

President's Message Relayed from Atlas Satellite-- Dwight D. Eisenhower (December 19, 1958)

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The Atlas rocket



Dwight D. Eisenhower

The following words were President Eisenhower's full remarks to the country on December 19, 1958:

This is the President of the United States speaking. Through the marvels of scientific advance, my voice is coming to you from a satellite circling in outer space. My message is a simple one. Though this unique means, I convey to you and all mankind, America's wish for peace on earth and good will to men everywhere.

As heartfelt as those words no doubt were, what the President had to say to the world that day was of far lesser importance than how he said it, the means behind the message.

For, as the President mentions in his short statement, for the first time, his voice—a human voice—was being broadcast from outer space and to the terrestrial earth.

Historically intertwined with the US-Soviet "Cold War" (usually dated 1947-1991) was the unofficially declared US-Soviet "Space Race" begging the question: Which superpower would be the first to seize the heavens?

The Russians seemed to have gotten a head start with the launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial earth satellite, which they catapulted into space on October 4, 1957. Sputnik penetrated low orbit, was visible from the Earth, and had its radio signals detectable from the ground.

Originally, then sitting President Dwight D. Eisenhower was not overly impressed with or worried about Sputnik or what it represented. Actually, he was pleased that it would be the USSR, and not the US, who were the first to traipse into the legally confusing world of orbital satellites. After all, who actually owned outer space?

But Ike's take on the space situation was very much the minority opinion. Many, many other Americans—including many in the Eisenhower Administration—saw Sputnik as the first notable victory in the Space Race and America was very much on the losing end of it.

In America, in Sputnik's wake, public outcry and government support (even if Ike's was begrudging) soon led to the creation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA; now known as DARPA), a program specifically geared towards space initiatives, and, shortly thereafter, to the creation of NASA which was officially sanctioned on June 29, 1958.

It was the ARPA agency who launched the US's first communications satellite into space. It went up on December 18, 1958, originating from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and was strapped aboard an American Atlas rocket.

The name of the satellite and the name of the project that saw to its development was titled SCORE, the Signal Communications by Orbiting Relay Equipment. The satellite "package" was designed and built by engineer Kenneth Masterman-Smith.

The creation and launch of SCORE was a super-secret mission. At the time of its launch, only 35 people were believed to have known about it. Not surprisingly, the POTUS was one of them. The President recorded his greeting/test message a few days prior to the liftoff at the White House. Two tape recorders--one installed as a backup—that were able to be switched on by way of radio signals sent from the Cape, were built into the missile and the audio of the President's message was placed inside each of them. The President's brief remarks—transcribed above—were played back to the earth the day after the rocket's launch; they were played during the satellite's second orbit after the recording failed to play during its initial circling of the Earth.

After its broadcast, at the White House later that evening, the President was informed of the successfully completed space mission; he dutifully and proudly relayed the news to those in attendance at the White House that night.

But as auspicious as it was to have the President speaking from space, the relatively weak signal was not heard by anyone but the most devoted radio hobbyists with the most sensitive equipment. Most Americans only heard the President's comments when they were replayed later during radio and television newscasts.

Still, the launch of the satellite and the President's broadcast from space was considered a major success. SCORE's successful exit from the earth, its ability to transmit and the fact that it was the first time a missile guidance system had steered a satellite into orbit hallmarked the entire endeavor as a great victory.

Despite its historic notoriety, the SCORE satellite did not stay airborne for long. Twelve days into its flight, its internal batteries died. It burned up when it reentered the Earth's atmosphere on January 21, 1959.

Nevertheless, this initial triumph helped pave the way for future communications. The first of the two revolutionary Telstar satellites was launched in July of 1962, the second in May of 1963. Via these orbitals, the first TV signals, telephone calls, fax images and live transatlantic feed could be relayed from space.

Hence, though the actual number of words he actually stated were few, in that recording of December 1958, President Eisenhower nevertheless spoke volumes and opened up the world to the brand new age.

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