

Referencing the Apollo Program and our country's near-mythic success in achieving the goal of a first moon landing has become commonplace in the climate-and-energy debates. Here's Obama doing it in his address a few days ago to the National Academy of Sciences (a great speech, btw, defending the role of government in spurring scientific advances, transcript and analysis available [here](#)):

Our future on this planet depends on our willingness to address the challenge posed by carbon pollution. And our future as a nation depends upon our willingness to embrace this challenge as an opportunity to lead the world in pursuit of new discovery.

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik a little more than a half century ago, Americans were stunned. The Russians had beaten us to space. And we had to make a choice: We could accept defeat or we could accept the challenge. And as always, we chose to accept the challenge. . . . We have to replicate that.

The analogy isn't perfect, as Obama concedes.

There will be no single Sputnik moment for this generation's challenges to break our dependence on fossil fuels. In many ways, this makes the challenge even tougher to solve.

There being no "Sputnik moment" means at least two things, I think: With climate change, humanity won't be alerted with a single call to action as tangible and undeniable as a vessel hurled into space, and it also won't be spurred to constructive competition by an entity we're as willing to pit ourselves against as cold-war-era Soviets. In more Olympian terms, we're missing both the start gun and the other runners.

But the Apollo program can't be beat for inspiration to tackle seemingly impossible problems, and to do it led by government. Citing it in the climate context also nicely alludes to the link between the [first-ever photographs](#) of the entire Earth from deep space, taken by Apollo astronauts, and the rise of environmentalism.

I therefore hope it isn't entirely off topic to urge readers to watch the DVD of the film documentary [In the Shadow of the Moon](#), as I did recently. It chronicles the Apollo program's origins, ups, downs, accidents and triumphs through moving interviews with the

astronauts, who are now removed enough in time from their experiences to have given them sometimes surprisingly deep thought. The movie breeds excitement about our country's ability to rise to challenges and about our government's renewed interest in building the scientific capacity we'll need to do it.