

HONR269i

To the Moon and Back: The Apollo Program

Discussion Questions

Session 18: Voskhod, Soyuz and Zond

The American and Soviet space programs largely had the same goals, but they made different decisions, and those decisions contributed to different outcomes.

1. Name some specific decisions that the Soviet space program made that the American space program decided differently that helped to advance their lunar landing program. This question is hard because you know the outcome, and that knowledge will color your opinions on the wisdom of certain decisions. You may find it easier to examine the alternative outcome (that the Soviet Union was first to land people on the Moon, perhaps because of some accident that substantially delayed Apollo) and then try to explain what it was that they did to achieve that outcome that the Americans could have, but didn't, do.
2. Now turn the problem on its head and name some decisions that the American space program made that the Soviet space program decided differently that helped to advance the American lunar landing program. This question is hard because there are many things the Americans did differently, but the question asks you to name the ones that actually mattered to the outcome. Because history takes only one path, you can't know for sure which ones made a difference and which did not. But you can test your beliefs in that by asking yourself what would have happened if they had made the same decision the Soviet Union did on that point. If it would not have been likely to change the outcome, it isn't one of the decisions we want to be talking about here.
3. Now pick two cases in which the Soviets made a better decision (from question 1) and two cases in which the Americans made a better decision (from question 2), and, for each, explain why those issues were decided differently. It will be tempting to just claim that it's because the people in charge made different decisions, and that's always the case. But these were all smart people, and smart people don't make decisions capriciously – they make them for reasons – often more than once reason. These reasons might be cultural, political, financial, technical, practical, venal, or any other "...al" you can think of. Dig deep and articulate what you think are the reasons that things were decided as they were on each side for the four issues you have chosen.