

HONR269i

To the Moon and Back: The Apollo Program

Discussion Questions

Session 19: 1968

1. It is now well understood that demographic bulges that result in large numbers of young people often result in social changes and (sometimes violent) challenges to the existing order. It is also now well understood that birth rates tend to decline markedly as societies become wealthier. We thus typically see the largest demographic bulges of young people (“youth bulges”) in places such as Africa where the economic circumstances are the most challenging. Start by identifying specific events in today’s world that might result in part from “youth bulges” in the demographic distribution. Then speculate on other effects that we might see from such effects over the next decade or so.
2. The United States was more than twice as wealthy in 1972 (\$1.28 trillion GDP) when the Apollo Program ended than it had been in 1961 (\$0.56 trillion GDP) when the commitment to the Moon landing had been made. And yet the two final Apollo missions were cancelled in September 1970 because the Nixon Administration determined that they simply could not afford the cost of flying them. Clearly Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is not the whole story. How can we rationally explain the conclusion that there simply wasn’t enough money when there quite clearly was a lot more money than there had been when the decision to build all that hardware and to develop the capability to land on the Moon had been made?
3. The entire Apollo program was flown during a period of tremendous social unrest. What should NASA have done differently because of this than they would have done if the flights had been flown, for example, during a time of greater national cohesion? For every answer you give, be clear about the tie to social unrest (and not, for example, to other factors such as the competition for resources or the achievements of the Soviet space program in the same period).