In May 1961, shortly after the Marshall Space Flight Center was formed at Huntsville, Alabama, President John F. Kennedy committed the nation to “landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth within the decade.” The project to develop the Saturn V Launch Vehicle was given to the Center.

Development of the Saturn V, which eventually launched 12 consecutive successful flights that put 27 men into lunar orbit, 12 of whom walked and worked on the surface of the moon, was a pioneering effort of engineering and management. Its missions have been compared in significance to the voyages of Magellan and Columbus. The Saturn V Project forced the development of new engineering and management concepts and challenged the institutions of higher education to new achievements, particularly in engineering and technology.

The largest rocket ever undertaken at the time, the Saturn V became the foundation stone of the massive expedition to the moon. It was composed of three propulsion stages and a small instrument unit to contain guidance and control systems. It could perform earth orbital missions through the use of the first two stages, while three were required for lunar and planetary expeditions. In the lunar configuration it stood 363 feet tall and, when fully loaded, weighed over 6 million pounds. It could place 250-300 tons in earth orbit and approximately 50 tons to the moon. The program required the development of two new rocket engines: the F-1 developing 1.5 million pounds of thrust; and the J-2 developing 225,000 pounds of thrust. New technologies ensuing from this effort included welding, manufacturing and handling, new materials, and transportation. The tailoring of existing management concepts and the development of new systems appropriate for a project of this magnitude and complexity caused a new set of management tools to be designed that are still in use.

The Saturn V development in Alabama by thousands of Alabamians and others focused favorable attention on the state and became a source of national pride and international respect. In addition to its impact on rocketry and engineering in general, the Saturn V program ushered in an unparalleled era of economic and social growth to North Alabama. Requiring the skills of more than 100,000 people and hundreds of companies in Alabama and across the nation, the program was the driving force in improvements in health care, education at all levels, the arts, and municipal services. It attracted to the state the major aerospace firms as well as peripheral and supporting commercial enterprises. The project was a prime mover in changing the character of Huntsville and the North Alabama region to that of high technology.

The United States government and the people of Alabama can be justifiably proud of this accomplishment which remains a standard in the aerospace industry.