# That's One Giant Leap for NASA

Suppose the public could choose an Oscar winner for "Best Public Policy in a Single Century." Well, suppose no more.

The Pew Center is not the Film Academy, but it did ask respondents what they thought the government's "greatest achievement" has been during these last hundred years.

Their answers are as ballots in an Oscar-style competition. And with the balloting completed, we now know the nominees and the winner of this race for the "Policy Award."

*The Nominees Are...*

Asked this open-ended question about "government achievement," precisely a third of the public answered, "Duh." As for those who *did* make a choice, they gave answers that fit into four general categories: "prosperity;" "victory;" "partisan programs," and finally, the Winner.

*As for the winner... it isn't "Prosperity"*

Americans *love* prosperity. But only 8% of those with an opinion considered ongoing "wealth and prosperity" to be the government's greatest achievement.

Americans probably consider themselves to be the *real* winners when it comes to building a successful economy. So the government got only minimal credit for its role in what economists call fiscal policy.

*...it isn't "Victory"*

Vince Lombardi insisted that "winning isn't everything; winning is the *only* thing." Not so. Just 4% considered America's victory in World War II as the greatest success. In fact, people gave more credit to the government for promoting public health (5%) than for beating the Nazis.

It's been almost three generations since America defeated fascism. But it isn't merely the passage of time operating here.

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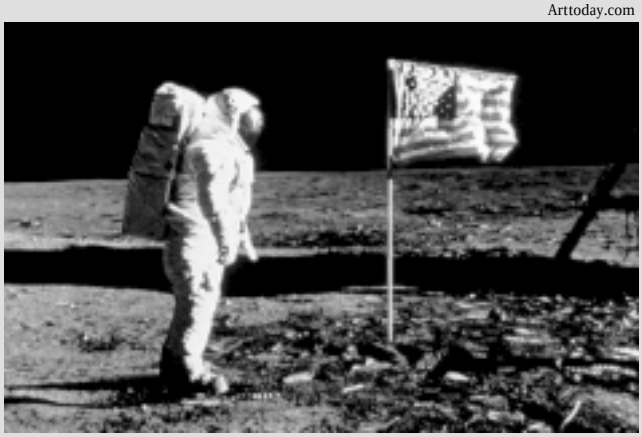

Our other great "victory"—the Cold War—is only a decade removed from today, yet only 3% cited that "victory" as the government's finest hour.

Washington actually got more credit for waging peace than for waging war. Adding together the votes for "diplomacy," for "America's stature in the world," and for the government's role in promoting peace—the "Pax Americana"—we come up with 11% of the total vote. The victories over fascism and communism totaled just 8%.

*...it isn't "Partisan Programs"*

Ask a policy wonk about governmental achievement and you're not likely to hear anything about "winning a war" or "preserving the peace." Those things are government actions, not policies *per se*.

Wonks think programmatically. And they think about policies and programs that have some partisan or ideological underpinning. But Pew didn't ask wonks; it asked the *public*. And the public doesn't think "programmatically." It thinks even less in terms of programs that are typically identified with either political party or any major political "ism."

Culling through the data I came up with three categories of programmatic response: fiscal conservatism (balancing the

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the level of shared opinion—the *degree* of collective memory about those early decades—accounted, on average, for more than a third of all responses. Since the '80s, the level has fallen off by about half (see Figure 1, pp. 46).

The graph of collective memory, decade by decade, produces something akin to a bell-shaped curve. For the '20s on through the '60s, the level of collective memory continues to increase. With the '70s the level falls back. Then the '80s and the '90s are visited upon us. And neither has produced a widely shared theme. Consensus is out; dissensus is in.

federal budget); social welfarism (maintaining the "safety net"); and social justice (promoting civil rights and liberties).

Three percent of the vote went to balancing the budget; 9% to the "safety net," and 13% to civil rights and liberties. All told, 25% of the votes cast went to these three programs, each of which *can* be tied to "conservatism" or to "liberalism."

Not bad. But not what a wonk would have imagined. In fact, fewer votes went to all these "political" programs combined than to that one very popular program that has neither partisan nor ideological colorations...

*The Envelope, Please*

...And this century's "Greatest Achievement" award goes to the producers of the Apollo project, the space shuttle program, and the Hubble telescope. In an acronym: NASA.

Sharing the award with the producers at NASA are the directors of those government programs that sponsor science and technology (S&T).

Taken together, space, technology and science got 28% of all votes cast for "greatest achievement." That's about three times as many ballots for space and S&T as for "peace." And nearly four times as many for space and S&T as for "prosperity."

The *really* big stars were space exploration and the Apollo program. Twenty-two percent of all the ballots went there. Space accounted for three-quarters of all the vote going to space *and* to S&T combined.

That space, science and technology should win this award is more than a little ironic. Americans say they love science, but they also countenance a system of education that proves their love is false, or at least shallow and fickle.

More than half the math and science teachers in America did not major, or minor, in college math or science! So, this Oscar should *not* be interpreted as evidence that Americans love science as some sort of Platonic ideal.

The "objective" reasons for this outcome are more practical than Platonic. Americans grant this award to government-sponsored science because they think science has "helped." Helped to improve their economy. Helped to make their travel, communication and work less burdensome. Helped to prolong their lives. Even helped America look great in the eyes of the world.

These are the practical and objective reasons. But beyond those are the cultural, and more subjective, aspects of this science thing, especially this space thing.

Remember "collective memory"? That it was more about fun than about ideas? More about celebrity than about issues? More about success than about failure? And more about anything than about ideology?

It's all of a piece. Our specific collective memory about the government's greatest success simply reflects generalized collective thinking about our public past. Space and science and technology *all* do well in collective recall, in part, because none of them is political and all of them are a kick.

Space, above all, wins an Oscar for "Best Policy in a Single Century" because space is most in keeping with our collective "thought process." Space exploration is "gee-whiz" entertainment—fun. Space programs produce an ongoing supply of heroes—celebrities. And space—moon shots, particularly—put us in touch with another, older collective notion: that we are the world's pathfinders and explorers—pioneers of accomplishment.

As an added bonus, space exploration has no partisan ideology. John Glenn and Neil Armstrong. Or Meriwether Lewis and George Rogers Clark. Government employees, all. And each made a name for himself implementing federal public policy. But each man and each policy can fairly be remembered as outside politics or partisanship of any kind.

Space is part national achievement; part national pride, and part a national theme park of the mind. It's our space-age "Frontierland." And nothing ought to fit better with the social-psychological dimensions of American collective thought than a place called "Frontierland." Apparently, nothing does.

*—Michael J. Robinson*

But why? There are three plausible theories: "recency;" "reality;" and a "restructured" media. "Recency" theory is cognitive psychology. Recency involves nothing more profound than the notion that the closer in time the public is to "everything," the more likely it is to remember anything. Being most recent, the last two decades should, as "recency" would have it, elicit more impressions, but no single theme.

"Reality" theory is history. The more memorable the history, the greater the shared memory. But the real history of the last twenty years has been less than cataclysmic. Without a cataclysm to recall, Americans remember many things, but few decade-defining things—no signature.

"Restructured media" involves changing information sys-