In *Dark Side of the Moon*, Gerard J. DeGroot offers a thoroughgoing indictment of the rationales that motivated the push by the United States to become the first nation to put a human on the Moon. He characterizes the space race with the Soviet Union as “shallow and trivial,” repeatedly calls human spaceflight “pointless” and describes the Moon as “a barren, soulless place where humans do not belong.” Clearly, someone looking for a balanced analysis of the Apollo lunar landing project will not find it here.

DeGroot says that his intent in writing the book was “to cut through the myths carefully constructed by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations” that winning the race to the moon was important, even essential, to the United States prevailing in its Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. In his view, these myths were used to “fleece” the American public. He repeats with thinly veiled disdain the various arguments that have been made
in favor of human space exploration, concluding that the public’s willingness to support it “was all one great fantasy, one collective willingness to indulge a romantic illusion.” The notion that space is a frontier to be explored (an idea put forth by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and by NASA) was “a sham—a confidence trick.”

This line of criticism is not new. Forty years ago, sociologist Amitai Etzioni characterized the race to the Moon as a “Moon-Doggle,” and leading scientists and social critics complained about the misplaced priorities of those who valued human spaceflight over more scientifically productive robotic missions and space exploration over other areas of public spending.

*Dark Side of the Moon* adds little to similar books that have preceded it, other than the florid language in support of its arguments. At one point, for example, DeGroot characterizes John F. Kennedy as “Buck Rogers in a business suit.” He reserves his greatest scorn for Wernher von Braun, who developed rockets for the Nazis during World War II and then emigrated to the United States, where he eventually joined the space program. DeGroot variously describes von Braun as “a trickster,” “a spoiled child” and a man with “the mind of a drug pusher” and someone with “the instincts of a rat.” When discussing the National Defense Education Act, a reaction to Sputnik that
provided college scholarships to those who wanted to study science and engineering, DeGroot can’t help adding that one of the thousands so supported was Theodore Kaczynski, later known as the Unabomber. This style of writing is closer to that of a tabloid than that of a serious academic study.

DeGroot sees Project Apollo as “an opportunity to hide a massive domestic spending program within a Cold War Trojan horse.” Those who actually did the hard work that made Apollo succeed would surely be offended by DeGroot’s remark that “hundreds of thousands of workers scattered all over the United States would learn to love the space program for the simple reason that it put food on the table.” [p. 103] He repeats the words of key Apollo workers such as Glynn Lunney, who said that those directly involved in the program thought they were doing “something special for America.” But DeGroot appears to believe that those voicing such sentiments had had their perspective manipulated. Similarly, he notes with a sense of disdain that “for millions of Americans, the space program was a wellspring of success-proof (at a time when proof was needed) that America as an ideal still worked.” [p. 187] He appears to have little regard for the American way of life of the 1950s and 1960s.

DeGroot uses mostly secondary sources as the basis for his analysis, and when he cites primary documents, they often turn out to be transcripts of publicly available reports, speeches
and news conferences. He makes a number of factual mistakes, the most egregious of which is saying that Apollo 9 went into lunar orbit, when in fact it was an Earth-orbital test of the lunar-landing module. He misidentifies a number of NASA officials, and he inserts comments made well after the fact into his historical narrative without any reference to the shift in chronology. He is also selective in his use of evidence, which is not surprising given the polemical purpose of his tract.

Project Apollo is surely a legitimate target for reasoned criticism. Unfortunately, the angry tone of *Dark Side of the Moon* seems more a product of disillusion than of reason. He says that he came to his examination of the space program seeking to write something “hopeful and uplifting” but found “a gang of cynics, manipulators, demagogues, tyrants, and even a few criminals.” Perhaps this could have been predicted, because DeGroot states his belief that almost all of the technologies intended to improve the quality of human life have instead turned out to have “rendered man more efficient in his moral corruption.” Given this attitude, it is no wonder that DeGroot was disappointed by what he found when he studied what the U.S. National Academy of Engineering chose as the major technological achievement of the 20th century.
John M. Logsdon is Director of the Space Policy Institute of George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs. He is the author of The Decision to Go to the Moon: Project Apollo and the National Interest (MIT Press, 1970).