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Apollo 1 Tragedy I

Lead: In the winter of 1967, the race to the moon was on. The pressure on the Apollo program was enormous. Faulty design and careless construction led to a disastrous fire.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: From the moment the first signals of Sputnik alerted the world to a new era of space exploration, it seemed that the United States was nearly always behind. The Soviets achieved the first dog in space, the first manned flight, the

first man in orbit, the first woman in orbit, the first space walk. America's stumbling space program seemed always two steps behind, never quite able to surpass its geopolitical rival. By 1966 President John F. Kennedy's goal of reaching the moon before the decade seemed illusive.

President Johnson was a man badly in need of a triumph. Racial unrest, antiwar protests, and budget problems beset him from all sides. He turned up the pressure on NASA and the space agency responded with a change of testing procedure. After a bitter internal debate, the space program began constructing the components of the Apollo moon shoot using an "all up" testing mandate.

Prior to that time every part had to work on its own before it was put into a system. Now all major systems, for instance such as the Command Capsule, had to be complete and checked out before it reached Cape Kennedy. This increased the speed but many felt also increased the danger. Some reasoned that Apollo was too complex for such a process.

The United States reached the moon by 1969 but not without witnessing one of the space program's worst tragedies. The Apollo I fire in January 1967 probably resulted from a schedule dominated by the need for speed rather than safety. On the other hand the terrible accident also

**probably saved the space program.
Next time: Fire in the cockpit.**

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

Giblin, Robin. "Fire in the Cockpit," *American Heritage of Invention and Technology*. 13 (4, Spring 1998):46-55.

Murray, Charles and Cox, Catherine. *Apollo: The Race to the Moon*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

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