

INST 154

Apollo at 50

Discussion Questions

Session 27: The Soviet Lunar Landing Program

1. There were a number of technical differences between the US and Soviet lunar landing programs. Some reflected choices that one side or the other made because they faced different circumstances. Others reflected unconstrained choices that could have been made either way by either side. List as many of the unconstrained choices as you can. Then, for each, identify which side made the better choice.
2. Look back at your answers from question 1. Did any of these, or any combination of these, determine the outcome (that the Americans succeeded in a human landing on the moon, whereas the Soviet Union never did)? Or was it the different circumstances of the two sides that essentially predetermined the outcome? Or could it have come out either way, with the actual outcome simply being a matter of chance (for reasons such as who happened to be in positions of authority on each side, or which side got unlucky with accidents that were beyond any reasonable human control, or ...)?
3. After Apollo 8 beat the Soviet Zond program to the Moon with a human crew, it became clear to the Soviets that they were unlikely to challenge Apollo on its own terms in the public discourse. They therefore shifted the focus of the “strategic communication” regarding the relative importance of various space program goals to better align with their relative advantages. What did they start to give greater emphasis to? Was this new emphasis (or emphases) well chosen, given the strategic purpose of the Soviet space program? Were the choices that they made the best that were available to them, or are there other choices that would have been better?