

Moon myths: Artemis in proportion

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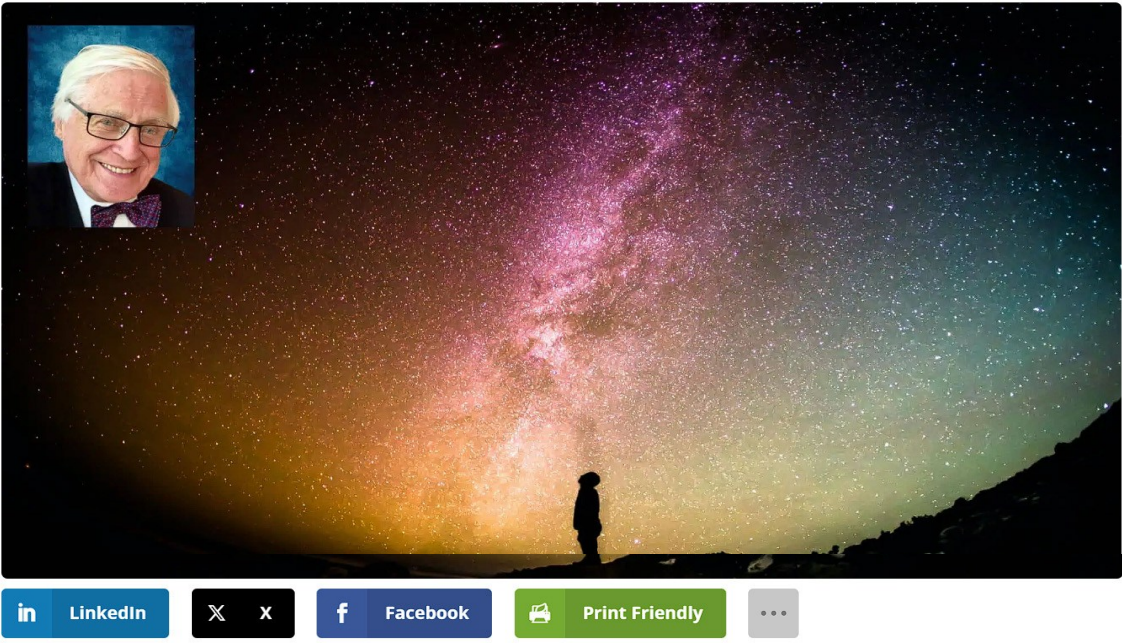
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Curious how space science is always exaggerated. If there’s a meteor shower due, when you might see a fleeting shooting star every five minutes or so, the artwork they provide shows the sky full of white-hot pokers raining down. It has happened again with Artemis, argues **Brian J Ford**...

“The astronauts have many important scientific tasks to perform,” they said, when we all know they’re there only as experimental animals to see it all works.

“People are going to the moon again, after fifty years!” they proclaimed. No, they were going round it. If you have travelled round the block in a bus, you cannot afterwards claim that you were invited to visit the White House.

“They will see the far side of the moon, a view never seen before,” heedless of the fact that American astronauts have orbited the moon (and seen the rear) literally scores of times. The Artemis crew were further away, so saw more in one take; but they weren’t the first.

“The earth will look like a tiny blue marble,” said the BBC’s science correspondent. A marble? It would look to them more than a dozen times bigger than the moon looks to us. A huge great blue football might be better.

“Their little mascot will float up when they are free from earth’s gravity,” they insisted. Such a common mistake – they are never free from earth’s gravity, and nor is the moon (or it would float off into space).

“They will see a perfect solar eclipse,” we were told. Wrong. The total eclipse of the sun we observe from earth takes place when the moon comes in front of the solar disc. They both seem the same size; so we can see the sun’s disc obscured and observe the prominences and corona that arise from its surface and are normally invisible. What the astronauts witnessed was the sun blocked by a massive moon that occupied sixteen times as much of their view.

Setting up a lunar base is such a good idea, and long overdue. And sending a small team in an extended loop around the moon is essential, if we are to be confident that the spacecraft is as safe as it needs to be. But why all the hype and blather? It’s an impressive achievement as it is; no need to confuse the public with exaggerated tales and invented spectacle.

Part of it is to claim American supremacy in space. Their unique achievement in landing men on the moon is unforgettable. I’ll never forget watching the TV live.

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The Soviets reckoned it wasn’t worth the effort, and they were the winners of the space race. It was Russia who launched the first satellite, sent the first signals back from space, launched the first animal into orbit and the first lunar spacecraft, sent the first images from the far side of the moon, returned the first animals (and plants) from space, put the first astronaut in orbit, sent the first spacecraft to Venus, launched the first dual crewed spacecraft, put the first woman (a civilian) in space, made the first spacewalk, the first soft landing on the moon, and was the first to send back images from the lunar surface; first to send a probe to Venus, first to perform spacecraft docking; first to return to Earth a sample of moon rock, land the first lunar rover, achieve the first soft-landing on Venus, and send back the first signals from another planet; to launch the first space station and be the first to fly a spacecraft to Mars, land, and send back photos and data from the surface; and the first to launch a multinational space station crew. Then, when NASA’s space shuttle failed its Health and Safety certificate, the United States relied on Russian expertise to launch their American astronauts.

The Redstone rocket that launched Alan Shepard into space was not an American invention, but a souped-up Nazi V-2 designed and constructed by the enemy rocketeer, Wernher von Braun. He was supposed to be tried as a war criminal, but had his Nazi history wiped clean when he agreed to work for the Americans instead. Designing the Apollo rocket that put Americans on the moon was van Braun’s greatest triumph.

Artemis is wonderful. Spectacular. But let’s keep it in proportion, eh?

Pic: Greg Rakozy (inset, Brian J Ford)

Brian J Ford is a biologist, author, lecturer and broadcaster. His most recent book is Nonscience Returns, “a satire on exaggerated science”.