Waiting for a Sputnik Moment?  
Insights from the Eisenhower Administration’s Response  
Project on History and Strategy Insight Memo  
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Policy Context: As thirty years of American hegemony fades into a new era of great power competition, the United States’ foreign policy elite has had trouble convincing Congress and the public that investment and reorganization are urgently necessary to protect American interests and influence around the world. The technological dimension of the current challenge is clear; the reinforcing powers of Artificial Intelligence, 5G, breakthroughs in computing power and possibly quantum computing will provide game-changing advantages to the competitor that weaponizes them first.

But this knowledge has not been matched by public alarm or a massive infusion of new investment. Many in the policy community fear that the United States will fail to meet the challenge of a resurgent Russia and rising China, absent some catalytic event – a “sputnik moment.” Proponents of action fear that China already had its “sputnik moment” when an artificial intelligence system defeated the world’s best Go player. The appeal of the Sputnik analogy raises the question of what happened when the Soviets launched the world’s first satellite in October 1957, and how and why the United States responded. The history of the Eisenhower administration’s response is more complicated than simple cause and effect, as told in a new biography by Dr. William Hitchcock of the University of Virginia.

Historical Context: On October 4, 1957, the USSR launched the first satellite into orbit, surprising the American public and upending its assumptions about the Cold War technological balance. Initially, the Eisenhower administration tried to downplay the strategic significance of the launch and allay public concern that the United States had fallen behind. Eisenhower explained that the civilian satellite program was not a race, that the United States was spending enormous sums on defense-related missile research, and that all the Soviets could enjoy was a propaganda victory.

This response did not assuage critics, who very quickly forced the administration to pivot into action. In response to congressional pressure, the Eisenhower administration supported passage of the National Defense Education Act, accelerated the formation of a civilian space program out of previously disparate agencies, and increased spending on basic R&D. But despite the heroic sepia with which we tell the Sputnik story, these were not Eisenhower’s priorities at the time – they were concessions to his political opponents.

As policy makers face calls for a “new Sputnik moment” in the competition with China, the following takeaways from recent PHS roundtables on the subject could be useful.


Historical Insights from the Sputnik Moment

1. **Be careful what you wish for.** Sputnik was not a pure crisis and response story of bipartisan cooperation. In reality it was a political and leadership crisis, initially seen by President Eisenhower’s critics as a useful cudgel to embarrass the administration and portray the President as out of touch and too obsessed with balancing the budget. Eisenhower knew that American missile technology was advanced enough to compete with the capabilities shown in Sputnik, but he couldn’t share that information with the public.

2. **The greater the initial underestimation, the greater the overreaction.** Misperception risks producing wild oscillations in perception of a competitor’s capabilities, not only in the policy world but also for the public. Managing public expectations is therefore a strategic element of great power competition, for a policymaker who wants to maintain control over their legislative agenda.

3. **Don’t waste a crisis – take a broad definition of it.** Eisenhower was politically forced to act in response to Sputnik, but to do so he decided to accelerate a series of initiatives already underway. These included a push to increase burden-sharing with the Europeans on nuclear ICBMs and greater defense spending on the missile program. He also moved forward on Defense Reorganization, NASA, and the National Defense Education Act, all in response to an event which he considered to be of little strategic consequence and despite severe misgivings about the expense and the domestic political impact. He did this not because he feared a missile gap, but because he sensed an opportunity to elevate the prestige of science & technology in America.

4. **Find the Ready Policy Entrepreneurs.** Sputnik was a policy window through which advocates of the NSF and what would become NASA and the NDEA eagerly scrambled to enact their policies. The director of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, NASA’s predecessor, had already begun the work of shifting his agency’s priorities toward space research. Advocates for federal involvement in education, desegregation, and STEM investment had been laying the groundwork in Congress for years; in fact, the NDEA already existed in various draft pieces long before Sputnik launched.

5. **Partisan politics can generate positive national security outcomes.** As mentioned before, Sputnik was more of a political crisis than a true strategic one. Nevertheless, the ambitious political use of the episode by the President’s critics—including Democratic Senator Lyndon Johnson who held Senate Hearings on the topic-- gave legitimacy to the fears of American citizens and increased the pressure on Eisenhower to spend more than he would have liked on a broad array of scientific, educational, and military areas. Partisanship as much as bipartisan consensus created the catalyst for action by disrupting the existing boundaries of argument and reframing the bounds of the possible.

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