Chapter 4
The Grip of the Space Frontier

When the editors of Time magazine announced an unconventional pick for its 1966 “Man of the Year”—not a single male but the generation of men and women 25 years old and under—they offered conventionally upbeat reasons for doing so. Brushing aside gathering clouds of war and student activism, Time suggested these American youth mostly avoided protest marches, accepted their nation’s military action in Vietnam, and worked to positively transform their world. The editors predicted these young go-getters “will land on the moon, cure cancer and the common cold, lay out blight-proof, smog-free cities, enrich the undeveloped world and, no doubt, write finis to poverty and war.”¹ Alas their rosy forecast did not come true. America’s 12 lunar-landing astronauts turned out to be older than 25, and earthly afflictions of poverty and war endured. But the magazine’s predictions echoed the still common conviction that an American Century of global peace and prosperity had begun. This new generation was ready to take charge and share the nation’s good fortune and heal a divided world. Among the many endeavors that illustrated this promise, the US space program demonstrated quite dramatically that Americans young and old were able to outpace the Soviet Union and secure their benevolent leadership on earth and beyond. This according to many aerospace experts, public officials, and media pundits who agreed that the so-called space frontier constituted the ultimate phase of American development. By tapping a potent nationalist myth and suggesting that the conquest of outer space was analogous to the settlement of the New World and western frontiers, they promoted the US space program as a critical foundation of Free World security and prosperity. Although Time did not call its honorees a generation of celestial pioneers, its divinations fit neatly with everyday discourse linking the nation’s frontier past with its spacefaring future.

J. Spiller, Frontiers for the American Century
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Time pointedly took up the frontier trope two years later when it designated “America’s moon pioneers,” the three astronauts who first orbited that cosmic body on Christmas day 1968, as the “indisputable Men of the Year.” Their “courage, grace, and cool efficiency” evoked the competent bravura of backwoods explorers lionized by nationalist chroniclers like Theodore Roosevelt. By asserting that the “newer world opened up by the Men of the Year will surely, in time, reach far beyond the moon,” the magazine’s editors also tapped a second strain of frontier mythology associated with historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who credited successive frontiers as the sustaining fount of American liberty and prosperity. Wonderstruck over a truly momentous event, the editors regarded the impending lunar landing not as a final goal but as the beginning of “a journey into man’s future.” They were sufficiently grounded to recognize that year’s shocking political violence, urban unrest, and environmental degradation at home as well as war and nuclear proliferation abroad stood in stark contrast to that bright future and had made “it easy to question the wisdom of spending billions to escape the troubled planet.” It turns out the editors were not clear-eyed enough. While they lauded the nation’s pioneering future in space, these and further “upheavals and frustrations” cast shadows over the ensuing Apollo moon landings and shook the cultural and political foundations of the space frontier motif.2

Advocates had used that motif since the late 1950s to promote a budget-straining space program whose primary aim was to bolster America’s security and prestige. This Cold War impetus foundered at the end of the 1960s as the United States won the race to the moon and pursued détente with the Soviet Union. The nation’s simultaneous economic woes, triggered by its weakening trade position and enormous government spending, meant that the United States could not afford to carry out the ambitious program of human exploration envisioned by partisans of the space frontier. President Richard M. Nixon made this very clear when he declared “we must define new goals which make sense for the seventies” while realizing “that space expenditures must take their proper place within a rigorous system of national priorities.”3 Since those priorities did not include much touted space planes, orbital stations, moon bases, and piloted missions to Mars, many advocates of such plans had to follow Nixon’s lead during that decade and stop summoning an unbounded space frontier. Rather than hailing an outward-looking nation of cosmic pioneers, they spoke prosaically of Americans as shareholders of a practical, earth-oriented space program.