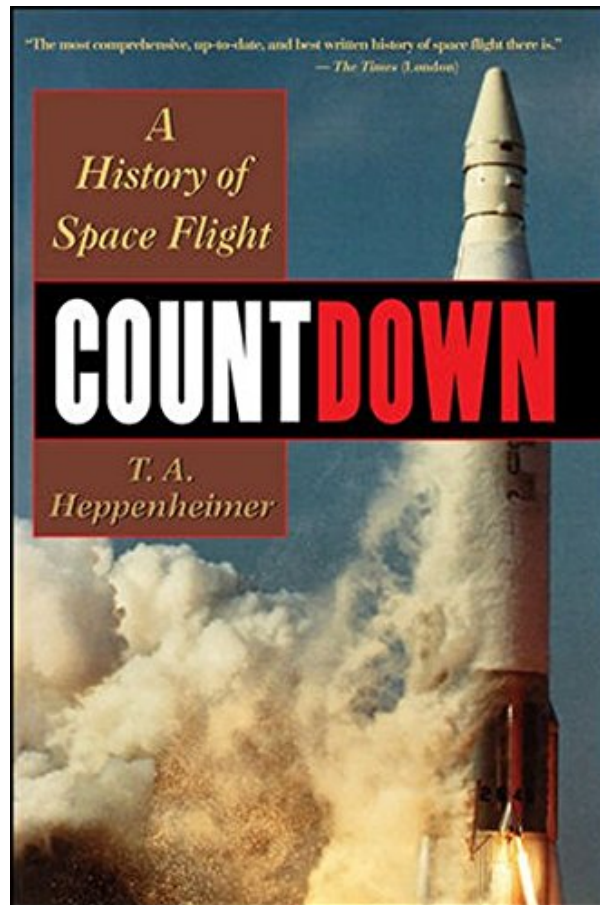
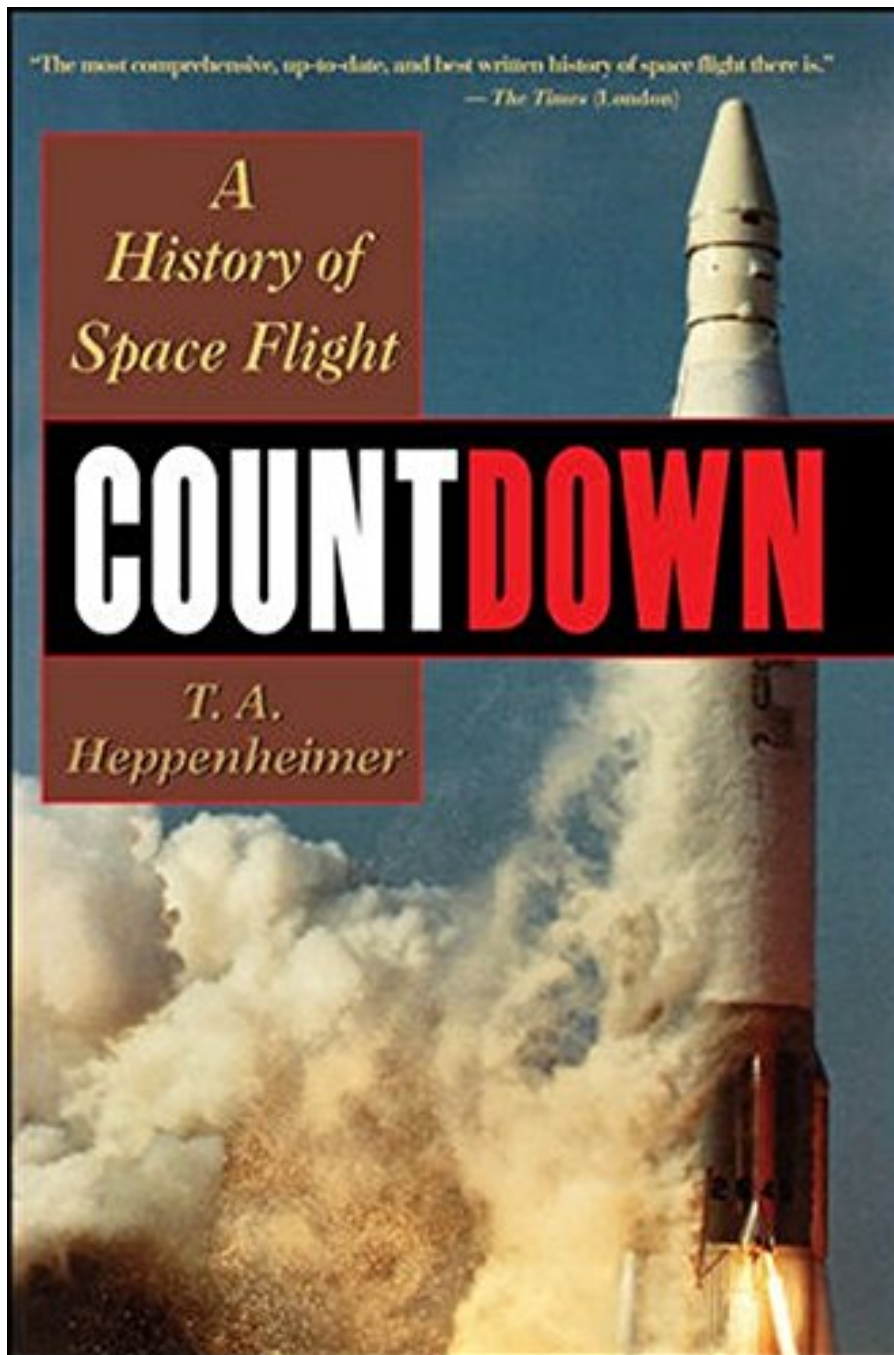


