

# Brief History of Rockets

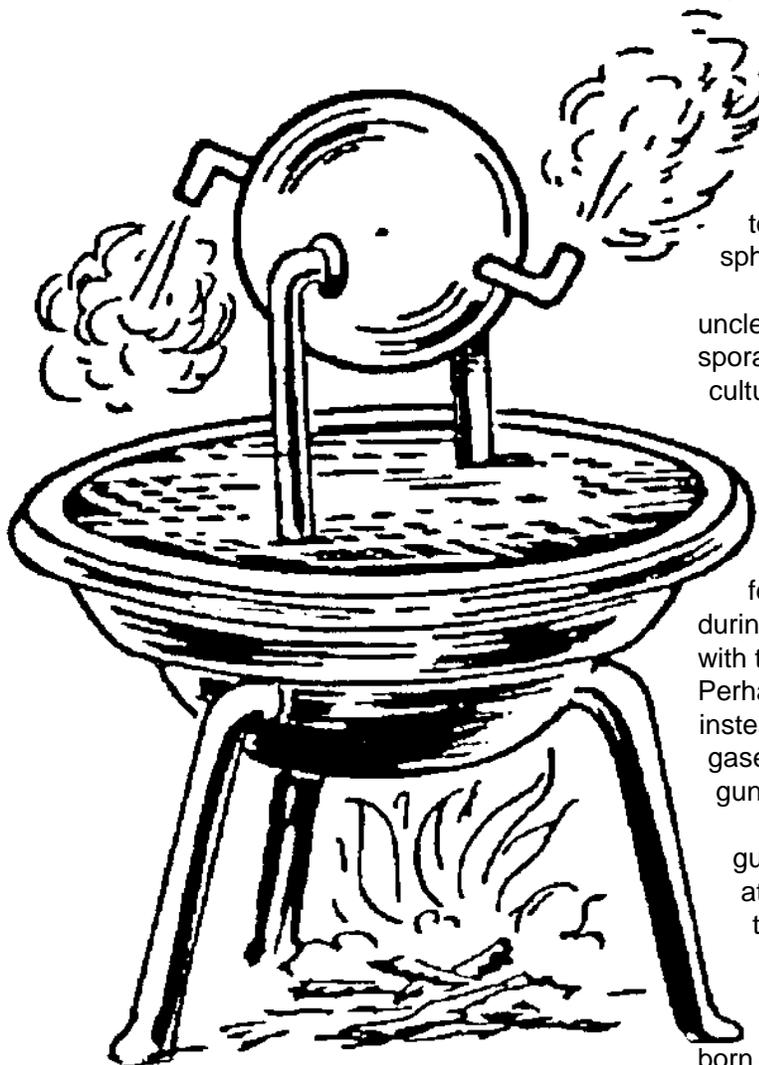
**T**oday's rockets are remarkable collections of human ingenuity that have their roots in the science and technology of the past. They are natural outgrowths of literally thousands of years of experimentation and research on rockets and rocket propulsion.

One of the first devices to successfully employ the principles essential to rocket flight was a wooden bird. The writings of Aulus Gellius, a Roman, tell a story of a Greek named Archytas who lived in the city of Tarentum, now a part of southern Italy. Somewhere around the year 400 B.C., Archytas mystified and amused the citizens of Tarentum by flying a pigeon made of wood. Escaping steam propelled the bird suspended on wires. The pigeon used the action-reaction principle, which was not to be stated as a scientific law until the 17th century.

About three hundred years after the pigeon, another Greek, Hero of Alexandria, invented a similar rocket-like device called an *aeolipile*. It, too, used steam as a propulsive gas. Hero mounted a sphere on top of a water kettle. A fire below the kettle turned the water into steam, and the gas traveled through pipes to the sphere. Two L-shaped tubes on opposite sides of the sphere allowed the gas to escape, and in doing so gave a thrust to the sphere that caused it to rotate.

Just when the first true rockets appeared is unclear. Stories of early rocket-like devices appear sporadically through the historical records of various cultures. Perhaps the first true rockets were accidents. In the first century A.D., the Chinese reportedly had a simple form of gunpowder made from saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal dust. They used the gunpowder mostly for fireworks in religious and other festive celebrations. To create explosions during religious festivals, they filled bamboo tubes with the mixture and tossed them into fires. Perhaps some of those tubes failed to explode and instead skittered out of the fires, propelled by the gases and sparks produced from the burning gunpowder.

