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The Latest Buzz: Aldrin Flies to the Moon Again

As a new film on the Apollo 11 mission is released, the second man on the moon tells ScientificAmerican.com what he thinks of NASA's current direction

By Adam Hadhazy



MOON WALK REDUX: Buzz Aldrin, the second man to set foot on the moon, gets to do it all over again, albeit in digital form in the new movie *Fly Me to the Moon*.

StarBuzz Enterprises

This Friday, Buzz Aldrin will be landing on the moon again—this time in the 3-D, computer-generated film, *Fly Me to the Moon*. In the kiddie flick, Aldrin voices a digital version of himself during the historic Apollo 11 moon landing mission in 1969. The story follows three adventure-seeking young houseflies that stow on board the NASA spacecraft.

ScientificAmerican.com spoke to Aldrin by phone about the movie and about NASA, which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. Aldrin has some reservations about the agency's planned return trip by 2020. He also foresees trouble ahead as the era of the space shuttle, the launch vehicle NASA has used since 1981 to put astronauts into low Earth orbit, ends in 2010. He also has some thoughts on fellow astronaut Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man to visit the moon, who has claimed that U.S. government has been hiding evidence of aliens for over 60 years. An edited interview transcript follows.

Tell us about *Fly Me to the Moon*.

Well, I think the movie is a marvelous combination of timely historical events and animation. The film showcases some of the [historical] achievements that I think need to be recognized by young people, voters, and the candidates for the office that will direct the space program for the next four years. I think events in the film were depicted accurately. Much of what happened on the [Apollo 11] mission, like the landing of the lunar module, has to be animated, because there wasn't anyone there to take pictures. You still have to put on [the 3-D] glasses to see the really exciting parts [in the movie] that cause the kids to scream a bit. Overall, I think *Fly Me to the Moon* is valuable as inspiration for children and I was happy to be a small part of it.

What do you think of NASA's current priorities?

I think we're too obsessed with short-term objectives and what satisfies the public thirst for immediate solutions to problems as well as [their] thirst for news. The media market gets in a frenzy about fixing a problem instead of looking at the longer-term progress of humanity.

That's what I'm trying to impress on those who motivate NASA and the leadership of this country. It doesn't mean vacillating back and forth between programs; it means that we have to be judicious in all these things and be reasonable. In the past I think we had

examples of being flexible and how to avoid gaps in development, and I think we are in danger of not having that now as we transition from the shuttle and the station to more exploration and space commerce.

What about the agency's plans to return to the moon by 2020?

A lot of people are fascinated by trying to set a goal and an objective. This kind of approach [by NASA] worked really well in the 1960s and 1970s. Having a race [to get back to the moon] is good for sound bites and the encapsulation of progress, but maybe not that good for the people involved. We want to see things done right without wastage, [and as such], I don't think we need a deadline. The question is less when than how, and will [NASA] handle things properly.

What about the proposed manned Mars missions, scheduled to take place by 2031?

Yes, it's not so much about when you get there but what you do when you're there. If you look at approaching Mars the way the Pilgrims came over on the Mayflower [to remain at their destination], that is much preferred to putting someone there who can't wait to get back home again. And if we don't have to pay for [these explorers] to come back, all the better.

It's important to realize it is not necessary to support a Mars program now. It is important to take steps based on a judicious review of the past. The past tells us that in the venture to get to the moon, we filled the gap [between the Mercury and Apollo programs] with the Gemini program. We were also flexible on our options, though we were not flexible after Apollo and did not define what was to follow Apollo. We will have a [multiyear] gap in capability when we retire the space shuttle [before] the next space vehicle, Orion, [is ready].

What should NASA emphasize—manned or robotic exploration?

I think NASA needs a mixture of manned flight and robotic missions. The agency needs to represent national interests in concert with the Department of Defense [DoD] and the Commerce Department. I don't think the management of that has matured as well as it could have over the years. [NASA] tried with the National Space Council, chaired by the vice president. The president has a science advisor now, but this person reports to the [White House] chief of staff, not the president directly. I think we need a cabinet level science position that can work with the DoD more appropriately, rather than [it and NASA] trying to absorb the other. We need to fund things on a long-term, sustainable basis, instead of during a one- to four-year political or budgetary time period.

What do you think of NASA's efforts to develop new technologies for getting humans in and out of space?

NASA does R&D in a lot of subjects. For example, the agency spent a lot of money on the X-33 program, which was for a craft that would take off horizontally like a plane and get into orbit. But that project was set aside. The return capsule being developed for the Orion module [the shuttle's replacement scheduled for 2014] is probably the right stage to use at this point. But space tourists in a future inflatable hotel shouldn't have to use a capsule. We need to have redundancy options [for getting people back and forth into space], and these are not being worked on at this time.

A craft that takes off and lands like an airplane would also be highly marketable to India and China and would increase [the U.S.'s] prestige. What we need is a way to deliver people and to do what we originally committed to do, which is have an emergency return vehicle at the International Space Station, rather than relying on the supposed cost effectiveness of a [Russian-made] Soyuz ship. If that's the only way we can get to the \$100-billion space

station after 2010 [when the space shuttle is retired], that is rather unfortunate. So it may make sense to extend the shuttle for a few more years. There are other ways of filling a gap [in craft availability and mission objectives] rather than squeezing it at both ends. That's what NASA did with the Gemini program between the Mercury and Apollo programs in the 1960s.

What do you think about fellow astronaut Edgar Mitchell's claims that the government is covering up the existence of aliens?

Well, despite the ridicule of other people, some people maintain that improbable things exist. Someone wanted to proclaim that when we landed on the moon that we would sink 50 feet [15 meters] into the lunar dust. That would have been a Nobel Prize-winning statement if it had turned out to be true; this now-unknown person could have been the famous predictor of the Apollo disaster. But for now, Edgar has carved out a future for himself and he's got to live in it.