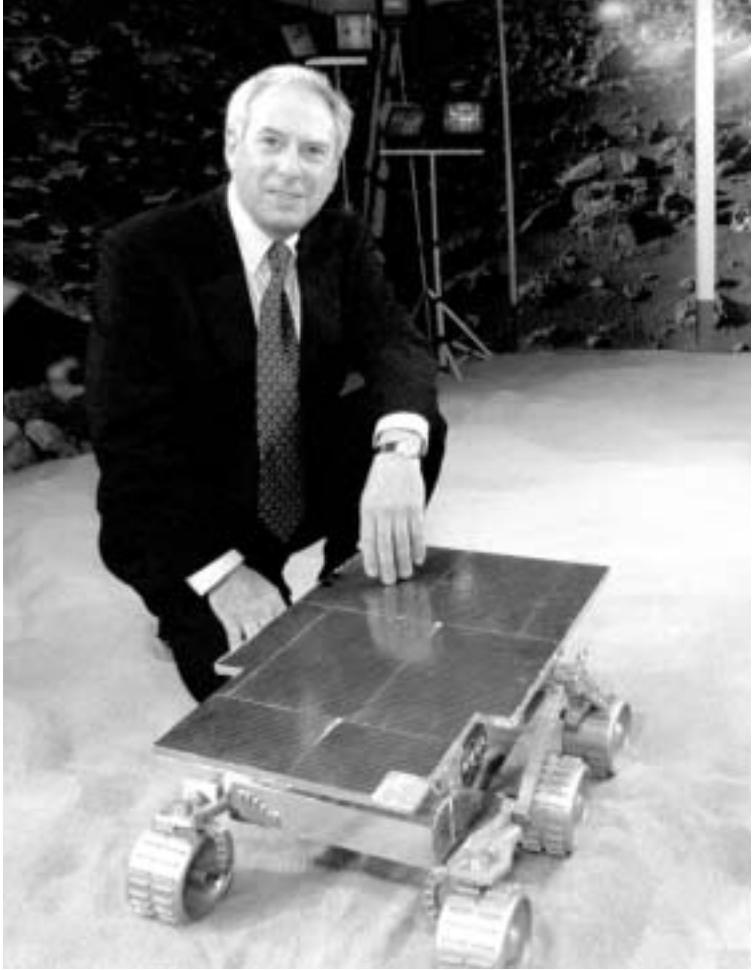

Opening Remarks—Daniel S. Goldin



Daniel S. Goldin with a model of the Mars Pathfinder's Sojourner rover.

What a wonderful day it is. We are taking the opportunity this morning to reflect on what it has meant since 1961 to be a spacefaring nation. We are also looking forward to the next forty years of human adventure in space and what it might bring us as a civilization.

While the specifics of what will unfold during the first part of the twenty-first century are not certain—and that’s the wonder of the space program—I can say with certainty that the possibilities are boundless. Accordingly, I am both excited about where we have been and where we are going.

Alan Shepard, of course, had become the first American to fly into space during a 15-minute suborbital flight on 5 May 1961, riding a Redstone booster in his Freedom 7 spacecraft. At the ceremony that followed, President Kennedy recognized the courage and sacrifice of all those involved in America’s first human spaceflight. The President commented that Shepard’s success as the first United States astronaut was an outstanding contribution to the advancement of human knowledge, space technology, and a demonstration of man’s capabilities in suborbital flight.

President Kennedy also juxtaposed the very public flight of Alan Shepard with the secrecy of our rival at the time, the Soviet Union: “I also want to pay cognizance to the fact that this flight was made out in the open with all the possibilities of failure, which have been damaging to our country’s prestige. Because great risks were taken in that regard, it seems to me that we have some right to claim that this open society of ours, which risked much, gained much.”¹

1. Remarks at the presentation of NASA’s Distinguished Service Medal to astronaut Alan B. Shepard on 8 May 1961. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 366.

President Kennedy's comments about the risks and rewards of spaceflight are just as applicable today as they were on 8 May 1961. In forty years of human spaceflight, we have achieved enormous successes, gained astounding knowledge about our universe and our place in it, and brought untold benefits to the people of the world.

We have learned to survive in the incredibly hostile environment of space. We have landed on the Moon. We have developed a remarkable vehicle, the Space Shuttle, which enables Americans to travel to and from Earth orbit much more readily than any previous launch technology, and we will have a vehicle that will take us not just to low-Earth orbit, but, eventually, we will develop a vehicle to take us out of Earth orbit.

I'm especially pleased to recognize the leadership of Alan Shepard as the first Mercury 7 astronaut to fly to space. He was truly an American hero, and I'm proud to have known him. Not long after I arrived at NASA, Alan met me to tell me that what we were doing at NASA was very important and that he personally wanted to make himself available. He said that he'd do anything that I asked to help accomplish the NASA mission. If I wanted him to testify before Congress, or meet with senior officials, or speak to schoolchildren, or take a trip across the world, he would be happy to do it.

He was an individual who had been the first American to fly in space, as well as an individual who had walked on the Moon. He offered to carry the message of the importance of human spaceflight to the masses because he believed in it so deeply, and he believed in this great nation of ours. Alan Shepard believed that NASA is a representation of the best that America has to offer.

He was enthusiastic about this fact and always shared it at every opportunity. He left us a legacy of excellence that is unmatched.

We need more heroes like Alan Shepard and the other wonderful astronauts who are opening up the cosmos. They are the modern descendants of Lewis and Clark, Richard Byrd, and Charles Lindbergh. They set their sights on the distant horizon of space and the journey to unknown places, bringing back knowledge and understanding. They inspire us with their perseverance. They lead us, as Americans, to a loftier place, and Alan was the first American there.

In some respects, we have come a long way since Alan Shepard flew the tiny Freedom 7 space capsule forty years ago, but, in other ways, we have not yet journeyed so far. Alan would have been the first to say that while the technology has changed, the curiosity of the human mind and the courage of the human heart remain the same.

Those who venture forth into space are a breed apart. Alan Shepard and every other astronaut should not be thought of simply as passengers or visitors in space. They are blazing a pioneering trail that will be followed by others once they have made the way safe. When we make the way safe, we are going to do great things.

As I was preparing these remarks, I thought about the possibilities. We've been locked in Earth orbit for too long, but we are going to break out. There's no doubt in my mind. The seeds are there. This is the anniversary of NASA's forty years of human space exploration, and it represents an important crossroad. As we celebrate it today, we continue to move toward a visionary goal.

In our quest to make what is envisioned real, we test, we build, we launch, we learn, and we fail. Then we start again and

never ever worry about the criticism of failure—because in failure we learn, and we start the cycle again.

So we are not only celebrating the past today, but also drawing a demarcation point from which to envision the future yet more wondrous. Let us work together to make it happen. Let us burn into our brains that this civilization is not condemned to live on only one planet.

Let's burn it into our brains that in our lifetimes we will extend the reach of this human species onto other planets and to other bodies in our solar system. Let's build the robots that will leave our solar system to go to other stars and ultimately be followed by people.

I wish that Alan Shepard could have been here with us today. We lost a true pioneer when he passed on in 1998. He liked to say of space exploration, "I know it can be done," "it's important for it to be done," and "I want to do it." His spirit lives on in that quest for our future in space.

I would like to close by dedicating this activity on the past, present, and future of U.S. human spaceflight to the memory of Alan Shepard, the first American hero of the space age and my personal hero. Thank you very much.