The Chinese began experimenting with the gunpowder-filled tubes. At some point, they attached bamboo tubes to arrows and launched them with bows. Soon they discovered that these gunpowder tubes could launch themselves just by the power produced from the escaping gas. The true rocket was

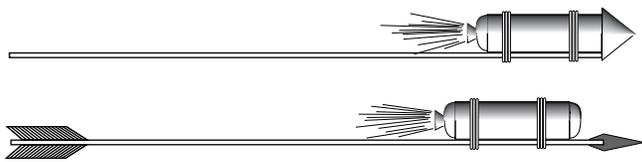


Hero Engine

born.



The date reporting the first use of true rockets was in 1232. At this time, the Chinese and the Mongols were at war with each other. During the battle of Kai-Keng, the Chinese repelled the Mongol invaders by a barrage of “arrows of flying fire.” These fire-arrows were a simple form of a solid-propellant rocket. A tube, capped at one end, contained gunpowder. The other end was left open and the tube was attached to a long stick. When the powder ignited, the rapid burning of the powder produced fire, smoke, and gas that escaped out the open end and produced a thrust. The stick acted as



Chinese Fire-Arrows

a simple guidance system that kept the rocket headed in one general direction as it flew through the air. How effective these arrows of flying fire were as weapons of destruction is not clear, but their psychological effects on the Mongols must have been formidable.

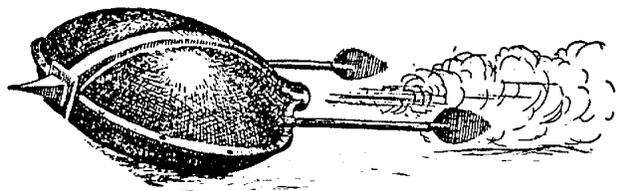
Following the battle of Kai-Keng, the Mongols produced rockets of their own and may have been responsible for the spread of rockets to Europe. Many records describe rocket experiments through out the 13th to the 15th centuries. In England, a monk named Roger Bacon worked on improved forms of gunpowder that greatly increased the range of rockets. In France, Jean Froissart achieved more accurate flights by launching rockets through tubes. Froissart’s idea was the forerunner of the modern bazooka. Joanes de Fontana of Italy designed a surface-running rocket-powered torpedo for setting enemy ships on fire.



Chinese soldier launches a fire-arrow.

By the 16th century rockets fell into a time of disuse as weapons of war, though they were still used for fireworks displays, and a German fireworks maker, Johann Schmidlap, invented the “step rocket,” a multi-staged vehicle for lifting fireworks to higher altitudes. A large sky rocket (first stage) carried a smaller sky rocket (second stage). When the large rocket burned out, the smaller one continued to a higher altitude before showering the sky with glowing cinders. Schmidlap’s idea is basic to all rockets today that go into outer space.

Nearly all uses of rockets up to this time were for warfare or fireworks, but an interesting old Chinese legend reports the use of rockets as a means of transportation. With the help of many



Surface-Running Torpedo

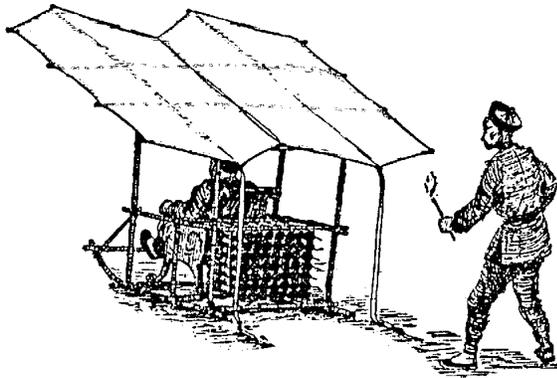
assistants, a lesser-known Chinese official named Wan-Hu assembled a rocket-powered flying chair. He had two large kites attached to the chair, and fixed to the kites were forty-seven fire-arrow rockets.

