The National Aeronautics and Space Administration was created on October 1, 1958, to perform civilian research related to space flight and aeronautics. President Eisenhower commissioned Dr. T. Keith Glennan, right, as the first administrator of NASA and Dr. Hugh L. Dryden, left, as deputy administrator. Photo courtesy NASA.

On July 29, 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Aeronautics and Space Act to support research into the problems of flight, both within the Earth’s atmosphere and in space. The Act created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which became operational on October 1, 1958.

NASA’s birth was directly related to the pressures of international political and military competition and, in particular, to the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik on October 4, 1957. During the Cold War, space exploration emerged as a major point of dispute and became known as the “space race.” From the beginning, however, NASA was strictly a civilian space agency.

Fifty years later, NASA is one of the best-known government agencies in the United States. NASA has sent six exploration crews to the lunar surface and robotic probes to investigate the solar system’s planets. The “space race” is over, but NASA continues to test the boundaries of discovery and exploration.