

Round Trip to the Moon

Soviet scientists have accomplished a fantastic technical feat in sending Zond 5 around the moon and then recovering it in the Indian Ocean. The precision in missile guidance was itself uncanny. So was the ability of the Russians to decelerate the moon vehicle's enormous initial return speed to one that permitted it to survive the final fiery passage through the atmosphere.

The scientific returns of this unprecedented circumlunar voyage depend upon the instruments that were carried. At the least, Zond 5 probably had cameras whose film, when developed, may provide pictures of greater sharpness than those radioed back to earth by earlier spacecraft which made one-way flights to the moon. However, this advantage may be offset by the fact that the earlier pictures were taken on the moon itself or from vehicles much closer to that body than the thousand miles or so that was the closest approach of Zond 5.

It is likely that the Soviet Union now has vehicles with sufficient rocket power and carrying capacity to take men on a journey similar to the one just completed. It may well be that Soviet astronauts will make such a trip soon. That would be a spectacular exploit, though it is still not evident that men can learn enough more on such a voyage to justify the greatly increased cost and danger.

But even a manned circumlunar flight is still a long way from the much more difficult goal of landing astronauts on the moon and then returning them to earth safely. The latter achievement is sought by this country's Project Apollo, which is scheduled to resume manned flights soon, the first by this country since the tragedy of January 1967.

Until the nation has a better idea of the progress achieved during this long interval between American manned flights, it is premature to conclude that the Russians have a significant over-all lead in space capability and that Soviet citizens will certainly plant their flag on the lunar surface before American astronauts.

In any event, as the Soviet rape of Czechoslovakia has recently reminded the world so dismayingly, a nation's image and prestige depend primarily upon what it does here on earth, not on its feats in space.