Recapturing what was lost in space

Glenn's contemporaries remind us how amazing flight can be

By Donald True Van Deusen

An old man who put new life into America's space program has returned. On Saturday, Sen. John Glenn, 77, the first American man to orbit the earth, completed his second trip to space, aboard the shuttle Discovery.

His status as very able geriatric, far more than the mission itself, had the whole world focused again on the incredible missions into the cosmos about which the world had come to be blase.

It is abundantly appropriate that the excitement of this continuing odyssey has been rekindled by an elder. It was, after all, he and his generation that made such travel possible. That reminds us that the aged — people we often see as nearly comic, bordering on incompetent — are capable of substantial accomplishments right here on Earth.

Many of Glenn's age are excited by his exploits, and their excitement ought to awaken our own.

There's Dorothy Sampson, 84, who swims for an hour three times a week at the Gershman Y, after she has taught an exercise class for other less lively oldsters. And she does all this with a cheery smile and laughter that brightens up the entire pool. She says, "I think it's terrific. I give him a lot of credit; he has a lot of guts. Back in 1962, the first time he did it, I was only going to the Y two times a week."

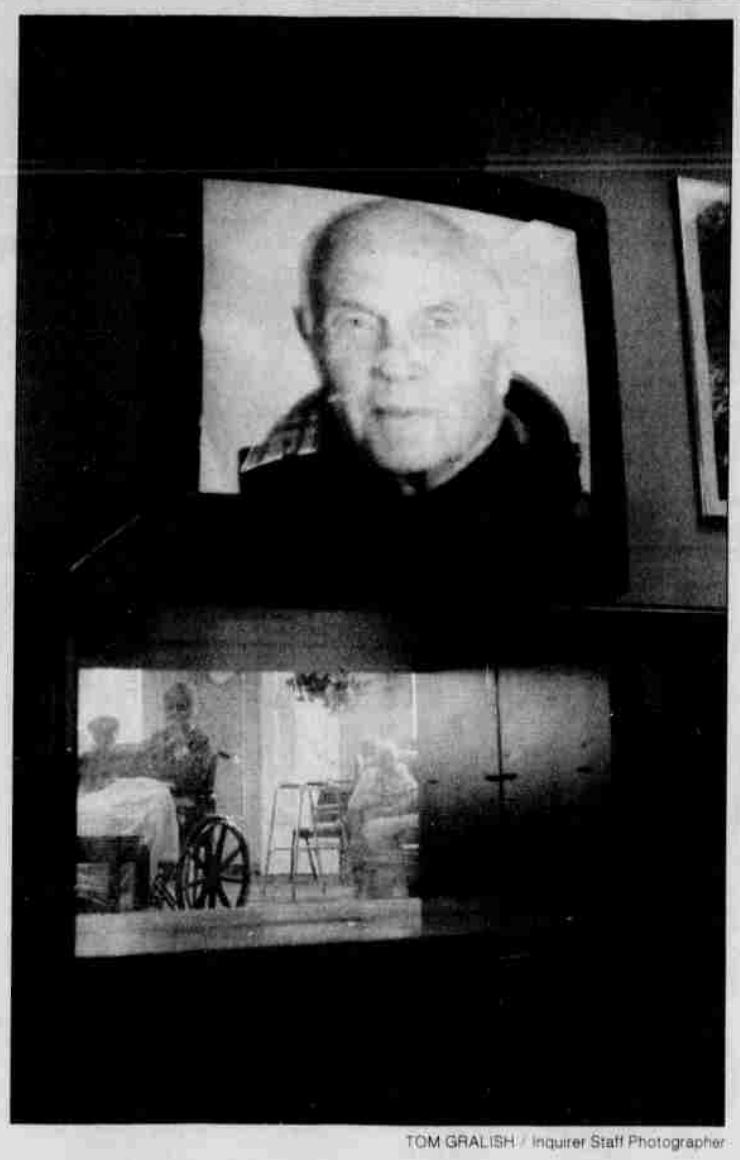
Also at the Gershman is the South Philly charmer, Italo W. Novelli, a.k.a. "Iggy," who mans the control desk, keeps the wise guys in line, and flirts with the girls, all with such warmth and energy you never realize he's 77, same age as Glenn. "Why are they so worried about him going in outer space?" Iggy asks. "I've been going there for years, and no one ever wrote about me."

