Lux et Fides: A Journal for Undergraduate Christian Scholars

Volume 1 Article 3

May 2023

The Success of Project Mercury through the Persona of the Mercury Seven

Cameron D. Reagan
Taylor University, cameron_reagan@taylor.edu

The Success of Project Mercury through the Persona of the Mercury Seven

By Cameron Reagan

A crowd of thousands gathered on the beaches of Cape Canaveral, Florida on July 29, 1960, to witness the launch of the Mercury-Atlas 1 rocket. Unfortunately for the spectators, the rain early that morning had brought with it a heavy cloud cover which would not warrant a good view of the rocket after it ascended into the sky, but eager to see the latest developments of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Mercury program, they still waited. At 8:13 a.m., they heard the roar of the boosters and the Atlas rocket slowly rose into the sky, disappearing into the clouds in a matter of seconds. Still listening to the sound of the boosters, the crowds gazed into the sky, hoping for a glimpse of the rocket. Then, one minute after the launch, the rocket exploded, still unseen by the crowds but heard very clearly.[1] Left wondering what happened and what went wrong to cause such a massive explosion, they gradually dispersed, listening to reports on the radio and questioning how the American space program would ever put a man into space before the Soviet Union.

In the early days of Project Mercury (1958-1963), technological failings were commonplace, as NASA's engineers attempted to build a rocket that could lift a one-ton manned capsule into space. Despite the multitude of failures and explosions, the American public remained very optimistic and enthusiastic about the Mercury program, leaving many scholars to question why they would have such faith in a program that had yet to prove itself capable of its objectives. Given the Cold War context of the program, the high stakes of the space race were readily understood by the public, but that does not explain the lack of criticism NASA received

[1]National Aeronautics and Space Administration, *Post Launch Report for Mercury-Atlas No. 1 (MA-1)* (Washington, DC: Project Mercury Space Task Group, August 2, 1960), https://tothemoon.ser.asu.edu/files/mercury/mercury_atlas_1a_postlaunch_report.pdf.

given the number of setbacks and failed launches. As all launches were broadcast on national television for the entire country to witness, NASA was unable to cover up any malfunctions that occurred. Despite all of this, the press coverage of the Mercury program remained overwhelmingly positive, depicting NASA as capable and in control of the future of the space race. Working independently of one another, NASA and the press corps portrayed the astronauts with a mythical persona, deemphasizing the technological failings that plagued the Mercury program and presenting a competent and successful space agency. This is evidenced by NASA's public portrayal of the astronauts, the press's focus on the men rather than the program, and the comparisons between the astronauts and their Soviet counterparts made by the press.

Historiography

While there is no shortage of literature written about NASA during the Cold War, the overwhelming majority of the historical conversation revolves around the following three topics: the political nature of the space race as an offshoot of the Cold War; the development of flight and technology through the space program; and the impact of the space race on American culture and life.[2]

NASA itself has contributed to the historical conversation through works of "official history" by commissioning pieces written within the organization. The first of these, *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury*, was written in 1966, only three years removed from the end of the Mercury program, and goes into great detail about the scientific, technological, and personnel-related aspects of the program.[3] Because it was written so close to the events themselves, it did not have a broad historical perspective, so it did not offer much of an

[2]Karsten Werth, "A Surrogate for War—The U.S. Space Program in the 1960s," *American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2004): 565.
[3]Loyd S. Swenson, Jr., James M. Grimwood, and Charles C. Alexander, *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), V.

argument. After the end of the Cold War, Roger D. Launius published several articles and books on NASA and Project Mercury specifically through his role as curator of the division of space history at NASA.[4] His work often examined the cultural impact of the program as well as the Cold War dynamic of the space race. Because these works were commissioned by NASA, they offered more insight into the inner workings of NASA that other sources have not had access to previously as they commented on the interaction between the political and cultural components.

Since the end of the Cold War—and several decades removed from the Mercury program—several authors have examined the interplay between the Cold War and the space race and its effect on the American people. Looking at the space race with a greater historical perspective, Howard E. McCurdy's *Space and the American Imagination* (1997) presented the argument that the space race was a continuation of America's sense of exploration and adventure that followed from the tradition of manifest destiny and the American West. McCurdy examined the popularity of the space race through the lens of a collective "imagination" and how it was used to shape public policy regarding the space program.[5] Other works that have examined the cultural impact of the space race have brought up the Cold War context as a means of getting investment from the American people, which played into the popularity of the program.[6]

As the space race is inseparable from the Cold War, the third common avenue for historical works on NASA looks at the political nature of the Mercury program as a reaction to early Soviet successes in space. Karsten Werth depicted the space race as the only viable alternative to outright military aggression in the age of nuclear weapons and mutually assured

---

[4]Roger D. Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum: The Apollo Astronaut as Cultural Icon," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 174.
[5]Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997), 4.
[6]Roger D. Launius, *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019): 70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvhrcxzx.

