

# NASA's Artemis II launches crew to the Moon for first time in 54 years

**Bryan Dyne**  
2 April 2026

NASA's Space Launch System (SLS) rocket carrying the Orion spacecraft and four astronauts lifted off from Launch Complex 39B at Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Wednesday at 6:35 p.m. EDT, beginning the Artemis II mission, the first crewed flight to the vicinity of the Moon since the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972.

The Artemis II mission is an enormous international effort involving thousands of skilled engineers and scientists at NASA and its various contractors. It has been in development, in various forms, since the Constellation program which began in 2005. And there is no small amount of personal courage from the crew themselves as they travel to the Moon and back through hard vacuum.

The crew consists of NASA astronauts Reid Wiseman (commander), Victor Glover (pilot) and Christina Koch (mission specialist), along with Jeremy Hansen (mission specialist) of the Canadian Space Agency. Wiseman is a naval aviator and test pilot, who took part in Expedition 40/41 onboard the International Space Station in 2014, spending 165 days in space. He also served as chief of the astronaut office before being assigned to this mission. Glover, another military pilot, flew on the SpaceX Crew-1 Dragon spacecraft to the ISS for Expedition 64/65 in 2020-21.

Koch is an electrical engineer with experience in remote field stations in Antarctica and has a specialization in designing instruments for extreme environments. She spent 328 days on the ISS in 2019-20, which included a spacewalk with fellow astronaut Jessica Meir. Hansen, a former Royal Canadian Air Force fighter pilot, is a rookie astronaut and the first astronaut whose inaugural spaceflight will take him to the Moon since Bill Anders of Apollo 8.

Artemis II is also a welcome development amid a world dominated by the ongoing criminal war against Iran launched by the Trump administration, the murder of Renee Good and Alex Pretti by the fascistic Immigrations and Custom Enforcement (ICE) Gestapo and the vast growth of social inequality and dictatorship under capitalism.

At the same time, the mission is largely overshadowed by these same developments. The war in Iran, a new front in the many wars globally of American imperialism, has cost thousands of lives and destroyed tens of thousands of

structures, including historical sites dating back thousands of years. Costs of fuel and other basic necessities have skyrocketed as the supply chain issues caused by the war continue to intensify. And the growth of dictatorship in the US becomes ever more stark, with Trump's deployment of ICE to airports only the latest in a series of measures to suppress social opposition to the administration's fascistic policies.

The 10-day mission will not land on the Moon but serves as a test flight for a proposed landing by the Artemis IV mission, currently slated for 2028. In between, the Artemis III mission is scheduled to test rendezvous and docking with SpaceX's Starship HLS and Blue Origin's Blue Moon, both still under development, and the new Axiom spacewalk suit.

In lieu of a lunar landing, which the Orion spacecraft cannot carry out, the crew has begun a variety of tests of the entire SLS. The errors so far encountered include a brief communications dropout approximately 51 minutes into the flight, a fault light on the toilet system (subsequently resolved in coordination with mission control), a closed crossover valve on the spacecraft's water tanks, and a single latching current limiter failure similar to those observed repeatedly during the uncrewed Artemis I mission in 2022. None of these anomalies prevented the mission from proceeding.

The current milestones include the perigee raise maneuver, bringing the Orion into a high Earth orbit, and the successful completion of the critical translunar injection burn, sending the four to the Moon's orbit. They are currently on course to travel within 6,000 miles of the lunar surface on flight day six, surpassing the distance record set by Apollo 13's emergency free-return trajectory in 1970. The spacecraft will then return to Earth and splash down off the coast of the western United States.

It is worth noting that while many breathless media reports, and NASA itself, note that the orbit will take humans "farther from Earth than anyone in history," this is not a significant technical accomplishment since all of these missions go the same approximate distance, with minor variations forced by the orbit chosen. The one selected for Artemis II is a particularly conservative one that doesn't require significant maneuvers at the Moon.

