INST 154
Apollo at 50
Discussion Questions
Session 4: The Decision to Go to the Moon

In this class we are particularly interested in understanding how Apollo is – and isn't – like other substantial challenges that societies may – or may not – choose to tackle. The commitment to action is one important aspect of this multi-faceted issue. That's our focus for this week's discussion. Please discuss the following questions.

1. When seeking to explain a decision, we often implicitly adopt the rational actor model and explain why the decision that was selected was both feasible and a logical choice. As Graham Allison has noted, such explanations can be constructed for pretty much any (reasonable) decision, whether the choice is to act or not to act, so there must be more to the story than just the rational actor perspective. Choose some major decision that some government has made (e.g., the President's recent decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate change, or the Chinese decision over the past decade to construct facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea, or the State of Maryland's decision in recent years to limit tuition increases to 2% per year) and adopt a bureaucratic politics perspective to explain the decision you have chosen.

2. John Logsdon has suggested four circumstances that together make it possible for nations to make a "big decision" to do something. Pick some "big decision" other than the Apollo program from American history (some examples might include the American Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, the creation of the Social Security or Medicare systems, or the decision to invade Iraq after 9/11) and explain whether each of Logsdon's circumstances existed when that big decision was made.

3. Make a list of several significant issues facing our society over the next decade or two. Logsdon's four circumstances might – or might not -- all align at the same time for any one of these issues, and indeed some of the issues might not even be amenable to a "big decision" in the first place (for example, no one "big decision" led to the creation of the World Wide Web). But the goal of this question is not to decide whether a big decision is possible or appropriate in each case, but rather to construct a list of issues about which you might – later – ask that question (and other questions).