On the day of the flight, Wan-Hu sat himself on the chair and gave the command to light the rockets. Forty-seven rocket assistants, each armed with torches, rushed forward to light the fuses. A tremendous roar filled the air, accompanied by billowing clouds of smoke. When the smoke cleared, Wan-Hu and his flying chair were gone. No one knows for sure what happened to Wan-Hu, but if the event really did take place, Wan-Hu and his chair probably did not survive the explosion. Fire-arrows were as apt to explode as to fly.

## Rocketry Becomes a Science

During the latter part of the 17th century, the great English scientist Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) laid the scientific foundations for modern rocketry. Newton organized his understanding of physical motion into three scientific laws. The laws explain how rockets work and why they are able to work in the vacuum of outer space. (See *Rocket Principles* for more information on Newton’s Three Laws of Motion beginning on page 13.)





Legendary Chinese official Wan Hu braces himself for "liftoff."

Newton's laws soon began to have a practical impact on the design of rockets. About 1720, a Dutch professor, Willem Gravesande, built model cars propelled by jets of steam. Rocket experimenters in Germany and Russia began working with rockets with a mass of more than 45 kilograms. Some of these rockets were so powerful that their escaping exhaust flames bored deep holes in the ground even before liftoff.

During the end of the 18th century and early into the 19th, rockets experienced a brief revival as a weapon of war. The success of Indian rocket barrages against the British in 1792 and again in 1799 caught the interest of an artillery expert, Colonel William Congreve. Congreve set out to design rockets for use by the British military.

The Congreve rockets were highly successful in battle. Used by British ships to pound Fort McHenry in the War of 1812, they inspired Francis Scott Key to write "the rockets' red glare," in his poem that later became *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Even with Congreve's work, the accuracy of rockets still had not improved much from the early days. The devastating nature of war rockets was not their accuracy or power, but their numbers. During a typical siege, thousands of them might be fired at the enemy. All over the world, rocket researchers experimented with ways to improve accuracy. An Englishman, William Hale, developed a technique called spin stabilization. In this method, the escaping exhaust gases struck small vanes at the bottom of the rocket, causing it to spin much as a bullet does in flight. Many rockets still use variations of this principle today.

Rocket use continued to be successful in battles all over the European continent. However, in a war with Prussia, the

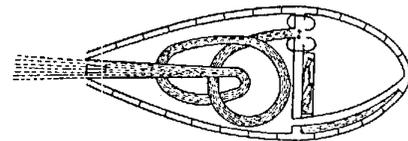
Austrian rocket brigades met their match against newly designed artillery pieces. Breech-loading cannon with rifled barrels and exploding warheads were far more effective weapons of war than the best rockets. Once again, the military relegated rocketry to peacetime uses.

## Modern Rocketry Begins

In 1898, a Russian schoolteacher, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935), proposed the idea of space exploration by rocket. In a report he published in 1903, Tsiolkovsky suggested the use of liquid propellants for rockets in order to achieve greater range. Tsiolkovsky stated that only the exhaust velocity of escaping gases limited the speed and range of a rocket. For his ideas, careful research, and great vision, Tsiolkovsky has been called the father of modern astronautics.

Early in the 20th century, an American, Robert H. Goddard (1882-1945), conducted practical experiments in rocketry. He had become interested in a way of achieving higher altitudes than were possible for lighter-than-air balloons. He published a pamphlet in 1919 entitled *A Method of Reaching Extreme Altitudes*. Today we call this mathematical analysis the meteorological sounding rocket.

In his pamphlet, Goddard reached several conclusions important to rocketry. From his tests, he stated that a rocket operates with greater