Edward Kurtz, 87, a retired postman, who keeps in shape visiting countless family members from Atlantic City to San Francisco, plus swimming three times a week, says, "I wasn't surprised. He's physically and mentally capable of handling the job, and I was glad to see him come back. I retired in 1962, the time of his first trip, and I was too caught up in the euphoria of quitting work and not having to get up at 4:30 every morning after 37 years to take that much note of it."

Walter Jaka, 93, of Cherry Hill, who plays trumpet every Tuesday at the 23d Street Cafe jam sessions — with a wind power that can topple trees — was not carried away with Glenn's journey: "I don't know nothing about it; I just take care of my business and my music." Asked about Glenn's 1962 journey, he said, "I don't remember what happened 20 minutes ago."

Jim Dofton, only 57, a retail shoe store owner from Haverton, was in the First Army Band playing drums when Glenn was given his ticker tape parade in New York City in 1962. "I was happy to see him go off again," Dofton says. "I always liked him."

Even more ecstatic was Leonard Krawitz, 83, a retired veterinarian and veteran of the World War II China-Burma theater: "I think it's absolutely wonderful, and the guy they picked was the best thing that could have happened. I always had a great admiration for that guy, a hot fighter pilot, test pilot, a top gun, not enough words to describe how much I admire him. But can you name anyone else on that ship?"



TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff Photographer

I worked as public relations director for National Research Corp. at the time of the first Glenn mission on Mercury 6. It was an exciting time, and my job, although technical, was the stuff of dreams, calling up boyhood readings of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon and age-old questions ("Are we lost out here in the stars?").

At the same time, there was an underlying sense of national urgency — anxieties over the threat of Soviet domination of space during this Cold War era. After all, the Soviets had beaten us up there with the launch of Sputnik.

It was a truly exciting time to be alive, particularly for those of us having anything to do with space exploration.

In the years since, we have had men land on the moon and walk in space. We have watched missions to Mars, Venus and beyond. Space travel has become more common as it has become far more sophisticated and, inevitably, much of the thrill has vanished.

We should allow ourselves the enthusiasm of Glenn's contemporaries. No, I can't name anyone who went up with Glenn, but they all deserve a lot of credit. A lot of old people around here have remembered what the rest of the world had forgotten: These are amazing things we do.

Donald True Van Deusen (Van369@aol.com) writes frequently for the Commentary Page.

■ Tomorrow: David Boldt: "Urban Perspective" with Acel Moore.

Newt Gingrich takes leave with grace, accountability

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Nothing better became Newt Gingrich in his tenure as speaker of the House of Representatives than his manner of leaving it.

In an age that avoids accountability, Gingrich, in one stroke, took responsibility for his party's disappointing showing in last week's elections, accepted the consequences and deprived the opposition of a useful target.

He laid the path for his own political comeback, should he wish one. Such a prospect may seem unlikely. But Gingrich, the Ph.D. and former professor, is enough of an historian to know that others have overcome similar defeats.

Gingrich's self-imposed departure from the political scene falls on the anniversary of Richard Nixon's defeat in the 1962 race for governor of California. In that year of John Glenn's first go-round, Nixon fell victim to the ineptness of his own campaign (California Attorney General Dan Lungren, who lost this year's dull race to Lt. Gov. Gray Davis, seems to have followed Nixon's old playbook) and an unexpected surge of support for the Democratic administration after John F. Kennedy's deft handling of the Cuban missile crisis.

When Nixon lashed out at the press (he showed none of Gingrich's grace) and made a promise he would not keep ("gentlemen, this is my last press conference"), no one foresaw that he would be elected president of the United States six Novembers later. They preferred harping on his phrase, "You don't have Nixon to kick around any more" (now being applied to Gingrich).

