

1968: A Global Perspective

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Lunar 1968: The Case of Apollo 8

On Christmas Eve, 1968, humans the world over were treated to a view of their planet taken from an entirely new perspective courtesy of Apollo 8, the United States' first manned flight around the moon. Declaring it the only real revolutionary event in a year of so much pseudo-revolutionary posturing, Time magazine hastily changed its upcoming "Man of the Year" from "The Dissenter" to the three Apollo astronauts, while NASA's acting administrator lauded it as the "triumph of the squares, the guys with computers and slide rules who read the Bible"--the very antithesis of the "dissenter" making so many waves in 1968. Meanwhile, commentators from across the political and cultural spectrum expressed the hope that beyond offering a psychological lift at the end of this damn near apocalyptic year, the image of an Earth without borders and visible hostility, a "grand oasis" of life floating alone in the darkness of space, might serve as an inspiration for peace in Vietnam, in American inner cities, and in the so many other places unrest smoldered in 1968. Had the "establishment" finally done something right, something that even the growing numbers of disaffected could appreciate? Had Apollonian rationality triumphed over the Dionysian chaos that seemed to prevail in 1968? Or was Apollo 8, all things considered, really a hollow achievement that meant little in a year of so many even more cosmic happenings here on Earth? This presentation will explore how Americans understood Apollo 8 in the context of the tumultuous 1968.