After three months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the American people have begun to adjust to a new normal, while policy attention turns from immediate medical and economic treatments to broader strategic thinking. It is time now for imagination about how this could change the landscape, both for domestic policy and politics and for international affairs and geopolitical competition. The United States must try to anticipate the spiraling negative consequences across various national interests while also contemplating the potential for paradigm shifts that benefit U.S. society, U.S. institutions, and the United States’ status in the world. In other words, perhaps this should be a “Sputnik moment.”

But the American federal coronavirus response is nothing like what we imagine when we invoke Sputnik, either in kind or degree. A closer look reveals that the United States has learned exactly the wrong lessons from that moment 60 years ago. Sputnik was not the genesis of the American science and technology push of the late-1950s and 1960s. In fact, Sputnik should not have fueled such a historic policy movement; it only did so because the bureaucracy was prepared for a sea change and because of the quite ordinary and unsavory political maneuvering that occurred in its wake. These elements—the groundwork and the aftermath—offer far more useful lessons.

The Analogy

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union upended American assumptions about the technological balance in the Cold War by launching the world’s first satellite into orbit. That moment lives on in American imaginations as the spark setting off an era of great American scientific achievement, economic growth, and common purpose, all of which laid the groundwork for eventual victory in the Cold War.

Of course, there is great similarity between the Soviets’ early “win” in the space race and the disruption of the epidemic in the United States. Much like losing the first round of the space race, this tragedy highlights societal weaknesses, shames Western capabilities, and emphasizes the few advantages of authoritarian government. If the United States casts itself into a Cold War mindset and sees China as an ideological competitor seeking to expand its sphere of authoritarian influence at U.S. expense, then March and April 2020 will likely have played into that narrative.
Many Americans, especially those who hold such a competitive worldview, have seemed to crave “another Sputnik moment,” for space, artificial intelligence, 5G telecommunications, technology more generally, ideological competition, and even climate change. A frightening surprise might awaken complacent Americans and mobilize politics for a massive effort to confront a shared threat.

Ask and ye shall receive; the Covid-19 pandemic has genuinely shocked the country. But if the United States wants to make something positive out of this—even perhaps achieve a space race-style comeback—it must abandon the myth and learn from what really happened.

The Aftermath

The United States arrived at a massive space program in the 1960s despite the best efforts of President Eisenhower, whose “New Look” strategy for outlasting the Soviet Union and maintaining American greatness was to husband the nation’s resources carefully, avoiding expansive government programs and high levels of public debt. In his estimation, Sputnik should not have frightened anybody and certainly was not important enough to merit an expensive crash space program. The U.S. intelligence community was not surprised by the satellite launch (though they were impressed by its weight: 184 pounds, compared to the 3.5-pound American satellite then in development).

More importantly, American leadership knew that the United States was rolling out far more superior weapons capabilities than those demonstrated by Sputnik, chiefly Polaris and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. These breakthroughs in missile technology had occurred so quickly in part because Eisenhower had prioritized research into next-generation nuclear weapons delivery—not a satellite program. As he stated, “We decided not to give the satellite a higher priority in 1955 because we had begun to pour big money into the missiles – the things that really count, at this stage.”

So, why does the United States remember Sputnik as a devastating realization of U.S. deficiency? Washington opinion-makers were alarmed, ordinary Americans less so. It is not clear that many in the general public experienced a heightened threat perception during the weeks after the launch or assumed that the balance of power had shifted meaningfully.

But Eisenhower’s expectation that any public reaction “should be keyed to its true significance” was naive, both for failing to account for the value of world prestige and for the opportunity it presented his political opponents. In a flourish of opportunism that today’s politicos would recognize as a “Benghazi move,” congressional Democrats accused the administration of negligence and warned that GOP fiscal priorities were endangering the nation. Critiques of the administration’s response bear a strange similarity to today: “This is a life and death matter for our country and the free world, and it should be so treated at the highest level of government,” which has instead been mired in “dangerous and foolish complacency.”

Pressure mounted with the Soviet launch of Sputnik II only a month later, weighing more than 1,000 pounds and carrying a live dog. The marked absence of a successful American satellite launch was embarrassing, though it signified no real danger. Nevertheless, Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic leader in the Senate at the time, seized the opportunity to bludgeon the president and the GOP in congressional hearings, combining the satellite achievements with hyperbolic intelligence reports to yield the frightening—

1 Yanek Mieczkowski, Eisenhower’s Sputnik Moment: The Race for Space and World Prestige (Cornell University, 2013), 46.
2 Mieczkowski, Eisenhower’s Sputnik Moment, 52.
and unfounded—theory of a large missile gap between Soviet and American postures. This argument—that Eisenhower’s New Look and the GOP’s tight-fisted policies were not just wrong but dangerous—would later help the Democrats increase their majorities in Congress in November 1958 and fuel John F. Kennedy’s presidential bid in 1960.