destruction. As the United States and Soviet Union knew that they could not use their newly created nuclear weapons, they used space as the battlefield in which to fight the symbolic fight of technological superiority, or what he called the "surrogate for war."[7] Other authors have looked at the economic aspect of the space race as a motivation for American politicians to get involved and bolster their support. Gerard DeGroot argued in *Dark Side of the Moon* (2006) that the American government played off of the public hysteria created by the Cold War to strengthen the economy and put money in their own pockets.[8] Without facing outright armed combat, the United States government was able to garner the economic benefits of war without any military action, as the American people were in a wartime mindset and were willing to have their tax money go toward the space race.[9]

While some of the above-mentioned sources discussed to some degree the popularity of the astronauts with regard to the imagination of the public and their level of investment in the program, there has been far less discussion as to why the astronauts held such popularity in the first place. Many other works discuss the popularity of the astronauts as a given without looking at why they were able to achieve and sustain such fame and celebrity status in the face of failure. One aspect which has been largely overlooked by the body of scholarship is the degree to which the fame of the Mercury astronauts was manufactured by NASA to bolster support for a largely unproven space program. Instead of merely assuming that the astronauts were popular by default, it is critical that the popularity of the astronauts be examined through the political, cultural, and economic factors within the context of the Cold War. These factors are best viewed through the body of news reports, ranging from national publications to local newspapers, as they

[7]Werth, "A Surrogate for War," 563.
[8]Gerard J. DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 63.
[9]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 104.

demonstrate the portrayal and public perception of the astronauts at the time. Rather than viewing the popularity of the astronauts as a mere element of a larger concept, such as political or cultural factors, viewing the popularity of the astronauts as an independent factor provides new insights into the nature of the space race by demonstrating the impact of the narrative that emerged from the press concerning Cold War politics and the space race.

Historical Context

Flight has always fascinated mankind; perhaps it is because flight has been all but unattainable for the vast majority of human history. However, since Wilbur and Orville Wright took the first flight in a "heavier than air machine,"[10] people have looked higher at what man might be able to attain. In 1915, hoping to see what potential they might tap into through flight, Congress established an organization to guide and facilitate future research into flight, thus creating the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA). For decades aeronautical technology developed to create crafts that could fly farther, higher, and faster, as NACA worked on projects such as Charles Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris in 1927.[11] Following World War II, NACA continued the effort to build a faster plane and devoted its attention to jet propulsion, which was viewed as the next step in military aviation, in hopes of exceeding the sonic barrier. This was finally accomplished in 1947 when Captain Charles E. Yeager broke the sound barrier in the X-1 plane, propelled by a rocket engine fueled with liquid oxygen.[12]

The development of the atomic bomb in World War II increased the consequences of NACA's research due to the military application of aeronautical technology, and NACA found

[10]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 6.
[11]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 6.
[12]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 9-11.

that its staff and budget had both increased by more than ten times since 1939.[13] As the United States realized that its biggest rival following the war would undoubtedly be the Soviet Union, it quickly began the effort to develop military technology more advanced than that of the Soviets, thus developing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) which could launch a nuclear warhead from America to anywhere in the world, making the bombing planes used in World War II obsolete.[14] American fears increased exponentially upon the Soviets' development of a hydrogen bomb, as one *Newsweek* article described a grim picture: "In an atomic attack, the front would be everywhere. Every home, every factory, every school might be the target. Nobody would be secure in the H-bomb age."[15] Reports such as this brought the possibility of death by a nuclear attack into every home in America, permeating the bleak picture throughout American thought and life. This belief became so entrenched in the minds of Americans that one report showed that the majority of Americans in the 1950s believed that they would be more likely to die in a Soviet nuclear attack than from natural causes.[16] This is important to understand the mindset of Americans entering into the space age, as nuclear warfare was so entrenched in the minds of Americans that it carried over into the motives of space exploration, thus creating the "space race" with the Soviet space program.

With outer space thus far untouched, there was no precedent for the use of, or operation within, outer space, and speculation ran wild as to how the untapped potential might be used as a new military front. Some suggested that satellites be armed with ray guns as well as missile defense systems or spy technology, while others feared that a giant mirror set in orbit may be

[13]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 9-11.
[14]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 563.
[15] "H-Bomb Odds: 1 Million to 1—and That's What May Save Us," *Newsweek*, April 5, 1954, 28, quoted in Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Stragelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 99.
[16]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 567.

used as a burning glass. Whatever would become of the new frontier, Americans agreed that it was vital that they reach outer space first to set an advantageous precedent, whether military or peaceful.[17] To allow the Soviets to reach space first would very likely give them a nuclear advantage as it was believed that they would be able to launch nuclear warheads from a satellite. Therefore, when the Soviets successfully launched *Sputnik I* into orbit, and Americans everywhere could hear the "beep-beep-beeping" of its radio signal, the ever-present fear of falling behind in nuclear technology seemingly became a reality.

