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Apollo at 50

Discussion Questions

Session 3: NASA Before Apollo

NASA was rather unlike the N.A.C.A. that it grew out of. Here we'll look at a few things that either caused or resulted from those differences.

1. 1958 was a time of divided government in the United States, with a Republican President, a Democratic Senate (with a very slim majority), and a Democratic House of Representatives (with a 33 seat majority). The American political system is designed to favor stasis – changing the law requires that the President, the House and the Senate all agree, and that the Supreme Court uphold the constitutionality of the law if challenged. How was it, then, that the government acted so quickly and decisively to create NASA? What strategies were used to achieve this?
2. When NASA was ready to buy spacecraft for the Mercury program they wrote a contract to buy them. But how do you write a contract to buy something that doesn't yet exist, and for which nobody actually knows how to build it? Who decided what the spacecraft should do? How did they know that they were right? How did they know that the contractor could build it?
3. President Eisenhower's decision to select only military test pilots to fly the spacecraft for what he had insisted be a civilian agency was a little odd. What was his reason for doing this, and how might things have been different if they had gone with the more open call for applications that had originally been proposed (which was described in the Swenson reading)?