

The Land of Might-Have-Been

The Los Angeles Times of 7 July 1999 contains a brief but fascinating column by Jim Mann about the contingency plans for a disaster on the Apollo XI mission to the Moon. For me, the mission was always a matter of history, and I confess that I'd only considered the possibility of failure in abstract terms. While I was learning about the Moon mission, I knew Armstrong and Aldrin would survive, just like I knew Anakin Skywalker would survive *The Phantom Menace*.

In reality, they had to consider the possibility that they might survive the trip, but be stranded on the lunar surface. In that event, the only option for the astronauts was to simply turn off the radio at some point and die. No daring rescue mission was planned, or even feasible. Their air was probably insufficient to last until another craft could reach the moon, and even if one could get there, I doubt it would have been able to get all of them home. The supply line was just too long. Two men we know as heroes were prepared to die, utterly alone, farther from home than any human had ever been.

Mann's column was prompted by finding contingency plans in the National Archives. Surprisingly, they were not NASA documents, but Presidential ones. Mann reprints the speech that William Safire had written for Richard Nixon to give to the Nation after consoling the "widows-to-be."

Reading the speech itself is an eerie experience. It's a look at a might-have-been world where brave men failed in to come back from conquering the depths of space. The experience is like reading a story about an alternate reality where the South won the Civil War or the Nazis won World War II. In fact it's most like reading one of the science fiction stories about the first Moon landing written before there was a Moon landing.

The speech is actually very touching. If it had been given, it would undoubtedly become an oft-quoted oration. That in itself is a glimpse into the strange world that national leaders inhabit. Preparing to express that sorrow before it was felt, and to channel it into a National recovery before it happened is a formidable challenge.

The other question raised by this document is how many triumphal addresses are in the Presidents' files, undelivered. How many unannounced peace accords are there in the National Archives; how many unsent congratulations on successful campaigns; how many unspoken acceptance speeches. All of them rendered science fiction by the inexorable march of reality.

How strange it must be to try to lead a country through these shadows of might-have-been. Or worse, through the shadows of could-yet-be.