It was in this context that Project Mercury was created in 1958, with the objectives of achieving orbital flight and the recovery of a manned capsule.[18] Soon after, NASA selected seven military test pilots to be the astronauts for the Mercury program: Donald K. Slayton, Alan B. Shepard Jr., Walter M. Schirra Jr., Virgil I. Grissom, John H. Glenn Jr., Leroy G. Cooper, and Malcolm S. Carpenter.[19] Of the seven men, they were all relatively similar, being married, middle class, Protestant Christians; however, two of them stood out from the others with regards to their personalities. John Glenn and "Gus" Grissom were in stark contrast to each other as Glenn was eloquent and personable whereas Grissom was reserved and spoke very succinctly. Throughout the press conferences that would follow, and the news articles written by these two astronauts, the differences in their personalities were on full display, giving an interesting perspective on the program. Whereas Glenn would offer an articulate and descriptive response to any question given him, Grissom would answer very bluntly, never mincing words or saying more than necessary. Looking at the words of these two astronauts specifically, one would

[17]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 566.
[18]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 111.
[19]National Aeronautics and Space Administration, *Mercury Astronaut Team* (Washington, DC, April 9, 1959) 3, https://history.nasa.gov/40thmerc7/presscon.pdf.

answer a question knowing what his audience wanted to hear, and the other would answer it in the most straightforward way he could.[20]

Additionally, the achievements of the astronauts through their respective flights reflected the highest point of the program as well as one of the greatest losses. The sinking of Grissom's capsule in July 1961 marred the otherwise successful flight, making it difficult for the program to be able to boast in the success. However, Glenn's successful orbital flight and subsequent landing in February 1962, followed by his parade through Washington, DC, and address to Congress, was in many ways the high point of the program. The dichotomy of these two astronauts offers an interesting insight into the program as a whole and is valuable to understanding the nature of public perception of the astronauts. A closer examination of these astronauts demonstrates the interplay between the news coverage and public perception of the Mercury Program.

The Everyman

On April 9, 1959, Dr. T. Keith Glennan, Administrator of NASA, stood in front of the press in Washington, DC, and introduced the seven astronauts selected to be part of the Mercury program.[21] Unanticipated by all of NASA, the astronauts realized immediate fame and popularity, even receiving a standing ovation from the press in the room. Picking up on their popularity, NASA reinforced their celebrity status by portraying the astronauts as the ideal "everyman", as if any cross-sectional selection of American men would yield an equivalent group. This image held up among the public as the Mercury Seven were viewed as remarkable, and yet, unremarkable at the same time. At a glance, they were middle-class family men who had

[20]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 9-10.
[21]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 3.

served their country during times of war and had similar interests and worries as any other American; however, what distinguished these seven from the rest of America was their willingness and desire to strap themselves to a highly explosive rocket and blast into the most uninhabitable place known to man. The American public was fascinated by what made these seemingly ordinary men volunteer to have such an outrageous job.

The press conference introducing the Mercury Seven was very unremarkable with the astronauts, NASA administrators, and press corps crammed in a plain, tight room asking and answering questions in a monotonous tone. Led by NASA's director of public affairs, Walter T. Bonney, the pacing of the press conference was slow and clunky. Making the whole situation more clumsy, the astronauts did not even have their own microphone, so to answer a question, they would have to lean over and share one with the man beside them.[22] Additionally, none of the astronauts had any training for handling the press, so the majority of the astronauts—except for John Glenn—kept their answers very succinct and to the point, in proper military fashion. Almost humorously, the two astronauts with the two most opposite personalities sat beside one another as John Glenn and Gus Grissom shared a microphone.[23] Glenn, who was known for being eloquent and comfortable in front of television cameras and reporters, would give long, romantic answers to a reporter's question and then pass it on to Grissom, whose reserved midwestern roots led him to answer most questions in a single, straightforward sentence and move on.[24] One author commented on the eloquence, or lack thereof, of the astronauts, saying, "They were rocket jocks—intelligent, able men, but not particularly deep thinkers."[25] Years of

[22]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 3.
[23]George Leopold, *Calculated Risk: The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2016), 73.
[24]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 21.
[25]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 106.

flying dangerous missions as military test pilots had prepared them for the danger of the Project Mercury missions, but the ordinariness of the men shone through as they attempted to answer the reporters' questions with some semblance of eloquence and professionalism.

To the surprise of the NASA officials and astronauts, the reporters seemed to be far more interested in the personal lives of the astronauts, asking questions about their wives, children, sense of patriotism, and religious convictions, and gladly glossed over the rough edges of the astronauts as they stumbled through the interview. At the heart of the questions, the reporters wanted to know, "What made these men the way they were?"[26] The press did not seem interested in the details of the Mercury program, instead, they probed the astronauts in hopes of finding out what made the seemingly ordinary men so extraordinary. NASA historian Roger D. Launius summed up the reporters' fascination with the astronauts, saying, "The reporters wanted confirmation that these seven men embodied the deepest virtues of the United States."[27] To the American public, the entire space program was pointless if those at the head were not going to be proper representatives of the nation, and they were not disappointed by the humble and intelligent personas of the astronauts.