Tsiolkovsky Rocket Designs



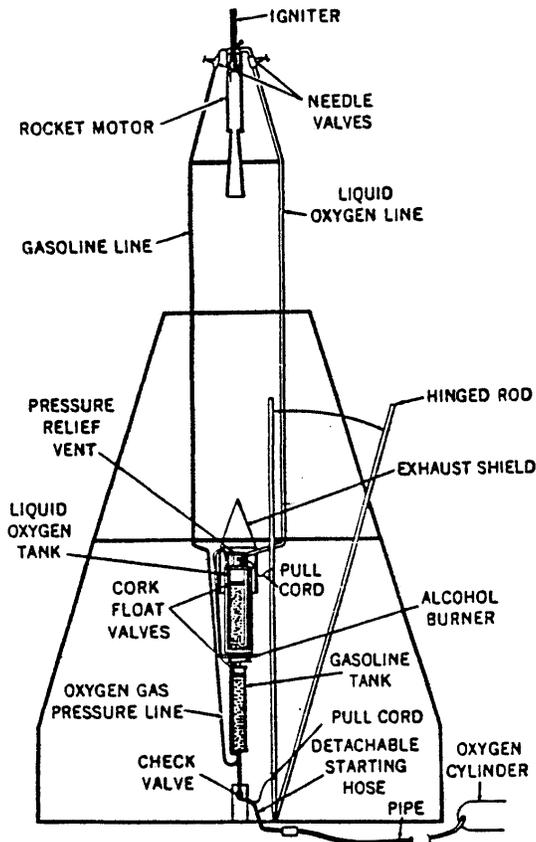
efficiency in a vacuum than in air. At the time, most people mistakenly believed that the presence of air was necessary for a rocket to push against. A *New York Times* newspaper editorial of the day mocked Goddard's lack of the "basic physics ladled out daily in our high schools." Goddard also stated that multistage or step rockets were the answer to achieving high altitudes and that the velocity needed to escape Earth's gravity could be achieved in this way.

Goddard's earliest experiments were with solid-propellant rockets. In 1915, he began to try various types of solid fuels and to measure the exhaust velocities of the burning gases.

While working on solid-propellant rockets, Goddard became convinced that a rocket could be propelled better by liquid fuel. No one had ever built a successful liquid-propellant rocket before. It was a much more difficult task than building solid-propellant rockets. Fuel and oxygen tanks, turbines, and combustion chambers would



Dr. Robert H. Goddard makes adjustments on the upper end of a rocket combustion chamber in this 1940 picture taken in Roswell, New Mexico.



Dr. Goddard's 1926 Rocket

be needed. In spite of the difficulties, Goddard achieved the first successful flight with a liquid-propellant rocket on March 16, 1926. Fueled by liquid oxygen and gasoline, the rocket flew for only two and a half seconds, climbed 12.5 meters, and landed 56 meters away in a cabbage patch. By today's standards, the flight was unimpressive, but like the first powered airplane flight by the Wright brothers in 1903, Goddard's gasoline rocket became the forerunner of a whole new era in rocket flight.

Goddard's experiments in liquid-propellant rockets continued for many years. His rockets grew bigger and flew higher. He developed a gyroscope system for flight control and a payload compartment for scientific instruments. Parachute recovery systems returned the rockets and instruments safely to the ground. We call Goddard the father of modern rocketry for his achievements.

A third great space pioneer, Hermann Oberth (1894-1989) of Germany, published a book in 1923 about rocket travel into outer space. His writings were important. Because of them, many small rocket societies sprang up



around the world. In Germany, the formation of one such society, the Verein für Raumschiffahrt (Society for Space Travel), led to the development of the V-2 rocket, which the Germans used against London during World War II. In 1937, German engineers and scientists, including Oberth, assembled in Peenemunde on the shores of the Baltic Sea. There, under the directorship of Wernher von Braun, engineers and scientists built and flew the most advanced rocket of its time.

The V-2 rocket (in Germany called the A-4) was small by comparison to today's rockets. It achieved its great thrust by burning a mixture of liquid oxygen and alcohol at a rate of about one ton every seven seconds. Once launched, the V-2 was a formidable weapon that could devastate whole city blocks.

