

*We Could Not Fail: The First African Americans in the Space Program.* By Richard Paul and Steven Moss (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015) Pp 312. Hardcover \$30. Kindle \$16.50.

The world's attention focused on the United States in the fall of 1957 with the racial integration of Central High School, Little Rock, in September, and the launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* in October. The democratic ideals of the nation and its perceived technological superiority over its communist counterpart were quickly called into question. Over the next 12 years, the United States attempted to counter that negative image by claiming advances in civil rights and by racing the Russians to the moon. When considering the overlap of these two concurrent events of the 1960s – the modern civil rights movement and the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union – it is somewhat surprising that so little has been written on how they intersected.

Early portrayals of the space program reveal a mostly white organization – German rocket scientists overseeing white American technicians, engineers, and fighter pilots. For the most part, African Americans working for NASA or its contractors were relegated to janitorial or kitchen labor. Alfred Phelp's *They Had a Dream* (1994) became one of the earliest efforts at specifically linking the stories of African Americans to the history of NASA, consisting of a series of individual chapter biographies about African Americans who took part in the space program. Most of its presentation of racial discrimination focuses on astronaut candidates Edward Dwight and Robert Lawrence. The other chapters, while presenting stories of discrimination to a degree, are largely episodes of "overcoming the odds." Steven L. Moss's 1997 Master's Thesis "NASA and Racial Equality in the South, 1961-1968" represents one of the first academic works on the topic. He examined where and how the space agency used its influence, and had its influence used, to change racial attitudes and policies in southern communities that hosted NASA facilities. Eighteen years later, Moss, now an Associate Professor of English at Texas State Technical College and a Fellow of the Kellogg Institute, combined his efforts with Richard Paul, the award-winning independent public radio documentary producer of *Washington Goes to the Moon* (1999) and *Race and of the Space Race* (2010). Together, they wrote *We Could Not Fail: The First African Americans in the Space Program* (2015), the story of 10 African American men who worked for NASA or its contractors during the space race.

Combining the fields of oral history, space history, African American history, Southern history, and social history, Paul and Moss argue that NASA could advance civil rights only as quickly and as strongly as the president, Congress, and the agency's administration would allow. Independent action would have most likely doomed the agency, as segregationist politicians would move to defund the organization. As a result, NASA followed the lead of Kennedy and Johnson. The former viewed federal jobs as a means of forcing equal employment opportunity, particularly in the South, while the latter insisted that the space agency, along with other government agencies, could end poverty and racial tension through employment. The select few African Americans who gained employment as engineers or technicians became heroes, appearing in *Ebony* magazine and on the front pages of Black-owned newspapers. As the authors point out, that did not happen to Blacks working for the General Services Administration or for

the post office. Morgan Watson, one of NASA's first black engineers, considered being selected to participate at NASA as "certainly a thing of pride" [pg. 3].

Although this book incorporates the use of primary sources from NASA's archives, it is primarily a story of the work force told through personal interviews of African American technicians, mathematicians, engineers, and an astronaut candidate, all of whom faced the challenges of discrimination in their attempts to be included in the US space project. Each chapter weaves their personal accounts into the context of national and local events related to the civil rights movement. The archives, Paul and Moss argue, yield NASA's perspective on integrating its workforce, but only oral history interviews provide the vivid accounts of how Black personnel dealt with the choice of obtaining good jobs in the space program while confronting the terror of living in the southern communities that housed NASA facilities. It also delivers first-hand accounts of how African Americans influenced the personal and professional lives of Black and white employees through protest, pressure, or simply by coming to work. As Paul and Moss note, it was not always the people who marched for equality that made the difference. It was also those who showed up every day at their jobs and impressed upon those around them that they were completely qualified to work alongside their detractors. To prove this point, they had to be their best at all times. Anything less would be used by their opponents to justify racial exclusion.

*We Could Not Fail* provides significant insight into the oft-overlooked intersection of American domestic issues and the nation's desire to improve its international standing. Still, I would have liked to have seen a little more from NASA's perspective to further illustrate the political constraints, particularly in the context of the Cold War. The United States sought to prove to the world its technological superiority over the Soviet Union through space achievements. At the same time, it had to explain its ongoing racial struggles that conflicted with its proclaimed democratic freedoms. A greater inclusion of NASA's attempts to balance these two issues would yield a little more perspective to the challenges faced by those seeking to integrate the space agency without detracting from their personal stories.

Despite this concern, Paul and Moss provide an engaging narrative that links the domestic issue of civil rights to a noteworthy era of American technological history, international relations, and government projects. This book demonstrates how individuals could change the work culture of a federal agency and, in turn, influence government policy. The concurrent events of the space program and the civil rights movement should not be treated as separate issues. Paul and Moss take a significant step at merging two landmark events into a single, yet vital, examination of American history. Hopefully, more research on these topics will follow.

**Eric Fenrich**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*