The United States should not romanticize this moment as much as it does. In the wake of Sputnik, American leadership did not come together in a show of unity; the opposition blew the issue out of proportion and used it to push their partisan agenda. Yet both parties navigated the furor well enough to enact thoughtful and necessary legislation.

In the face of growing congressional pressure, Eisenhower’s administration began to signal that it would loosen the purse strings and pursue a federal science and technology education bill and greater basic research investment. He did so mainly in an effort to stop the political bleeding, and he was able to because the policy proposals and bureaucratic momentum were already in place.

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**The Groundwork**

Americans think of the Sputnik moment as having jolted America from 0 to 60 in terms of what would later be called science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) investment. Certainly, the contentious politics of federal involvement in education had precluded serious national STEM education investment up to that point, and a catalyst was necessary to overcome the resistance to educational investments.

But the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was by no means a new idea when the Soviet satellite launched. Education interest groups had been laying the federal education aid groundwork for years, and influential actors in Washington had already brought the issue to Congress and the president’s attention over the preceding summer.¹ Fifteen of the nation’s foremost scientists met with Eisenhower only days after the Sputnik launch and focused their pitch on education, finally convincing the president of specific education proposals which he had previously resisted.² For the NDEA, Sputnik was the last piece of the puzzle, not the first.

On another front, the National Science Foundation (NSF), created by Congress in 1950 to promote fundamental scientific research and education, finally received adequate funding to make a difference in the budget for fiscal year 1957—a year before the launch of Sputnik. More than 10 years since its initial proposal as a new agency, and more than 5 years since its founding, a 1955 NSF-sponsored report on Soviet professional manpower convinced Congress to increase its science education support budget nearly eightfold.

The National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA) was not a new idea, either. The new agency was created from a combination of several Defense Department programs and the existing National Advisory Committee for Aero-

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nautics (NACA). The NACA was a federal civilian basic aeronautics research agency with 8,000 employees, a $70 million budget, and three large laboratory centers whose technological breakthroughs had been crucial for victory in World War II. At the time, it possessed a wealth of civilian engineering knowledge and had been testing high-speed, high-altitude rockets as well as re-entry mechanisms and supersonic aircraft.⁶

The NACA was underfunded in the early-1950s because the Korean War demanded greater priority on investment in specific military technology and due to President Eisenhower’s drive to balance the federal budget. But between 1954 and 1957, its director, Dr. Hugh Dryden, quietly shifted the agency’s emphasis from aeronautics to space research, and by the time Sputnik launched, the foundation for a sophisticated space program was ready to go. According to the NASA History Series, satellite launch missile design and construction was underway, NACA laboratories had prepared test facilities, and the agency was considering a number of satellite proposals. “All that was lacking was a sense of urgency and coordination.”⁷

**Contemporary Impact**

This matters for today because the science and technology investment of the Eisenhower years is a story of policy activists and farsighted civil servants laying the groundwork far in advance of funding and prioritization. It is not a story of a frightened nation coming together, nor is it a story of institutions and development sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus.

But those two myths are the stories invoked when Americans yearn for a “new Sputnik moment.” Americans invoke Sputnik as though summoning a miracle, to stitch the United States back together and jump-start a galvanizing process to skip the difficult, lengthy policy work it will take to address national threats and prepare for global challenges. But if the United States wants to ramp up investment, whether in national unity, future generations, technological capabilities, or—urgently—public healthcare and crisis response systems, then a shock is not enough.

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Better to learn the true lessons of Sputnik. First, prepare for a crisis by laying the groundwork early and enabling the activist bureaucrats who can imagine and plan for what is coming. Elect leadership that will implement those plans. Second, partisanship and opportunist bickering are no excuse for our politicians’ failure to develop wise policy in response to crises. Some optimism on that front is warranted due to the enormous and necessary CARES legislation, but there is still a long way to go.

If the United States were governed by these lessons, it would be ready for the public health administrative overhaul that Americans will surely be demanding soon. Perhaps it would even have been ready for the pandemic itself.

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⁶ Ibid., 172.
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