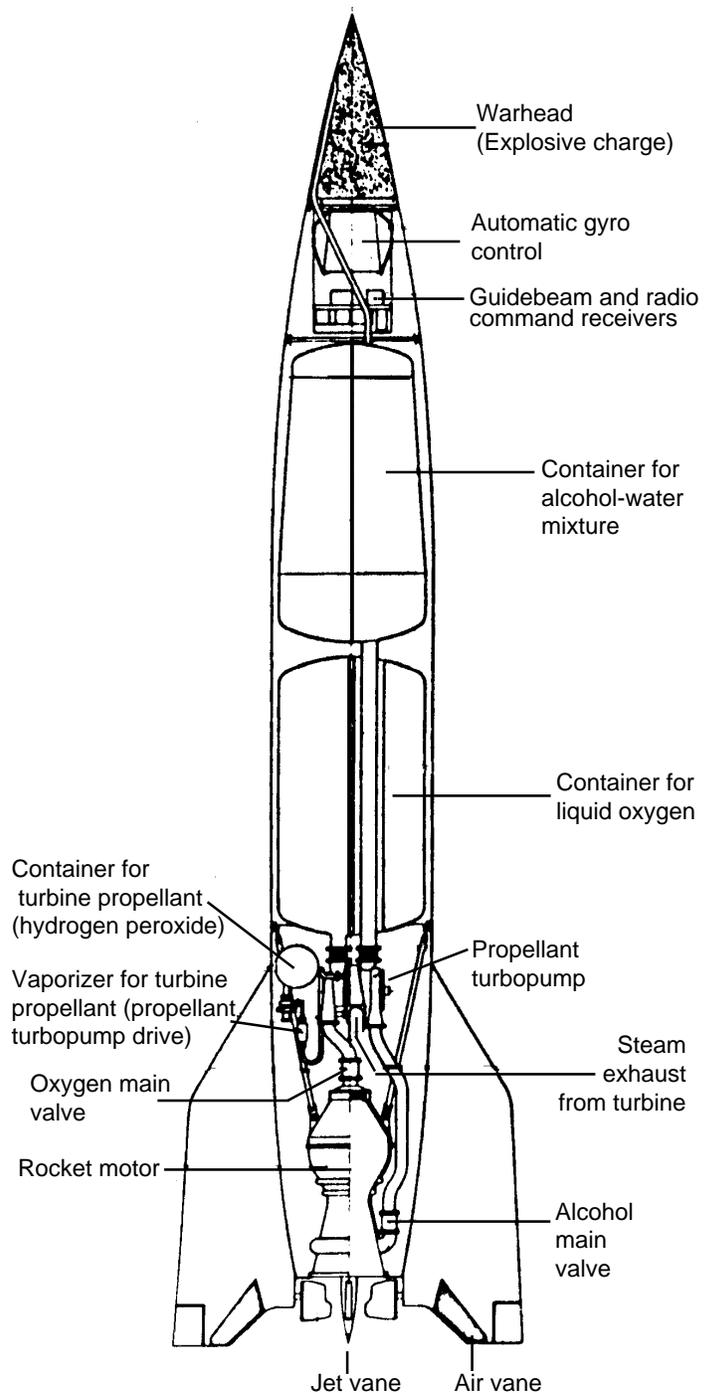
Fortunately for London and the Allied forces, the V-2 came too late in the war to change its outcome. Nevertheless, by war's end, German rocket scientists and engineers had already laid plans for advanced missiles capable of spanning the Atlantic Ocean and landing in the United States. These missiles would have had winged upper stages but very small payload capacities.

With the fall of Germany, the Allies captured many unused V-2 rockets and components. Many German rocket scientists came to the United States. Others went to the Soviet Union. The German scientists, including Wernher von Braun, were amazed at the progress Goddard had made.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized the potential of rocketry as a military weapon and began a variety of experimental programs. At first, the United States began a program with high-altitude atmospheric sounding rockets, one of Goddard's early ideas. Later, they developed a variety of medium- and long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles. These became the starting point of the U.S. space program. Missiles such as the Redstone, Atlas, and Titan would eventually launch astronauts into space.

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union stunned the world by launching an Earth-orbiting artificial satellite. Called *Sputnik I*, the satellite was the first successful entry in a race for space between the two superpower nations. Less than a month later, the Soviets followed with the launch of a satellite carrying a dog named Laika on board. Laika survived in space for seven days before being put to sleep before the oxygen supply ran out.

A few months after the first *Sputnik*, the United States followed the Soviet Union with a satellite of its own. The U.S. Army



German V-2 (A-4) Missile



launched *Explorer 1* on January 31, 1958. In October of that year, the United States formally organized its space program by creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). NASA became a civilian agency with the goal of peaceful exploration of space for the benefit of all humankind.

Soon, rockets launched many people and machines into space. Astronauts orbited Earth and landed on the Moon. Robot spacecraft traveled to the planets. Space suddenly opened up to exploration and commercial exploitation. Satellites enabled scientists to investigate our world, forecast the weather, and communicate instantaneously around the globe. The demand for more and larger payloads created the need to develop a wide array of powerful and versatile rockets.

