

# Sputnik and the Space Race Transform the World

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On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, into orbit around the Earth. It was about 22.4 inches in diameter and weighed about 184 pounds. The launching of Sputnik came in the midst of the Cold War, an ideological competition between the Communist bloc and the west for influence in the “Third World.” It shattered American confidence in what it thought was its technological and military superiority and gave the Soviet Union and the communist system an enormous propaganda boost. It was particularly disturbing because the missiles that launched a satellite into orbit could be adapted to carry nuclear weapons. In response, the U.S. government invested billions of dollars in the space and arms races, established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and devoted far more attention to science and math education.

In the decades following Sputnik, the Soviet Union and the United States sent people into space and eventually the United States landed men on the moon in 1969 and sent unmanned space ships to explore Mars. Because of the premium placed on miniaturization and heat resistance during reentry, the space race contributed to a number of major technological breakthroughs. They include computerization, the microchip, lightweight metal alloys, new kinds of plastics and ceramics.

Examine the excerpts from the newspaper articles and the political cartoons. (a) Answer the questions following each excerpt and the cartoons. (b) In your opinion, why are the responses from around the world so different from each other?

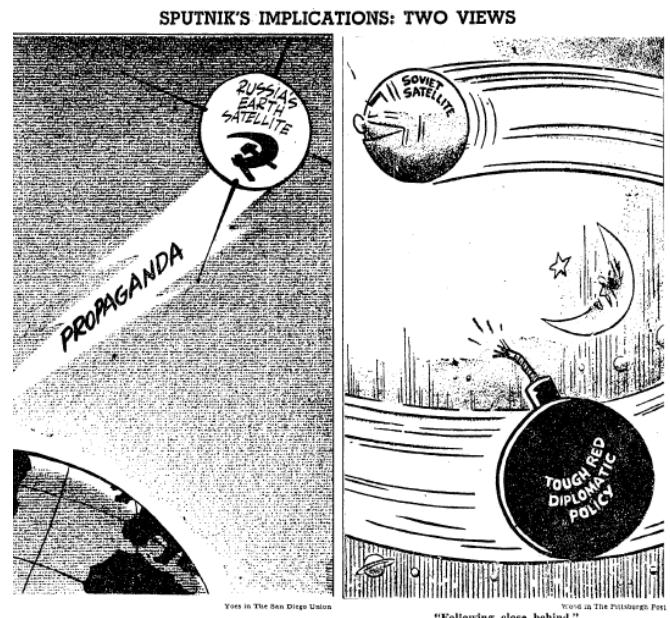
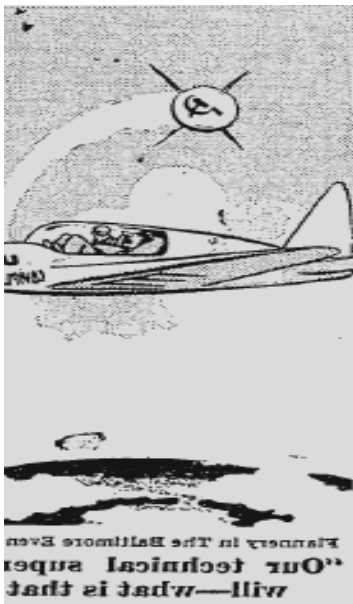
1. “The World Reacts,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1957. “Many Britons were astonished that it was the U.S.S.R., not the U.S., that led the way into space. However, it was Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s view that despite ‘startling’ developments, the world peace still hinged on the West’s nuclear-bomb deterrent. In France, the Paris press echoed British surprise that the Soviet Union had stolen a march on the U.S. Washington was criticized for taking a ‘complacent’ view of Soviet capacities and for retaining laws that kept nuclear secrets from allies. The view was that Western brains should be pooled to compete with Soviet research, and that American tactical weapons should be made available to fellow NATO members. In Rome, the ‘Red moon’ was viewed as a warning to the West to increase its efforts in rocketry. It also brought home a realization that as a country capable of producing a Marconi and a Fermi, Italy was now far behind in science. In Vatican City, the newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* said that ‘God has no intention of setting a limit to the efforts of man to conquer space.’ In New Delhi, the ‘baby moon’ was the No. 1 topic of conversation, a major scientific and propaganda triumph for the Russians, and a come-uppance for the United States. In Cairo, the pro-Nasser press found vindication for the avowed policy of neutralism and satisfaction for what is considered the sudden obsolescence of Western bomber bases.”

1. How did these country’s react to the launching of Sputnik?
2. What do these reactions have in common? In what ways are they different?

2. “Soviet Exploits Its New ‘Sputnik Diplomacy,’” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1957. “Since the Soviet space satellite has been in its orbit, Moscow has been showing what many are now calling sputnik diplomacy. No telescope or other artificial aids are needed to see and study the new Soviet policy. Nikita S. Khrushchev is personally spearheading the present offensive and acting as the principal public enunciator of the new policy. His over-all objective is plain: to win the maximum number of political and propaganda gains possible in the new world situation

created by the space satellite's vivid demonstration of Soviet long-distance rocket capabilities. Mr. Khrushchev seems to think that it is he and his country that can now speak and act from a position of strength, thus turning the tables on the United States. A major effort is being made to create the stereotype of the Soviet Union as being now the world's strongest military and scientific power. A massive effort is now being made to break up the Free World's defensive alliances, most particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Corollary to this, of course, is the fact that, if successful, this effort would end the existence of the ring of bases for United States bombers which now exists around the Soviet empire. The Soviet Union now hopes that it may be possible to negotiate a disarmament agreement on its own terms. The Soviet Union now seeks to impose and to have generally accepted its hegemony over the Middle East. The Soviet Union demands that the West give up any thought of rolling back the Communist tide and surrender any hope of liberating the Communist countries."

1. What is "Sputnik Diplomacy"?
2. According to *The New York Times*, how does Soviet Premier Khrushchev hope to take advantage of Sputnik?



- What does the cartoon on the left credit for the Soviet Union's being the first nation to launch a satellite?
- What concerns are expressed in the two cartoons on the right?



1. How do the cartoons from the Soviet Union and Hungary (a member of the communist block) view Sputnik?
2. In your opinion, why does the cartoon on the right compare Soviet Premier Khrushchev to a witch?

**Final Activity:** Write an approximately 100 word long “Letter to the Editor” of *The New York Times* explaining your view of the significance of the launching of Sputnik.