Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
The Space Race

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/space-race

Teaching Tips
The video and audio clips in this source set are drawn from documentaries, news broadcasts, newsreels, speeches, and interviews. Together, they provide an understanding of how the U.S. space program developed, in large part, as a response to concerns about technological advances and military capabilities of the Soviet Union. These sources provide an overview of the space program from the earliest years of the Cold War through the establishment of NASA, the successes and failures of the Apollo program, and the development of the space shuttle program in the 1970s and 1980s.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:

- Post-World War II Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union
- The nuclear arms race
- The 1957 launch of Sputnik 1 and Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s 1961 orbit around the Earth

Essential Question
What was the significance of the space race in U.S. history?

General Discussion Questions
- What is the relationship between the Cold War and the U.S. space program?
- How did the U.S. respond to the push for military superiority in space?
- What national priorities are reflected in how the U.S. space program developed?
Classroom Activities

1) Ask students to watch and listen to the following sources:
   - Military Possibilities of the Space Shuttle (1981)

How do these different sources present the value of space exploration? What were perceptions of the relationship between the U.S. space program and U.S. strength and security? What motivated the United States and Soviet Union to “race” when it came to space exploration?

2) Ask students to watch the following sources:
   - Russian Progress in Science (1960)
   - The Space Race and Higher Education (1958)

Based on these two sources, how has education figured into space exploration? What types of education were considered necessary within the context of the Cold War? What resources did the United States and Soviet Union put toward education within the context of the Space Race? Are effects of the relationship between education and the space race apparent in U.S. education today?

3) Ask students to watch the following source:
   - The Space Race and Higher Education (1958)
   - NASA Astronauts and U.S. Culture (2019)
   - Civil Rights Activists Protest Apollo 11 (2019)

What did the space race signal about national priorities, values, or ideals? In the United States, whose interests has space exploration served?