Scientific exploration of space using robotic spacecraft proceeded at a fast pace. Both Russia and the United States began programs to investigate the Moon. Developing the technology to physically get a probe to the Moon became the initial challenge. Within nine months of *Explorer 1* the United States launched the first unmanned lunar probe, but the launch vehicle, an Atlas with an Able upper stage, failed 45 seconds after liftoff when the payload fairing tore away from the vehicle. The Russians were more successful with *Luna 1*, which flew past the Moon in January of 1959. Later that year the *Luna* program impacted a probe on the Moon, taking the first pictures of its far side. Between 1958 and 1960 the United States sent a series of missions, the *Pioneer Lunar Probes*, to photograph and obtain scientific data about the Moon. These probes were generally unsuccessful, primarily due to launch vehicle failures. Only one of eight probes accomplished its intended mission to the Moon, though several, which were stranded in orbits between Earth and the Moon, did provide important scientific information on the number and extent of the radiation belts around Earth. The United States appeared to lag behind the Soviet Union in space.

With each launch, manned spaceflight came a step closer to becoming reality. In April of 1961, a Russian named Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit Earth. Less than a month later the United States launched the first American, Alan Shepard, into space. The flight was a sub-orbital lofting into space, which immediately returned to Earth. The Redstone rocket was not powerful enough to place the *Mercury* capsule into orbit. The flight lasted only a little over 15 minutes and reached an altitude of 187 kilometers. Alan Shepard experienced about

five minutes of microgravity then returned to Earth, during which he encountered forces twelve times greater than the force of gravity. Twenty days later, though still technically behind the Soviet Union, President John Kennedy announced the objective to put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade.

In February of 1962, John Glen became the first American to orbit Earth in a small capsule so filled with equipment that he only had room to sit. Launched by the more powerful Atlas vehicle, John Glen remained in orbit for four hours and fifty-five minutes before splashing down in the Atlantic Ocean. The *Mercury* program had a total of six launches: two suborbital and four orbital. These launches demonstrated the United States' ability to send men into orbit, allowed the crew to function in space, operate the spacecraft, and make scientific observations.

The United States then began an extensive unmanned program aimed at supporting the manned lunar landing program. Three separate projects gathered information on landing sites and other data about the lunar surface and the surrounding environment. The first was the *Ranger* series, which was the United States first attempt to



Close-up picture of the Moon taken by the *Ranger 9* spacecraft just before impact. The small circle to the left is the impact site.



take close-up photographs of the Moon. The spacecraft took thousands of black and white photographs of the Moon as it descended and crashed into the lunar surface. Though the Ranger series supplied very detailed data, mission planners for the coming *Apollo* mission wanted more extensive data.

The final two lunar programs were designed to work in conjunction with one another. *Lunar Orbiter* provided an extensive map of the lunar surface. *Surveyor* provided detailed color photographs of the lunar surface as well as data on the elements of the lunar sediment and an assessment of the ability of the sediment to support the weight of the manned landing vehicles. By examining both sets of data, planners were able to identify sites for the manned landings. However, a significant problem existed, the *Surveyor* spacecraft was too large to be launched by existing Atlas/Agona rockets, so a new high energy upper stage called the Centaur was developed to replace the Agona specifically for this mission. The Centaur upper stage used efficient hydrogen and oxygen propellants to dramatically improve its performance, but the super cold temperatures and highly explosive nature presented significant technical challenges. In addition, they built the tanks of the Centaur with thin stainless steel to save precious weight. Moderate pressure had to be maintained in the tank to prevent it from collapsing upon itself. Rocket building was refining the United State's capability to explore the Moon.

The *Gemini* was the second manned capsule developed by the United States. It was designed to carry two crew members and was launched on the largest launch vehicle available—the Titan II. President Kennedy's mandate significantly altered the *Gemini* mission from the general goal of expanding experience in space to prepare for a manned lunar landing on the Moon. It paved the way for the *Apollo* program by demonstrating rendezvous and docking required for the lunar lander to return to the lunar orbiting spacecraft, the extravehicular activity (EVA) required for the lunar surface exploration and any emergency repairs, and finally the ability of humans to function during the eight day manned lunar mission duration. The *Gemini* program launched ten manned missions in 1965 and 1966, eight flights rendezvous and docked with unmanned stages in Earth orbit and seven performed EVA.