The popularity continued beyond the first press conference as NASA made a contract with *Time-Life* for the exclusive rights to publish an ongoing series covering the missions and personal lives of the Mercury Seven. This was a controversial move among much of the press as only *Life* had access to the astronauts and their families, and an essential aspect of the contract was that *Life* could not publish anything without the approval of NASA and the astronauts.[28] Since its creation in 1936, *Life Magazine* was intended for the middle class, presenting a visual

[26]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 186.
[27]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 186.
[28]Leopold, *Calculated Risk*, 78.

storytelling experience through stunning photo essays that were highly accessible to the average American.[29] Thus NASA's contract with *Time-Life* was significant as NASA could effectively present a positive image of the astronauts to the whole nation through one of the highest circulating weekly news publications in the nation.

*Life'*s first article on the Mercury Seven served as an introduction to the program and gave brief descriptions of all the men, accompanied by an image of the seven astronauts in a classroom, dressed in civilian clothes and listening to a lecture.[30] No part of this image screamed of greatness or bravery, yet the astronauts were hailed as such. In an official history of the Mercury program published by NASA in 1966, the authors described the appearance of the astronauts as, "Slightly short of average in stature, they were above average in seriousness of purpose. Otherwise, these seven seemed almost random samples of average American manhood."[31] The press did not need to create a fantasized image of the astronauts because the American public was so eager to learn everything about the men that they would accept even the most mundane image of the astronauts in a classroom.

The introductory article in *Life Magazine* reinforced the idea of the astronauts as extraordinary-ordinary men by bringing up the flaws and concerns that the astronauts had, not to belittle or demean them, but to show that they were, in many respects, average men. However, in doing so, it raised the point that their greatness came from their ordinary lives, as the only difference between them and the rest of the population was their occupation. The article gave a laundry list of the mundanity of the astronauts, saying, "Two of the four cigaret [sic] smokers in

[29]Sheila Webb, "The Consumer-Citizen: "'Life' Magazine's Construction of a Middle-Class Lifestyle Through Consumption Scenarios," *Studies in Popular Culture*, 34, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 23, 25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23416397.
[30]"The Astronauts–Ready to Make History," *Life Magazine*, September 14, 1959, 26-27, https://books.google.com/books?id=BUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA26&pg=PA26#v=onepage&q&f=true.
[31]Swenson, *This New Ocean*, 160.

the group are trying—so far unsuccessfully—to stop. Two others are worried about their weight. They are concerned about the condition of the grass in their yards and proper schooling for their children."[32] What made the astronauts so extraordinary in the public eye was not their achievements or elegant lifestyle—for they hadn't yet flown any missions for NASA and their lifestyles were anything but elegant—rather, it was their willingness to excel in service and bravery when the opportunity arose. In many ways, the astronauts represented the American ideal of a humble man who would answer the call to serve the nation when the need arose.[33]

Furthermore, the *Life* articles written by the astronauts played into the image of the Mercury Seven through the language used to describe the program and their specific duties within. In each essay, the men were very careful to credit the engineers and administrators involved in the process of each flight, bolstering the democratic spirit of the nation. Likewise, they described the complex procedures and engineering feats in layman's terms, again reinforcing the idea that they were ordinary people, just like every other American.[34] This created a complex paradox where the astronauts were depicted as supermen—exceptional men performing brave and daring exploits for the glory of God and country—yet simultaneously, they were represented just like every other ordinary American with families and ordinary lives.

The contract with *Life* also bolstered this as the "everyman" persona of the astronauts was reinforced by their appearances in the very magazine that ordinary Americans read. Rather than appearing in high-brow publications only accessible to a distinct group of elites, the astronauts lived in the middle-class homes of everyday Americans through *Life's* photo essays. It followed that the reader couldn't help but feel that the astronauts were cut from the same cloth as

[32]"The Astronauts," *Life*, 27.
[33]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 191.
[34]M. Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Virgil I. Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan B. Shepard, and Donald K. Slayton, *We Seven* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1962).

themselves, as though any cross-sectional observation of the American populace would find men and women as intelligent, patriotic, and God-fearing as these men and their families. In his biography of Gus Grissom, George Leopold described how one aspect of the selection process for the Mercury program would be a persons' ability to be "good heroes;" the humble intelligence of the Mercury Seven, portrayed through the issues of *Life Magazine*, prepared them perfectly to live out this role.[35]

