



Why America Needs Another "Sputnik Moment" to Tackle National Challenges

Thomas F. Remington, Harvard University

In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Obama invoked "our Sputnik moment." Recalling U.S. investments in research and education after Russia launched the first space satellite half a century ago, the President called for renewed efforts to meet international competition with investments in education and research, renewable energy, biomedical science and information technologies. Obama's call to action still matters.

The Original Sputnik Moment

The Soviet Union's launch of an unmanned space satellite on October 4, 1957 – followed by the launch of Sputnik II a month later – led to a watershed in the Cold War. That era of high super-power tensions brought an arms race and repeatedly pushed the world to the brink of all-out nuclear war. But there were also some positive side-effects, which we should not forget.

With the Sputnik launches, the Soviet Union showed that it had mastered long-distance rocket technology and might be able to use space as a platform for space-based weapons. The threat to America was obvious, but so was the challenge – and our nation responded immediately and vigorously under both Republican and Democratic presidents.

Although he was a Republican and the former commander in chief of U.S. forces in Europe during World War II, President Eisenhower did not respond to Sputnik by calling for a huge boost in military spending. Instead, he said the American people should meet the Soviet competition by improving education and investing in science. He created a White House office of science and technology led by the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; quintupled funding for the National Science Foundation; launched the National Aeronautics and Space Agency; and proposed increased federal, state, and local spending on education.

Both Eisenhower and his Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, were concerned about the race for the hearts and minds of people in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Both called on America and the rest of the "Free World" to counter communism by helping developing nations escape from poverty. Both presidents also worked toward equal civil rights at home. In fact, right before Sputnik in September 1957, Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock to enforce the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling striking down school segregation. When the Little Rock schools resisted, Eisenhower had the international audience in mind as he deployed U.S. Army troops to force admission for nine black children who were being barred from school by the Arkansas National Guard. The Soviet Union was reminding people around the world, especially in developing nations, that the United States talked a lot about freedom but denied it to African Americans. It was the Cold War, as much as anything, that persuaded Eisenhower to press desegregation with federal power.

President Kennedy Calls for Social Reforms

President Kennedy was even more vigorous about invoking Cold War competition to urge America to realize as well as proclaim high democratic ideals. When he accepted his party's nomination in July 1960, Kennedy pointed to "three worlds – the free nations, the repressed countries of the Communist world, and the impoverished nations." The United States, he declared, must "awaken" the new nations and strengthen the free world by improving the lives of our own people and showing that democracy is more inclusive and successful than Communism.

How, exactly? In his January 1961 Inaugural Address, President Kennedy highlighted the moral imperative of tackling the problem of poverty in the United States, even as we protect liberty around the world. Calling on Americans to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty," Kennedy set forth an ambitious agenda to reform our system

March 1, 2013

<https://scholars.org>

here at home and defend our ideals around the world. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," Kennedy said, and followed by a less remembered call to "my fellow citizens of the world." "Ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

Throughout his time in office, President Kennedy repeatedly linked domestic reforms to a global freedom agenda. America's unemployment rate was too high and economic growth too slow, he argued. To help less privileged citizens, Kennedy pushed for improved unemployment compensation and an increase in the minimum wage. He tackled lack of access to health care and the blight of substandard housing for 25 million Americans. Kennedy, in short, coupled the challenge of the Cold War to making progress at home on extending equal civil rights, fighting poverty, improving education, and extending health care to the poorest Americans.

From Then to Now

The Cold War inspired presidents to defend U.S. ideals in contests with the Soviet power by improving the actual lives of all Americans through expensive and sustained public efforts to overcome poverty, inequality, and racial injustice. Today, domestic challenges are no less serious, and questions about U.S. standing and influence no less worrisome.

In 2011, the U.S. poverty rate stood at a decades-long high point of 15%. Family incomes are falling, and U.S. income and wealth gaps are the highest in the advanced world and have reached levels not seen since the end of the 1920s. The richest one percent claim nearly a fifth of all income and pay low taxes, even as the United States has declined to 12th place in the world in reading literacy; 17th in science literacy; and 25th in math literacy. U.S. life expectancy at birth languishes in 25th place among several dozen advanced industrial democracies.

America's moral and political influence in the world remains strong, but for how long? Decades ago, the Sputnik moment challenged and mobilized Americans to work together to strengthen our economy, society, and democracy. The 9/11 crisis in 2001 did not spark any similar effort, because U.S. leaders are divided and federal spending as a share of the economy is lower than at the time of Sputnik, and headed lower still. Yet the challenges America faces now are, if anything, even greater than then. It remains to be seen whether President Obama and his successors can invoke another Sputnik moment to mobilize resources to fight social injustices and boost U.S. competitiveness in a world still marked by clashing models and ideologies.