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History of
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COUNTDOWN

*T. A.
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T. A. Heppenheimer's acclaimed chronicle of rockets, politics, and the pioneers who dared to reach beyond humanity's limits.

"The most comprehensive, up-to-date, and best written history of space flight there is."-The Times (London)

"A lively account of the development of space activities in the U.S. and the Soviet Union . . . as good a one-volume overview of space as exists."-Scientific American.

"Countdown is by far the best history of space flight I have ever read. It is detailed, lucidly written for the layman, and full of fascinating stories.-Adrian Berry, Daily Telegraph.

"Science writer Heppenheimer's readable account provides a timely historical overview of the early visionaries, the engineers, and the geopolitical forces that placed men on the moon and created today's aerospace industry. . . . A thoughtful analysis that is highly recommended.-Library Journal.

"By far the most significant and technically insightful account of the ventures into the space environment I have seen. . . . [Heppenheimer] concentrates unerringly on key elements, both technical and managerial, in this account of man's initial space ventures."-Lee Atwood, Former president and chairman, North American Aviation Corporation.

"Like a skilled artisan, Heppenheimer weaves social, political, scientific, technological, military, and economic threads of the history of space flight into a tapestry that reveals fascinating patterns and themes."-Publishers Weekly

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A Very Well Written, Informative Account

By Chris

Countdown is excellent account of the history of space flight. It's well-written and organized and not only discusses the technology of space flight, but also touches on the personalities and politics that have driven its development. Understanding these forces is as important, if not more so, than appreciating the technology. Most accounts focus on the geewhiz aspects of space travel, but don't put them any political or economic context.

Heppenheimer does a wonderful job of reminding the reader about the original impetus for various pieces of space technology. For instance, the Treaty of Versailles limited the types of artillery the Germans could

have, so they focused on developing rockets, which the treaty did not address.

He also discusses the origin of the race to the moon and the long-standing interest of many people in going to Mars. Most people outside the space field, and few people inside it, don't realize the influence a series of articles on space travel (which Werner von Braun provided information for and helped edit) in Collier's Magazine in the early 1950's had on the present shape of the U.S. space program - manned flight to the moon and Mars, space stations and the space shuttle.

The book is a bit thin on recent developments - the X-33 program for example - and the Chinese space program, but this is a minor flaw.

Those who are strong advocates of manned space flight should be forewarned. Heppenheimer is clear-eyed and articulate in his criticisms about the utility of this aspect of space exploration. Still, as someone who is a supporter of manned flight, I found his skepticism a valuable and useful reminder that we need to be honest in our appraisal of the U.S. space program and its goals.

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

The Right Stuff -- with the Right Facts!

By A Customer

This is a very well-researched, captivating, and intentionally unvarnished history of space flight as seen through the programs of the two big players in this venue -- the U.S. and Soviet Union. Heppenheimer has done his homework with meticulous perfection, including a very probing analysis of a Soviet program which has for many years been veiled in secrecy.