While the seemingly mundane aspects of the astronauts' lives played into their popularity, the American public was also fascinated with the courage of the men, both as military test pilots as well as in their future endeavors in space. This is evidenced in a letter received by John Glenn from a nun in Buffalo, New York, who said, "This atomic generation can use your vocabulary. We hope and pray they absorb as reality the manly traits you display. You represent the 'American Image' we wish them to portray in their adult lives. A man's real achievement is the conquest of self. On that score we agree that Colonel Glenn is truly 'Go'."[36] Glenn received over 300,000 letters throughout the Mercury program containing people's thoughts on him or the program.[37] Comprising a significant percentage of the letters to Glenn were children who were fascinated by Glenn's endeavors in space and wrote with questions about space or Glenn's opinions on any number of topics. Many of the letters ranged from requests like, "Can you come to my house for dinner next Friday?" to questions such as, "If you had to go to the bathroom while you are in flight, what would you do?"[38] These rather mundane letters spoke to the accessibility of the astronauts to the American public, as they were held up as the ideal figures to

[35]Leopold, *Calculated Risk*, 64.
[36]John Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn* (Houston, TX: World Book Encyclopedia Science Service, 1964), 3.
[37]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn*, xii.
[38]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn*, 26, 29.

be emulated due to their bravery, but they were also ordinary enough for people to feel that they could write a personal letter to them.

Similarly, one of the talking points for the astronauts in their articles in *Life* was always their military experience, either in combat or as a test pilot, and how it had prepared them for the Project Mercury missions.[39] The popularity of the astronauts was twofold, both in the ordinariness of their lives and in the distinct belief that the capsules would explode with the astronauts in them, thus the daring nature of the astronauts held high popularity.[40] Following this, *Time Magazine* wrote an article detailing Glenn's military service in both World War II and the Korean War. The article described how Glenn had flown several missions with famous Red Sox left fielder Ted Williams, who said of Glenn, "The man is crazy."[41] This played into the daring and bold persona of the astronauts that NASA wanted to portray—the very type needed to go into space—yet to the public, Glenn was still personable and likable, so he did not seem too different from the rest of the American public.

When the Project Mercury astronauts were first introduced to the public, the Mercury program—and NASA itself—was in its infancy and did not have any successes on which to hang its hat. The press, seeing the twofold predicament of the Soviet victories in space and American technological blunders, was not reassured by the optimistic front put up by NASA. This skepticism came out in the introductory press conference as well as in various articles written about the astronauts. The first of the *Life* articles (September 1959) written on the Mercury Seven introduced the mission in a very matter-of-fact way, saying that if the astronaut was successful in his mission, he would be lauded as an American hero, but if he died, the next man

[39]"You Just Don't Have Time to Get Frightened," *Life Magazine*, September 14, 1959, 39, https://books.google.com/books?id=BUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA26&pg=PA26#v=onepage&q&f=true.
[40]Leopold, *Calculated Risk*, 78.
[41]"Space: The Man," *Time Magazine*, March 2, 1962.

up would take his place.[42] Articles such as this demonstrated the belief that the Mercury program was virtually unproven and may be unsuccessful at the potential cost of the astronauts' lives.

The unproven nature of Project Mercury was made clear in a question during the initial press conference when one reporter asked the astronauts about what they were "hanging onto." When asked to clarify further, he said, "My feeling was that you men are obviously risking your lives. We all of us hang onto something as we go through life and feel that if we are risking our lives, it is worth it. And also, those who have a religious bent feel that if things don't go right that religion takes care of that. I would like to know if any of you have a religious, a strong religious feeling."[43] In essence, the reporter asked the astronauts how they had made peace with themselves to volunteer for this mission with such a small chance of success. This question was echoed in an article from *The Indianapolis Star* in 1959, asking, "What prompts a man to volunteer for such an ordeal?"[44] These questions didn't merely probe at the bravery of the astronauts, instead, they were attempts to understand the existential motivations of the astronauts as they had put their lives in the unproven hands of a government space agency.

One factor that played into the immediate popularity of the Mercury Seven was the existence of the American "imagination" of space, which was created largely by the emergence of popular space science fiction stories such as Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon.[45] Whether or not they believed in the plausibility of space exploration, the American public already had a developed image of what they believed it would look like, so the first demonstrations that space exploration would become a reality—such as the unveiling of the Mercury Seven—stirred great

[42]"The Astronauts," *Life*, 26.
[43]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 16.
[44]"Hoosier on Space Trip List," *The Indianapolis Star*, April 10, 1959.
[45]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 30.

emotion and excitement in the public's eye. The astronauts themselves admitted to having shared in this imagination, relating it to an age-old desire and curiosity to look up and be able to touch the stars.[46] The astronauts' fascination with space served to endear them further to the American public, as the descriptions of their desires to go to space were so simplistic, yet full of childlike curiosity, that the public was drawn to them.

