacemen were expected to travel the country, following a strict script, answering fan letters, and putting in appearances at the White House and on television.¹⁶ Neil Armstrong even entertained troops with Bob Hope in South Vietnam.¹⁷ And some Americans loved it. By the summer of 1970, when the NBC television reporter Chet Huntley lamented that the festivities had “trapped” the networks in an “exercise in boredom,” one self-identified “middle American” struck back against such “slurs” against the president and the astronauts by “Eastern Establishment Intellectuals.” The writer penned follow-up

¹⁵Safire, *Before the Fall*, 147.

¹⁶Contracts and rules over media appearances and public statements restricted what astronauts could say in public and even went so far as to regulate autographs that they could give to fans. See policy documents in Folder 2, Box 146, Neil A. Armstrong Papers.

¹⁷Neil Armstrong received thousands of letters from across the world and spent two years traveling to all fifty states as well as the Soviet Union. The Armstrong papers at Purdue University have extensive documentation of the fanfare.

letters to Armstrong and Nixon, assuring them of his support and loyalty.¹⁸ Behind the scenes, Nixon cut the NASA budget. But publicly, he was still capitalizing on the lunar touchdown two years later. Footage of his phone call with astronauts beamed forth from a documentary shown at the 1972 Republican National Convention, building a partisan case for Nixon's "courage and leadership."¹⁹

The moon landing also inspired Nixon to further consolidate the power of the presidency. Emboldened by Armstrong's and Aldrin's successful steps through the moon dust, Nixon convened his closest advisors the next day, demanding that they take bold action within the executive office "now." Notes from Haldeman's July 21, 1969, meeting with Henry Kissinger, John Erlichman, and Nixon emphasized the president's new sense of urgency to get moving, to "establish the mystique of the presidency," and to use power "more effectively."²⁰ "Impressed by the astronauts last night," wrote Haldeman, the president instructed his team to use the word "GO as the theme: Means all systems ready, never be indecisive, get going, take risks, be exciting." This meeting launched two related developments that would define the next five years of the Nixon administration: first, the pursuit of loyalty and muscle in the executive branch by a system of "reward and punish," and second the concentrated effort to "sell accomplishments" of the president through a more centralized PR operation, spearheaded by the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP).²¹ During the 1972 election, CREEP worked hard to highlight the president as "a man of action" who had "long-range vision and a master plan" as well as "courage, decisiveness, and dedication" in the face of the "mess" he "inherited in 1968."²² But it also aimed to destroy the image of the president's opponents even by illegal means, which helped Nixon win reelection, but also hastened his downfall.

Although Nixon left office on August 8, 1974, amidst scandal, he forever transformed American political culture with the showbiz politics he brought into the White House and to the moon. And, as Apollo astronauts cultivated newfound publicity skills and forged remarkable connections to voters during their time in orbit and back on Earth, they become political contenders themselves as fame, rather than experience with governing, become key to political success.²³

Kathryn Cramer Brownell is assistant professor of history at Purdue University. She is the author of *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), which examines the role of entertainment in American politics and the emergence of the celebrity presidency.

¹⁸Letters exchanged between Goldberg, Huntley, Nixon, and Armstrong, July 1970, Folder 3, Box 309, Neil A. Armstrong Papers.

¹⁹Memo from Gordon Strachan, June 12, 1972, Folder 7, Box 14, Contested Materials Collection, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library (RMNL), Yorba Linda, CA.

²⁰Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 73.

²¹On the pursuit of loyalty and power, see Michael Koncewicz, "They Said 'No' to Nixon: Republicans Who Stood Up to the President's Abuse of Power," manuscript under contract with University of California Press. On CREEP as a PR operation, see Brownell, *Showbiz Politics*, 207–218.

²²Memo from Gordon Strachan, June 12, 1972, Folder 7, Box 14, RMNL.

²³John Noble Wilford, "Many Astronauts Now Pursue Down-to-Earth Careers in Business and Politics," *New York Times*, December 29, 1969, 33; David Canon, *Actors, Athletes, and Astronauts: Political Amateurs in the United States Congress* (Chicago, 1990).