Even if you think you understand what the Cold War space race and its historical aftermath was all about -- think again. "Countdown" sheds light on behind-scenes decision-making of this era, and in so doing, challenges many of the conventional historical interpretations. Readers will learn how Khrushchev ironically used the Soviet space program as a cynical and desperate ploy for propaganda value, ultimately selling the U.S.S.R. short on other vital technology development, and assuring its dependency to a "second-rate" world power. There is also much interesting information on the "mastermind" of Soviet rocketry -- Sergei Korolev -- and his story is a rather sad one of bureaucratic undermining of brilliantly conceived projects.

Heppenheimer has a great gift for writing about sophisticated technological projects while also paying heed to how the human element factors into both successes and failures. He is just as comfortable illuminating NASA's proudest achievements as he is berating the agency for the bureaucratic ineptness that led to such debacles as the Challenger explosion. (And, by the way, one learns that the Challenger came seconds close to the same kind of disaster two years earlier). There is a sad, poignant description of the decline of the Soviet program, which evokes images of high-tech facilities being ravished by hoodlums and looters who no longer sense anything special about lofty space ideals. A test model of the Soviet space shuttle, Buran, is described as being displayed in Gorky Park, not far from a ferris wheel. We are told of cosmonauts who recently asked their control center about onboard tools found in their craft -- and nobody knowing what they were for due to pilfered or destroyed records. The decline of the U.S. program is also assessed, although it is more one afflicted by lack of purposeful missions than any economic strangulation.

In the end, "Countdown" proves that looking at things with informed hindsight can be just as exciting as the first unfolding of the events themselves. Heppenheimer concludes by asking some hard questions about the meaning and purpose of spaceflight, advocating that NASA take a very different approach than its current course. All in all, this is a book for those who want an intimate and factually sound telling of the symbolically glorious, yet pragmatically dubious, history of man's entry into outer space.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

A Solid Overview of the History of Space Flight

By Roger D. Launius

T.A. Heppenheimer has a long track record of producing popularly-written books and articles on the history of air and space flight. "Countdown" is very much in the model of his other works, providing a breezy survey of the subject, without much overall depth but also with little nuggets of insight that prompt readers to stop

and ponder certain aspects. In the case of "Countdown," the overview coupled with the flashes of cleverness make the book worth reading and keeping on the shelf of anyone studying the history of space flight. Its merits aside, "Countdown" is not the critical work that many involved in studying the subject have been anticipating for many years.

This book focuses mostly on the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to reach the Moon, and Heppenheimer, writing not long after the end of the Cold War, was able to tap into a rich vein of documentary materials then just beginning to become available. He makes the most of these new sources and offers intriguing portraits of the inner workings and nasty internal politics of the Soviet space program. His discussion of how Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev cynically used the Soviet space effort to further his ideological ends is one of the most important contributions of "Countdown." Heppenheimer also reveals in this book the full extent of the Soviet Moon program, which was both impressive and close to success. Something not previously well known before that mid-1990s, as Heppenheimer shows had it not been for the Soviet failure to develop a heavy-lift rocket it might have reached the Moon before the United States.

Throughout this book Heppenheimer takes pot shots at the human space flight effort, insisting that it is more "an exercise in theater" than a legitimate activity. He believes that satellites and probes have been the real workhorses of the space age, providing enormous scientific, economic, national security, and public returns on the investment. In his view, human space flight offers little of benefit to the nations engaged in it beyond the prestige of actually engaging in it.

The last part of this survey focuses on recent developments in space. Heppenheimer is an inveterate capitalist and he excoriates NASA as a state-run program that benefits only big business and the technological elite while arguing that the dream of practical space flight will only be fulfilled by the private sector. Moreover, as long as space flight remains "a sport of government," Heppenheimer insists, human space flight will dominate the agenda to the detriment of other aspects of the effort. This is, in Heppenheimer's view, the core obstacle of practical developments in space.

Without question, Heppenheimer has offered a useful survey of the history of space flight. "Countdown," however, is neither as comprehensive nor as probing as many readers will expect. Additionally, his indictment of human space flight will probably prove unconvincing to most readers. As it is, this is a helpful but not essential work on an important subject.

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