Going beyond science fiction, the collective imagination of space also drew from the nation's history regarding manifest destiny, as if space as the "new frontier" was the next outlet to be explored and conquered, like the American West in the century before.[47] This kind of entitlement drew widespread investment by the public before there was a realistic understanding of the space program, which played a role in the actual formation of policies regarding the Mercury program. In order to draw full cooperation from the American public for an expensive, and thus far unproven, space program, NASA purposefully connected the astronauts to the cultural tradition and imagination of exploration that already existed among the American public.[48] While the instant popularity of the astronauts was not anticipated by NASA, the administrators quickly picked up on it and used it to their benefit by shaping the public image of the astronauts to depict the embodiment of American ideals and virtues. The "hard-living, hard-drinking" image of military test pilots was breezed over, leaving only the clean-cut, patriotic image portrayed by the seven men as they revealed their ordinary qualities and concerns about the length of the grass in their lawns.

The apparent innocence of the astronauts, coupled with their boldness in the face of danger, hailed back to pioneer aviators such as Charles Lindbergh, to whom they were

[46]"The Astronauts," *Life*, 28.
[47]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 4.
[48]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 2.

compared.[49] As their mission followed the great American tradition of exploration and discovery, their bravery and honor from years of service in the military were lauded with a kind of reverence by the American public. In a letter to John Glenn, one woman wrote, "This letter is to thank you, John, for offering up your life so willingly for your country…. You wrote on our hearts in indelible ink that will not fade in a life time [sic]."[50] The letter invokes very religious language by referring to the acts of bravery and heroism performed by Glenn as well as the impact he left on those who watched his flight. Similar to the comparisons to American pioneers and explorers, the astronauts' experiences as test pilots, pushing the limits of speed and excitement, brought to mind the heroes of automobile racing, perhaps the most popular sporting event at the time.[51] Tangentially, less than two weeks after Gordon Cooper's Mercury-Atlas 9 flight in May 1963, he attended the Indianapolis 500 and even asked to drive one of the race cars around the track; a few years later, he would spend his free weekends working on the pit crew of one of the racers.[52] To these men, speed and danger was a part of their lifestyle, and the American public loved it. The combination of the astronauts' exploration, military service, and bravery, along with their humble curiosity, endeared them to the public long before the Mercury program showed any evidence of being successful.

Surrogate for War

When the Mercury program was created in 1958, NASA was in a desperate situation as it struggled to play catch-up with the Soviet space program; however, by using the public's fascination with the astronauts and the subsequent fame of the Mercury Seven, NASA directed

[49]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 175.
[50]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn,* 13-14.
[51]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn,* 13-14.
[52]Will Higgins, "When 2 Mercury Astronauts Tried to Keep Their Indy 500 Entry Under Wraps," *The Indy Star*, May 24, 2017, https://www.indystar.com/story/life/2017/05/16/when-2-mercury-astronauts-tried-keep-their-indy-500-entry-under-wraps/100878104/.

the public eye to the competence of the astronauts and away from the technological failings of the space program. The nature of the space race was such that the United States took the mindset of "if you're not first, you're last." The stakes of the race were high, with the leader holding the upper hand in nuclear superiority.

Lagging the Soviet Union in the space race was a significant concern for the United States space program and the country. It wasn't just a matter of saving face, rather it was perceived as a battle for the survival of democracy. The space race affected all aspects of American life including the economy as the American stock market experienced the largest one-day loss in two years after the successful launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik I*—simultaneously, shares in rocketry companies surged.[53] The significance of the space race was not merely an aspect of American imagination or technological competition but was viewed by the populace as a fight for survival. Offering a more skeptical opinion, Gerard DeGroot argued that the perception of the space race was manufactured by the governmental and economic leaders of the country to create public hysteria that would help put money in their pockets.[54] While it is true that the American public was much more willing to part with their money when they viewed it as necessary for the survival of the nation, the political leaders were equally as concerned about the outcome of the space race as the citizens, including President Dwight Eisenhower, who saw military advancement and national prestige as inevitable in space exploration.[55]

---

[53]Degroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 63.
[54]Degroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 63.
[55]United States. Department of State Historical Office, and Library of Congress, "News-Conference Remarks by President Eisenhower, October 9, 1957," Legislative Reference Service. 1963. *Documents on International Aspects of the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, 1954-1962*. 88th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate: Document, No. 18. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off. 59.

As they appeared to be behind the Soviets, NASA attempted to save face by pushing the narrative that they were working more methodically, and thus slower, to ensure the safety and success of the astronauts. Gordon Cooper wrote about this mindset in one of his articles in *Life Magazine*, describing NASA's approach as logical and scientific, as opposed to the Soviets, who rushed ahead with no concern for the safety or longevity of the program.[56] To a degree, this was true, as the approaches of the Soviet and American space programs were very different. The Soviets advanced at a faster pace because they built off previous successes, however, this also put a ceiling on their ability to succeed in the long run because they were working with old technology that had been adapted multiple times. The American approach was slower and required more resources, but it was also more diversified, making it easier to adjust and advance as time went on.[57] Cooper's argument was meant to counter any doubts about the Mercury program by reassuring Americans that any perceived delays or setbacks were merely the result of NASA's careful scientific process rather than any inadequacy of the program itself.

