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2001 and future of higher education

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2001 and future of higher education

1968 was one of the most convulsive years in recent world history. Fifty years later it is worthwhile to remember many of the things that happened back then. That was the year of the Tet Offensive that radically changed American public opinion about the Vietnam War. That was also the year of the Paris revolts in May that transformed a lot of popular culture, of the Mexico City Olympic games where two African-American athletes publicly protested against racial discrimination by raising their black-gloved fists and wearing black socks in lieu of shoes at the podium. It was also the year in which both Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated.

On April 3, 1968, the day before Dr. King was killed, a unique movie opened in theaters across the U.S. Its title: "2001: A Space Odyssey." Although it had mixed reviews initially, this film directed by Stanley Kubrick and partially based on a short story by Arthur C. Clark titled "The Sentinel," went on to be the highest-grossing movie in North America for 1968, and today is considered one of the best and more transformative films ever made.

"2001" was a very revolutionary film in many ways. It included a number of cryptic messages open to interpretation by the audience, high quality special effects well before the era of CGI (Computer Generated Images), the first serious introduction of the concept of artificial intelligence, very little dialogue (only 40 minutes out of 161), elegant use of academic music, and a higher degree of scientific accuracy than any other science fiction movie made before.

This film captured the public imagi-

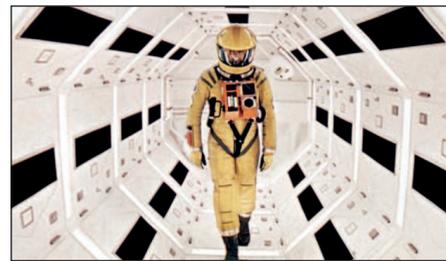
nation because it was released at a time when the human landing on the Moon was just around the corner, an event that took place little more than a year after the release of the movie.

Although these elements are important enough to celebrate the 50th anniversary of "2001," this movie is also a springboard to ponder a very basic question: How come those dreams of planetary travel by humans died with the last Apollo mission in 1972?

As with most big questions, it has a complicated answer. First, there is cost. It is very expensive to send humans to other planets. Also, traveling large distances is difficult, which translates into long and perilous journeys. Equally important is the fact that there is no political taste for human-manned planetary exploration today. After all, the main drive behind the original space race was the competition between the Soviet Union and the U.S. for world supremacy. These are some of the reasons for the demise of big dreams for the U.S. space program, but another major reason that tends to be overlooked concerns the lack of appropriate leadership.

And this issue brings us to a person who is little known by the American public, but whose vision and political savviness were crucial to the success of the U.S. beating the Soviet Union in the space race: James Webb.

Webb was the NASA administrator from the beginning of the Kennedy Administration in 1961 until 1968 when Lyndon Johnson announced Webb's resignation. Before President Kennedy announced to Congress on May 1961 the intention of the U.S. "to achiev-



MGM photo

Still from the "2001" movie.

ing the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon, and returning him safely to the Earth," he consulted Webb to see if such a thing was possible in that timeframe and how much it would cost.

Webb had been hesitant about taking the NASA job in the first place because he lacked any technical background about space exploration. He had been a businessperson and a policy maker when working for government. Kennedy told him that he was looking for someone with policy experience, not a scientist or an engineer. And Webb was very successful as NASA's head. Why?

First of all, Webb placed technical expertise above politics and allowed scientists and engineers a lot of freedom in running their programs. That approach is in big contrast with the way government agencies are run today. Second, he knew that great initiatives cost a lot of money, so he not only came up with a well thought out budget, but also doubled it when he presented it to the White House because he knew that in such an untried field things would not necessarily work out well the first time around.

Webb also remained focused and

promoted efficient communication among the different units at NASA, which at that time directly or indirectly employed nearly 400,000 people, hired about 20,000 contractors and worked with 200 universities in 80 countries. He also showed a lot of vision for a program that was supposed to make such an impact on the history of humanity, something that did not distract him from being honest and transparent when dealing with disasters, such as when three astronauts perished on the launch pad of the Apollo 1 spacecraft in 1967.

What kind of lessons can today's higher education administrators draw from Webb's example?

In a country where college education is under attack for political reasons and faces major financial threats, drastic changes in demographics, and scandals of many kinds, a new kind of leadership is needed. Academic leaders must be capable of communicating to diverse constituencies of society the benefits of higher education from economic and political viewpoints. We need leadership that is ambitious and proactive – not mediocre and reactive – to the challenges that we face today, one in which the leaders see themselves as heads of a "moon-shot," not being afraid of failure, and who come forward in moments of crises with transparency, authenticity, and creativity.

And that is what is called leadership.

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