How did Nixon make his comeback? Like Gingrich, he announced he would take some time off and begin a new career. He left California for New York, where he became somewhat of a rainmaker for a Wall Street law firm. He traveled the world, posing with prominent world leaders and writing articles. He sat out a couple of elections, and, favored by neither moderates nor conservatives but acceptable to both, the "new Nixon" was back in the saddle in 1968. He helped himself along the way by campaigning for Republican candidates and helping the party refill its depleted coffers.

Nixon's trajectory is a fitting model. Gingrich is already on good terms with Lady Margaret Thatcher. Perhaps he will work with other conservatives to build an international counter to the "third wavers" Blair, Clinton and Schroeder. He should do fine with the media. Whatever problems he encountered as Speaker, finding a microphone or a publisher were not among them.

Were Gingrich to attempt a comeback, what aspects of his legacy might he stress?

- He led the GOP to control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years.
- He transformed the party from the "get along, go along" Rayburn, Albert and Foley imitators to the party of ideas.
- He was the first speaker since Henry Clay who espoused and enacted a program. Gingrich was instrumental in reforming welfare and balancing the budget.
- He twice accepted the consequences of his mistakes. First, using his own funds, he reimbursed the House of Representatives for costs of its investigation into his campaign practices. Second, he resigned his post for the good of his party.

What if everyone in Washington took responsibility for their actions?

Now, what if it became the rage to take responsibility for your actions? What if Gingrich's style caught on? People might then expect the President and his advisers to take responsibility for their actions — just as Newt Gingrich did. If only out of feigned fairness, pundits and pollsters might start holding all public figures to new, higher standards of accountability.

By his chosen method of departure, Gingrich may have inflicted more harm on his enemies than he knew.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures about the American presidency. He works on Capitol Hill.

Can compassionate conservatism carry Bush into the White House?

By William McKenzie

Now that Texas Gov. George W. Bush has won a second term and can only see his presidential stock rise, what potential does he offer the party of his father and grandfather?

Oscar Hahn, a retired gentleman standing alone at a rally for Gov. Bush in League City, Texas, last month, may best reveal his possibilities. The seventy-something independent told a reporter that the large Bush gathering south of Houston was the first gubernatorial rally he had attended in more than 60 years.

The last one was for Wisconsin's progressive Republican Gov. Phil La-Follette in the early '30s. Hahn had decided to break tradition and go see Bush because "he has charisma people can follow" and because "he has it together."

Hahn also explained that while he believes in a limited government, the GOP Congress "does not dazzle" him. And he thought that independent counsel Kenneth Starr "didn't know when he was ahead." He also believed that President Clinton should not be impeached.

Later that day, Bush said that he thought the basic Bush supporter is "a thinking conservative who [believes] we should put compassion in our message."

That kind of human conservatism is what attracts swing voters such as Hahn. And that approach could expand the GOP's reach, much like some "New Democrats" have broadened their party with a fresher message.

Bush, however, first must choose to compete in the 2000 presidential race. Having watched him closely for four years, I don't believe he has made up his mind.

If he does run, he could help the national GOP reach more independent Oscar Hahns through creating its own "third way" of governing between left and right. President Clinton and Britain's Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair have ably moved their respective parties away from an outdated liberalism and toward a sensible center, from which politicians are attacking social problems with new approaches.

Bush does not like such comparisons, but he could reposition a GOP that appears to be choking on its harsh conservatism. He could do it with his insistence on social inclusion, fiscal restraint, personal responsibility and consensus politics. And he could point to a gubernatorial record that emphasizes those themes. He said recently that "governors have an opportunity to lead in a different way. They can put public politics in play in a compassionate way."



TAYLOR JONES

Like most successful GOP governors, Bush is not antigovernment. His 1995 inaugural address included this tell-tale line: "government if necessary, but not necessarily government."

Indeed, *Governor* Bush has spent most of his time trying to improve Texas schools. He likens public education to national defense, an essential function of government.

And, unlike some GOP congressional leaders, Bush is decidedly opposed to using hot-button issues to divide and conquer voters. He is solidly anti-abortion, for example. But he wants voters who might disagree with that view to consider his efforts to, say, reach out to minorities.