While NASA attempted to calm the fears of Americans about their position in the space race, United States officials were worried that too many unanswered Soviet victories in space might cause neutral countries in the Cold War to side with the Soviets.[58] President Eisenhower remarked on this issue early in the space race, describing it as a "great psychological advantage"[59] for the Soviets to have launched the first satellite into orbit. As he had been skeptical of the significance of space exploration as a means of national defense, Eisenhower

[56]Gordon Cooper, "First Rocket We Will Ride," *Life Magazine*, October 2, 1960, 82, https://books.google.com/books?id=ykQEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PA78#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[57]Launius, *Reaching for the Moon*, 122.
[58]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 571.
[59]Quoted in Werth, "Surrogate for War," 571.

was less concerned about the space race than other United States officials.[60] When Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin successfully orbited the Earth on April 12, 1961, the fear of falling behind the Soviets became a definite reality which was left unanswered until John Glenn orbited the earth in the *Friendship 7* ten months later.[61] As a result of the high stakes of the space race, it had a very high entertainment value and was marketed to the public as light propaganda.[62] Universal newsreels, short news clippings shown in theaters before each feature film, showed the Soviet space successes alongside American failures, accompanied by a narration that spoke of the uphill battle with which NASA was faced, creating a fear that the United States was outmatched by their rivals.[63] With this in mind, the public furor was extremely high, not because of any desire to further scientific research through astronautics but rather because the popular newsreels and press coverage of the space race punctured the nationalistic pride of Americans.[64]

The press found that they did not have to seek out or invent scandal within the space program to hold public investment; instead, the national competition with the Soviets made it such that the public would cling to any positive aspect of the American program. As the greatest achievement of the Mercury program through the first three years of its existence was the selection of the seven astronauts, the American public clung to the triumph of the personality and character of the Mercury Seven. The contemporary historical account of the Mercury program

[60]Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958). Cited in United States, *Documents on International Aspects of the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, 1954-1962*, 42.
[61]Launius, *Reaching for the Moon*, 78.
[62]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 573.
[63]Universal Pictures Company, "Newsreels: 1961 Year in Review - Headlines," January 1, 1962, https://www.buyoutfootage.com/pages/titles/pd_nr_007.php#.Y1dgKOzMJQJ.
[64]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 109.

described this unproven celebrity status, saying, "They were lionized by laymen and adored by youth as heroes before their courage was truly tested."[65]

Although Eisenhower was initially reluctant to label participation in space exploration as a space race, T. Keith Glennan, administrator of NASA, suggested in a letter to the president that the United States lean into the idea of a "space race" rather than avoiding the topic altogether. In doing so, Glennan said, the two countries could establish the confines of the "race", thus removing any military aspects from it and minimizing the threat of nuclear war.[66] Eisenhower, as a military man who experienced firsthand the effects of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, viewed space very pragmatically as a means of defending the United States from possible military threats, not as the next exploratory adventure for mankind.[67] With this in mind, Eisenhower began a long string of communication with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in which both leaders described their mutual desire to keep space a non-militarized zone.[68] But by eliminating the military component of space exploration, Eisenhower inherently emphasized the significance of the space race as a "surrogate for war", thus creating a social and technological battle of appearance with the Soviets.

Following the newly defined scope of space exploration, technological breakthroughs in the respective countries' space programs were given exponentially more significance as the public correlated them to the competence and superiority of their political system and leaders; conversely, technological failures also seemed to represent an inherent weakness in a nation's political system.[69] This placed extreme pressure on NASA to perform and, subsequently, made

---

[65]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 165.
[66]T. Keith Glennan, *The Birth of NASA: The Diary of T. Keith Glennan* (Washington, DC: NASA History Office, 1993), 27, https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4105.pdf.
[67]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 59.
[68]*Documents on International Aspects of the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, 1954-1962*, 57.
[69]Werth, "Surrogate for War," 568.

the setbacks of the early days of the program look very bleak. The first three years of the Mercury program were plagued with delays and malfunctions which cost an exorbitant amount of money and left nothing to show for it. The news coverage which had been overwhelmingly positive couldn't help but question the future of the program, as was evidenced by an article from *Time Magazine*, published in December 1960 titled "Lead Footed Mercury." This followed NASA's most recent failure on November 21, 1960, of the Mercury Redstone 1 (MR-1), in which the rocket launched a mere five inches off the ground only to settle back on the pad. Due to an electrical malfunction, the escape rocket launched without taking the capsule with it, and with painfully comedic timing, the parachute blew from the top as if it were the cork on a champagne bottle. The article described the MR-1 as the latest in a string of failures that had "just about evaporated the last faint wisp of hope that the U.S. might put a man into space before Russia does."[70] It went on to discuss NASA's multitude of postponements as the intended date for a manned orbital flight had been delayed over two years and had cost $350 million ($3.5 billion by 2022 value)[71] with nothing to show for it.[72] While articles like this were the exception among the overwhelmingly positive press coverage, it demonstrated the fact that a look at the technological accomplishments of the space program would not yield a positive result, and a positive view would have to come from a different source.