Launching men to the moon required launch vehicles much larger than those available. To achieve this goal the United States



A fish-eye camera view of a Saturn 5 rocket just after engine ignition.

developed the Saturn launch vehicle. The *Apollo* capsule, or command module, held a crew of three. The capsule took the astronauts into orbit about the Moon, where two astronauts transferred into a lunar module and descended to the lunar surface. After completing the lunar mission, the upper section of the lunar module returned to orbit to rendezvous with the *Apollo* capsule. The Moonwalkers transferred back to the command module and a service module, with an engine, propelled them back to Earth. After four manned test flights, *Apollo 11* astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man on the moon. The United States returned to the lunar surface five more times before the manned lunar program was completed. After the lunar program the *Apollo* program and the Saturn booster launched *Skylab*, the United State's first space station. A smaller version of the Saturn vehicle transported the United States' crew for the first rendezvous in space between the United States and Russia on the *Apollo-Soyuz* mission.



During this manned lunar program, unmanned launch vehicles sent many satellites to investigate our planet, forecast the weather, and communicate instantaneously around the world. In addition, scientists began to explore other planets. *Mariner 2* successfully flew by Venus in 1962, becoming the first probe to fly past another planet. The United States' interplanetary space program then took off with an amazing string of successful launches. The program has visited every planet except Pluto.

After the *Apollo* program the United States began concentrating on the development of a reusable launch system, the Space Shuttle. Solid rocket boosters and three main engines on the orbiter launch the Space Shuttle. The reusable boosters jettison little more than 2 minutes into the flight, their fuel expended. Parachutes deploy to decelerate the solid rocket boosters for a safe splashdown in the Atlantic ocean, where two ships recover them. The orbiter and external tank continue to ascend. When the main engines shut down, the external tank jettisons from the orbiter, eventually disintegrating in the atmosphere. A brief firing of the spacecraft's two orbital maneuvering system thrusters changes the trajectory to achieve orbit at a range of 185-402 kilometers above Earth's surface. The Space Shuttle orbiter can carry approximately 25,000 kilograms of payload into orbit so crew members can conduct experiments in a microgravity environment. The orbital maneuvering system thrusters fire to slow the spacecraft for reentry into Earth's atmosphere, heating up the orbiter's thermal protection shield up to 816° Celsius. On the Shuttle's final descent, it returns to Earth gliding like an airplane.

Since the earliest days of discovery and experimentation, rockets have evolved from simple gunpowder devices into giant vehicles capable of traveling into outer space, taking astronauts to the Moon, launching satellites to explore our universe, and enabling us to conduct scientific experiments aboard the Space Shuttle. Without a doubt rockets have opened the universe to direct exploration by humankind. What role will rockets play in our future?

The goal of the United States space program is to expand our horizons in space, and then to open the space frontier to international human expansion and the commercial development. For

this to happen, rockets must become more cost effective and more reliable as a means of getting to space. Expensive hardware cannot be thrown away each time we go to space. It is necessary to continue the drive for more reusability started during the Space Shuttle program. Eventually NASA may develop aerospace planes that will take off from runways, fly into orbit, and land on those same runways, with operations similar to airplanes.

To achieve this goal two programs are currently under development. The X33 and X34 programs will develop reusable vehicles, which significantly decrease the cost to orbit. The X33 will be a manned vehicle lifting about the same payload capacity as the Space Shuttle. The X34 will be a small, reusable unmanned launch vehicle capable of launching 905 kilograms to space and reduce the launch cost relative to current vehicles by two thirds.

The first step towards building fully reusable vehicles has already occurred. A project called the Delta Clipper is currently being tested. The Delta Clipper is a vertical takeoff and soft landing vehicle. It has demonstrated the ability to hover and maneuver over Earth using the same hardware over and over again. The program uses much existing technology and minimizes the operating cost. Reliable, inexpensive rockets are the key to enabling humans to truly expand into space.



Three reusable future space vehicle concepts under consideration by NASA.