That's classic Bush: Look for compensating appeals that help maintain a governing consensus. Coalition politics is actually like a religion to him. He has worked well enough with some Texas Democrats that even the state's Democratic lieutenant governor endorsed Bush's 1998 reelection campaign.

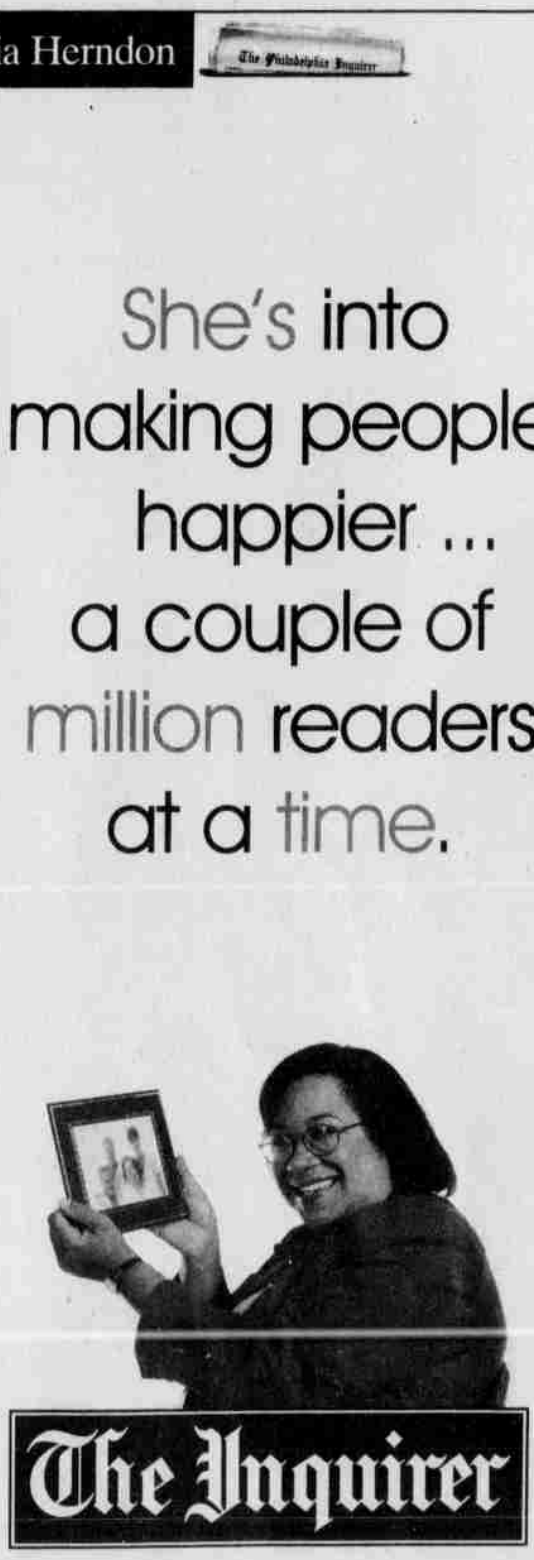
That said, Bush will face bumpy moments if he tries to move from Texas politics to the national scene. For one thing, the Republican presidential primary system is notoriously filled with true believers who probably don't see the need to broaden the GOP's reach.

Also, could a President George W. Bush govern in Washington? Congressional Democrats have few people among them like Bob Bullock and Pete Laney, the Democratic lieutenant governor and Democratic House speaker who have treated Bush fairly in Austin. Would a Dick Gephardt deal squarely with him?

Controlling the agenda in Washington is not like governing in a state capital, either. Countless think tank analysts run around Washington's corridors promoting their own agenda. And they don't hesitate to pounce on those who fail to support their ideas. Could Bush maintain anything approaching a consensus there?

Perhaps only if he attracts enough Oscar Hahns to win a mandate for a compassionate conservatism. In Texas, at least, he has won that battle.

William McKenzie is an associate editorial page editor of the Dallas Morning News. He wrote this piece for The Inquirer.

Columnist: Lucia Herndon
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