

THE PRIDE OF A NATION

By David A. Watson, PhD

Not long ago I had the distinct pleasure of serving as a chaperone to a group of Cub Scouts, my son included, on an overnight trip to Space Center Houston. The boys would spend Friday evening working on badges and pins, view two excellent IMAX films, and sleep on the floor in the museum portion of the center; a camping expedition without rain, fire ants, or mosquitoes. Not only that, but we parents could sit back and drink a cup of coffee while the eager young camp staff corralled the boys. We also would get to watch the movies with our guys. All things considered, it didn't sound half bad, so off we went.

While our Cubs were busy learning about Bernoulli's Principle, I spotted a most interesting newspaper. For \$1 I purchased a 20 page section that consisted of reproductions of famous front pages from the Houston Chronicle representing historic milestones in the exploration of space. Beginning with the successful launch of Sputnik by the Russians in 1957, and continuing through the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger and NASA's subsequent return to space, these pages told a story of both triumph and tragedy, of competition and cooperation between the Russian (really, in large part, the Soviet) and the American Space programs. The articles in the Chronicle detailing the early days of the space race made clear the fact that at that time the primary driver of the United States space program was our desire as a nation to somehow undo our embarrassment at not having been first in space. Even though at every juncture our technologies have proven superior to those of our competitor, the fact is that we were beaten to all the early milestones. The Soviets even go to the moon before we did, albeit using an unmanned vehicle. As a nation, we refused to accept that the Russians were our

betters, in space or otherwise. It was largely for this reason that JFK famously declared, at Houston's own Rice stadium, that "...We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard." In his excellent book Rocket Boys, (see also my December 2000 column) Homer Hickam, Jr. describes an encounter he had with then Senator Kennedy during the 1960 presidential campaign. Homer asked JFK, in essence, to outline his views on space exploration. The senator espoused rather vague, although welcome, support for a strong space program, according to Mr. Hickam. Kennedy knew that Americans wanted to best the Russians, and he knew that the country was anxious to make a bold statement regarding our technological might. At that time, the moon was seen as an almost penultimate goal; in fact, for years afterward it was quite common to hear the phrase "...if we can put a man on the moon, why can't we (you fill in the blank)."

We're now nearly 30 years removed from the last manned mission to the moon, in a world where the Soviet Union no longer exists, and where we are in the process of assembling one of the most complex and expensive structures ever attempted, the International Space Station. Given its cost, and its apparent inseparability from geopolitical realities, it has become necessary to justify the existence of this engineering masterpiece on the grounds that it will have play a major role in helping to solve earth-based problems, especially in the area of biomedicine. As a biologist by training, I am as hopeful as anyone that this will be the case, yet I am willing to pay my tax dollars to support the realization of this structure for a more basic reason. I long for a return to the heady days of space exploration as a means for expression of national pride (Russian participation in the ISS notwithstanding). It is said that the ISS will soon be one of the

brightest stars in the night sky; I want to point to it with pride and say to my children that the United States was the prime mover in making this particular star a reality.

So, how did I rate our indoor camping experience? Pretty good, actually. No tents to set up or take down, no snake sightings, plenty of progress toward scout ranks, and the grub was tastier than camp food. So what if the floor was hard, we didn't get to sleep before midnight, and we were back up by 6:30 a.m. A good time was had by all. We finished up with an inspiring IMAX presentation that left me, for one, with a lump in my throat, wanting more than ever to be a part of the exploration of the heavens.