

## THE ANSWER IS OUT THERE

ROBERT ZASLAVSKY

The recent announcement that a portion of the ashes of Jimmy Doohan (Engineer Montgomery Scott, “Scotty,” on the original *Star Trek*) would be launched into space, perhaps to rendezvous with the ashes of Gene Roddenberry, evoked in me a wave of nostalgia. I could not help wondering what had happened to our quest for “the final frontier.”

The last time that I felt this way was three years ago after the successful execution on the summer solstice of the first privately piloted space flight. It was an astonishing accomplishment, completed just six months after the centennial of the Wright brothers’ “first power-driven ... free, controlled, and sustained flight” at Kitty Hawk, N.C., on Dec. 17, 1903.

Mike Melvill’s flight from the Mojave Desert in the reusable SpaceShipOne reactivated the quixotic visions of my adolescence, which—since we are both the same age—was Melvill’s adolescence, too. As important as the flight itself were the recyclability and relatively low cost of the vehicle. The ship and flight were financed at a fraction of what they would have cost under NASA’s aegis. This meant that the cost of exploring space could be far less than we had assumed and that—if not in my lifetime, at least in my daughter’s lifetime—space travel could become an actuality.

The development of aviation has been dazzlingly swift. Within about a decade after the Wright brothers’ 1903 flight, the first passenger and freight airplane runs were already being made on the East Coast. In May 1927, less than a quarter-century after that first flight, Charles Lindbergh in *The Spirit of St. Louis* won the prize offered by hotelier Raymond Orteig by completing the first transatlantic flight between New York and Paris. Just 20 years later, in October 1947, Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier. In the 1960s, humanity’s first tentative steps into space were taken by Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepard. Before the decade was out, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins were on the moon.

That first lunar landing seemed miraculous to me at the time. After all, I had read Jules Verne and the John Carter of Mars novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs in elementary school, and I had studied Robert Goddard’s pioneering rocketry experiments. In junior high, I had devoured the early fiction of Ray Bradbury and the scientific publications of George Gamov and Willy Ley. In the early days of television, I was enraptured by Buster Crabbe’s *Flash Gordon* serials; in the movies, I gazed in awe at *Destination Moon*. In those allegedly halcyon days of the 1950s, *Life* magazine’s cover illustration of a space base on the moon made such an indelible impression on me that I can still see it vividly in my mind today. For my high school physics project in 1959, I built out of scraps a primitive diffusion cloud chamber for photographing alpha particle tracks. While I was in graduate school, I attended the initial reserved-seat showing of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Surely, I imagined, this dazzling cinematic achievement had opened up not only provocative metaphysical profundities, but also a vision of the not-too-distant future that could be realized in my lifetime.

When astronauts walked on the moon in the next year, it seemed that space travel was just around the corner. Yet, after the 1960s, lethargy crept into our national consciousness. Our public (and private) schools plunged into decline. Our political discourse grew ever more petty and myopic. Space receded as a goal.

Apparently, we have become so blind or jaded or self-involved that we no longer look to where the future should take us. We seem to be so mesmerized by personal and partisan trivia, so untouched by noble and cosmic aspirations, that we settle for petty satisfactions and victories on an earth shrunk to the dimensions of a mere turf, and we abjure the pursuit of lofty horizons.

As I now read my daily newsletter from space.com, I wrestle in my mind with the problem of determining what it would take to reawaken in American souls the drive to explore space. Such a drive would represent not only the possibility of technological progress, but also hope for the future.

We who should be witnesses to the beginning of the future are too obsessed with quotidian banalities to care that we are not.