The low points of the mission, on the other hand, have not been technical but the litany of reactionary and nationalist sentiments surrounding the launch. Trump posted on Truth Social that, “America doesn’t just compete, we DOMINATE, and the whole World is watching.” Numerous media commentators are placing identity politics front and center, focusing solely on the fact that Koch and Glover will be the first woman and first black person, respectively, to enter lunar orbit. NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman, the billionaire SpaceX-linked entrepreneur appointed by Trump, framed the mission explicitly in terms of competition with China, stating, “Competition can be a good thing. We certainly have competition now.”

Isaacman’s comments parallel the underlying political position of the American state during the Apollo era, which was driven not primarily by science but by great-power rivalry and closing the “missile gap.” As the WSWS noted when Artemis I flew in 2022, the US space program only came about in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. There was a very real need to demonstrate that American capitalism was capable of meeting and exceeding the achievements of the world’s first workers state, degenerated as it was, established by the October Revolution in 1917.

The major difference between now and then, however, is that in the 1960s, American capitalism was at its post-war apogee. US manufacturing dominated the world economy and the country was capable of dedicating enormous resources to the space program. A great deal of genuine innovation and technical development went into the space race, and which resulted in a variety of advances for everyday life.

Today, the goals of the space program are guided solely by geopolitical and economic conflict. Trump and Isaacman are above all concerned with China’s expanding lunar and space exploration program, including its Tiangong space station, lunar probes, and Mars rover. Developments in rocketry are primarily designed around updating US nuclear launch capabilities.

Moreover, the enormous \$93 billion price tag is primarily designed to feed into the corporate sector. Boeing and Lockheed Martin have each received approximately \$15 billion, Northrop Grumman received roughly \$6 billion, and the remainder went to a network of contractors operating on cost-plus contracts that reward schedule slippage and cost overruns.

Each SLS launch costs approximately \$4 billion. Only two rockets have been built, with a third in production, and the entire system will almost certainly be discarded in favor of commercially produced launch vehicles, most likely Elon Musk’s Starship, which is still prone to exploding during or even before launch.

And there is nothing technically groundbreaking about the Space Launch System. It is a smaller Saturn V with solid rocket boosters attached and RS-25 engines salvaged from decommissioned space shuttles. The Orion capsule is a scaled-

up Apollo Command Module. The entire mission architecture, including a free-return lunar trajectory to be followed by future crewed landings using a separate lander, directly replicates Apollo. The 14 years required to develop this system is almost twice the time elapsed between Alan Shepard’s suborbital flight in 1961 and the first Moon landing in 1969, when all of the underlying technology had to be invented from scratch. This reflects the bureaucratic and profit-driven character of the program, not the demands of genuine scientific exploration.

A further concern is the unresolved heat shield problem carried over from Artemis I. During that mission, portions of the Orion heat shield’s char layer broke away in fragments rather than ablating as designed. NASA’s own 2024 Inspector General report acknowledged this finding and noted the agency’s stated commitment to understanding the root cause. What the agency chose to do instead of fixing the underlying problem before flying a crew was to alter the reentry trajectory, a change that, according to publicly available analysis, actually subjects the heat shield to higher total stress over a shorter duration. Four people’s lives depend on how well that heat shield performs.

The Artemis project also reflects the narrow focus of the bourgeoisie towards securing a human presence in space as part of the military buildup against Russia and China. While there are certainly pro forma comments about the expansion of space exploration, the actual science missions being carried out by NASA are slowly being starved. The Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope, now fully assembled and on track to launch as early as fall 2026, will be the last major astrophysics observatory for the foreseeable future.

Named for NASA’s first chief of astronomy, Roman will have a field of view 100 times larger than Hubble’s, capable of imaging a billion galaxies and conducting a census of exoplanets. It is expected to generate science on dark energy, dark matter and planetary systems. After Roman, however, there is nothing scheduled. The next major astrophysics mission, the Habitable Worlds Observatory, is currently slated to launch in 2040.

That human beings are returning to the Moon is welcome. There is a tragic element, however, in the fact that our collective capacity to scientifically and rationally understand the world well enough to leave Earth, travel to other stellar objects and safely return, is subordinated to national competition, military positioning and private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**