

Book Review: *Dark Side of the Moon***Summary and Critical Examination:**

The *Dark Side of the Moon* by Gerard J. DeGroot is an antagonistic, bombastic, and deriding history of America's venture to the moon. The book is built around three primary pillars: 1. Provide a summary of the American space race, 2. Answer the question of why go to the moon, and 3. Cast a shadow on the quest of going to the moon by providing caustic comments on those involved in the program and on the American population in general. By the end of the book, DeGroot provides no original scholarly insight and comes across as anti-American.

DeGroot was born in California but is currently a professor of modern history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He has written 10 books including *The Bomb: A Life* which won the Westminster Award for best book on a war or military topic. In an interview with American Scientist Online, DeGroot comments that he does not want readers to see his book as an attack on the astronauts, scientists, and technicians that made the Apollo project successful.<sup>1</sup> However, his book repeatedly attacks not just those involved with the program but America itself.

The first pillar of DeGroot's book is to provide a historical summary of the events that began man's quest into space and the Apollo program. What the reader will find is that he simply restates and at times seems to pirate the ideas and work of other Apollo historians. The required readings to this point in ESD30 cover every piece of DeGroot's historical summary. In this regard, it seems a lot like a musician who 20 years after their prime re-releases their greatest hits album in the name money. Except in this instance the hits were not originally his. Ultimately, his summary is only the background for the other two pillars.

DeGroot's second pillar for the book is to answer the question of why go to the moon. Too often in his writing, he asks the question why and then gives an answer. Many times the answers he provides correspond to those learned in class. However, in each case he trivializes the answers. His questioning of the impetus for entering the space race and going to the moon is nothing more than Monday morning quarterbacking. Looking back on the fears that the American population and government had toward the threat of falling behind the Soviet Union may now seem unwarranted. This conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> American Scientist Online, <http://www.americanscientist.org/template/InterviewTypeDetail>, Jan 2007.

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however is much easier to make over 40 years later. Determining this answer while immersed in the situation is a much more difficult proposition. It is his responses to why we went to the moon that brings about the third pillar of the book.

The last pillar of DeGroot's book cast a shadow on the extraordinary feat of going to the moon due to his caustic attacks. Although there is one person that he holds in high regard and continually revisits throughout the course of the book even though his roll ends in 1960. He presents President Eisenhower as the only person that understands the real dynamic of space on society and international politics and influence. He routinely uses Eisenhower's beliefs and policies as an antidote for what he considers the misguided and potentially corrupt reasons presented for going to the moon. President Eisenhower does probably deserve more credit than history provides him on space issues, but DeGroot uses it again as a person with over 40 years of time to support his beliefs. President Eisenhower receives glowing reviews from DeGroot but most others do not.

There are many examples of DeGroot's caustic comments throughout the book. The following will help to illustrate the extent to which he goes and will emphasize the earlier comment about him being anti-American. He makes the following statement about the American media.

*"A hysterical public, egged on by an ignorant and irresponsible media, engaged in an orgy of fear."*<sup>2</sup>

He similarly is fond of referring to Americans as shallow. There are at least four references to this fact within his book. The first appearance is quoted below.

*"Shortly after Sputnik, the American people took the road labeled shallow."*<sup>3</sup>

The astronauts and President Kennedy did not escape his attacks either.

*"No mention was made of the fact that some astronauts cheated on their wives, often in serial fashion, and sometimes with more than one woman at a time."*<sup>4</sup>

*"After all, this was the era in which the president of the United States was a serial womanizer who cheated on his mistresses."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> DeGroot, Gerard, J., *Dark Side of the Moon*, New York University Press (2006), p.62.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p. 115

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 116.

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Additionally, he makes references to Enos, the second primate to go into space, and his problem of masturbation. The intent is not to discredit his colorful references but rather to ask where they belong in the context of answering why we went to the moon. It is just added rhetoric to bias the reader and promote his idea that Apollo was a foolish use of public resources. In the end, these comments uncover his possible agenda and further emphasize that this is not a scholarly work.

**Discussion of a Political Decision:**

DeGroot's book takes the stance that Apollo was completely a political decision. This is inline with what we learned in class. American's push to go to the moon was a deliberate political decision of the time. However, writing a book on the topic at this point lacks importance. As described in the Launius's paper, much scholarly work has already been conducted by authors like Logsdon and McDougall on the politics surrounding Apollo. DeGroot probably realized this and as such it prompted him to take the aberrant approach to castigate the decision and the program in order to produce a book that was not a rewrite of previously covered material. DeGroot produces no new insight, he only introduces and highlights tabloid worthy material.

**Relevance to the Larger Apollo Project:**

The *Dark Side of the Moon* relates to the overall theme of this course by forcing the reader to evaluate why America went to the moon and what benefits Apollo really provided. The facts of why we went to the moon are in DeGroot's book and even the answers, it is the reader's responsibility to determine their merit. The book also begs the reader to conduct more research into the benefits of Apollo. DeGroot states there are none, but history tells a different story. Finally, it is relevant to the larger Apollo project because Apollo is about people and the book very clearly shows that people are not perfect but at times can be extraordinary.

**Sources:**

The abstract for the book states, "Drawing on meticulous archival research, DeGroot cuts through the myths. . ."<sup>6</sup> A first look at his bibliography gives the appearance that this is true and that the book has significant contributions from primary sources. He list 10 archive collections to include five presidential libraries. However,

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<sup>6</sup> DeGroot, inside front cover.

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only 13% of his footnotes come from primary sources. Launius's article lists the leading works covering five categories of Apollo. DeGroot only uses two in the list with any significance--McDougall (29 times) and McCurdy (15 times). One of the main criticisms he has of Apollo is it did not provide any significant scientific results. However, he does not even include W. David Compton's work which Launius list as important under exploring lunar science. DeGroot also uses different polls like Gallup and public opinion statistics to support many of his claims. If the reader looks closely, they will find that many of these polls and statistics do not have reference citations. Some of them do, but it gives the appearance that he is providing just enough to make them all credible. I do admit however that I may be reading something sinister into it that is not there. The final synopsis on his sources is they further emphasis my assertion that this is not a great scholarly work.

**Conclusion:**

The *Dark Side of the Moon* is not a book I would recommend to readers looking for an in-depth quality analysis of why America went to the moon and the benefits that accompanied it. I would recommend it to the reader that sees themselves as shallow and feel that Apollo and the trips to the moon produced zero return on the money invested. When I presented this book to Dr. Mindell he made the statement that it was junky. At the time I was unsure what he meant. Now it is clear that the book is merely a paraphrase of previously written material that makes unnecessary attacks on Apollo, the government, the public, and even a chimpanzee named Enos. The book's conclusions are partly factual at best and leave the reader feeling worse for having taken the time to read it.

This paper is 1450 words long.