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We reached Mars 50 years ago, why haven't we sent people?



Rainer Zitelmann

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Viking 1 landed on Mars 50 years ago, so why haven't we sent people there? Because there are no property rights in space, says Rainer Zitelmann

Today marks the 50th anniversary of one of the greatest achievements in the history of space exploration. On July 20, 1976, NASA's Viking 1 became the first spacecraft to successfully land on Mars and carry out a long-term scientific mission on its surface. The landing took place exactly seven years after the Apollo 11 Moon landing, linking two historic milestones in space exploration.

Viking 1 sent back the first detailed color images ever taken from the Martian surface. It also conducted the first experiments designed to search for signs of life on another planet. The mission operated for more than six years, far exceeding its planned lifetime and transforming our understanding of Mars. Many of today's ambitious plans for human settlement and commercial activity on the Red Planet can be traced back to the success of Viking 1. Some 50 years later, its legacy continues to inspire a new era of private and public exploration of Mars.

But what about a human landing on Mars?

Harry W. Jones of the NASA Ames Research Center says: "It has seemed there must be overwhelming difficulties preventing our going to Mars. We have not reached Mars even though it has been NASA's horizon goal since Apollo. We do not have a detailed feasible mission plan. There has not been sufficient funding to make tangible progress. Mars plans usually propose developing advanced technology, before we can begin the mission."

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For over 50 years, there have been repeated excuses for indefinitely deferring a mission to Mars. And yet, there is no shortage of plans to reach Mars. Since the 1950s, over 1,000 plans have been devised. Even if you only count those that meet scientific standards, there are still 55 plans.

However, in a detailed analysis, Jones concludes that there are "no showstoppers" – that is, no insurmountable obstacles on the path to Mars. He identifies seven key challenges: hostile

surface environment, human performance, life support, medical care, radiation exposure, reduced gravity, and telecommunication delays – and shows that there are viable solutions for each and every one of them based on the current state of technology. Solutions for all these problems exist today, he argues, in part thanks to the recent great reduction in launch costs.

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A million people on Mars?

Soon, with Starship developed by Elon Musk, we will have a rocket capable of reaching Mars. His aim is to settle one million people on Mars. To achieve this, he will need to launch 1,000 Starships, each carrying 100 colonists, to Mars during each launch window, for ten launch windows, which occur approximately once every 26 months. Robert Zubrin, founder of the Mars Society and a significant influence on Musk, envisions 50,000 settlers within half a century.

Musk has repeatedly emphasized that no matter how financially successful SpaceX may be, the company will have failed in his eyes if the primary objective – the colonization of Mars – is not achieved. Even if he has recently shifted his short-term priorities and is focusing first on the Moon, the goal of Mars remains. And according to a YouGov poll from June 2025, 65 percent of respondents in the US endorsed the idea of the US sending astronauts to Mars.

The main reason why we are not already on Mars is – as so often in life – money. “Money makes the world go round” applies all the more to such an expensive undertaking as settling Mars. With taxpayer funding, it might be possible to finance one or a few missions to Mars, just as was done between 1969 and 1972 with the six Moon missions.

But building even a small city on Mars will only be possible with private capital. This requires private property rights on Mars. On Earth, no economic system functions without private property and entrepreneurship. And this will be even more true on Mars. In my book *New Space Capitalism*, I make the following proposal: companies that take the risk of financing and carrying out a mission to Mars should have the right to acquire land on the planet. States are not allowed to do so under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. But private individuals

should have this right – or take it. And then bring that land on Mars to the stock exchange as a REIT (real estate investment trust). In that way, anyone could own a small part of Mars – anyone who becomes a shareholder in such a REIT. And the companies that undertake these missions would gain a viable means of financing.

Scientific curiosity alone is not enough to conquer space. It has been sufficient to send many probes to Mars. But settling Mars requires more than curiosity; it also requires economic incentives. The absence of those incentives – namely, the lack of private property rights – is the real reason why, fifty years after Viking 1 landed on Mars, we still have not sent human beings there.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the book “New Space Capitalism”.

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