Looking at the economic side of the space program, the labor effort required to build the rockets and capsules caused a sudden demand for employment in factories across twenty-five states, which meant that the American populace would be immediately invested in the space

[70]"Lead-Footed Mercury," *Time Magazine*, December 5, 1960, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,895065,00.html.
[71]"Value of 1960 US Dollar Today," Inflation Calculator, InflationTool, https://www.inflationtool.com/us-dollar/1960-to-present-value?amount=350000000&year2=2022&frequency=yearly.
[72]"Lead-Footed Mercury," *Time*.

program as it created hundreds of thousands of jobs. In his economic analysis of NASA's space programs, Gerard DeGroot noted, "At factories spread over twenty-five states, they welcomed the big contracts that would give them steady employment for the next few years. That's exactly the way NASA wanted it. Eventually, hundreds of thousands of workers scattered all over the United States would learn to love the space program for the simple reason that it put food on the table."[73] While DeGroot's analysis was critical of NASA, it appeared that he was the product of the very thing he criticized, as the book's dedication was made out to his father, "a great craftsman who kept us fed by building rockets."[74] If the rockets were not initially successful, NASA made sure that its image was protected twofold by the nation's need for heroes in the astronauts and the need for economic stability.

From the beginning of the Mercury program, there was an understanding that the technology had a long way to develop before there would be any manned flights. To begin with, NASA's engineers were tasked with modifying the Air Force's Atlas rockets so that they would be able to reliably lift the weight of the space capsule. Reliability was the initial issue, as the Atlas rockets were originally designed for ICBMs, so a missile that exploded in the air had significantly fewer consequences than a rocket carrying an American astronaut. Whereas the success rate for a missile did not have to be 100%, there was never any question that the manned rocket must be successful.[75] While there were many indications of the engineers' uncertainty about the rockets, including the emphasis put on designing the escape rockets, the *Life* articles helped bolster support and faith in the program by allowing the public to hear from those most closely affected by the success or failure of the rockets. Anna Glenn, the wife of John Glenn,

[73]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 103.
[74]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 103.
[75]Swenson, Grimwood, and Alexander, *This New Ocean*, 183.

wrote an article in 1959 that described the perception of NASA from the perspective of the astronauts' families, and she expressed complete faith in NASA despite the few "bugs" and minor mistakes that had happened.[76] In reading this article, the thought immediately comes to mind that if the very wives of the astronauts were confident in the safety of their husbands, there should be no reason for concern. Contrasted to the introductory press conference in which many of the questions alluded to the fact that the astronauts could very likely die on the missions, the articles from the astronauts' wives instilled confidence in the space program.

By 1961, NASA was finally ready to begin manned flights, though it had lagged the Soviet launches by several months. While it appeared to have survived the worst days of malfunctions with the unmanned flights, the high stakes of having an astronaut in the rocket added additional pressure to the needed success of the mission. NASA's previous efforts to build an aura of competence by personalizing the astronauts now came into play as the entire nation watched the launches with anticipation. As one historian described, "By promoting the astronaut corps, agency advocates and media leaders were able to reduce complex technical issues to personal values such as bravery and patriotism. The first group of astronauts was remade into the embodiment of American values in such a way that few wanted them to fail."[77] When the rockets went up, the entire idealism of America was riding with the men in the capsule.

During the manned flights, NASA was careful to depict the astronauts as having complete control over the spacecraft, no matter what may arise, as the narrative of their competence was an important reflection on the space program itself. Technological failings were typically kept from the public when possible to promote a stronger belief in NASA as an

[76]Anna Glenn, "Seven Brave Women Behind the Astronauts," *Life Magazine*, September 21, 1959, 142, https://books.google.com/books?id=u0gEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=life%20september%2021%201959&pg=PA142#v=onepage&q=life%20september%2021%201959&f=false.
[77]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 88.

organization, but when the hatch on Gus Grissom's *Liberty Bell* capsule prematurely blew after it had landed in the Atlantic Ocean and all of America watched on national television as Grissom nearly drowned, NASA was left to scrap together its public image while choosing either to blame or defend Grissom for the mishap. In the ensuing story from *Life Magazine,* Grissom gave a detailed account of the procedures leading up to MR-4 and the events of the flight, including the incident which caused the hatch to detonate and the capsule to sink into the ocean. The account heavily emphasizes the routines and processes that Grissom naturally followed from training as a test pilot and astronaut and how he was very cognizant of his actions and movements leading up to the mishap.[78] This was meant to counter any question of Grissom's composure, as the article brings up the fact that Grissom asked the recovery helicopter to hold off for several minutes so he could perform a final check of the instruments in case they were affected by the recovery process.[79] Had NASA not defended Grissom against claims of incompetence, the American public would be left questioning both the astronauts and the program itself, leaving NASA with no silver lining; however, by defending Grissom, NASA showed the American people that they could still trust the astronauts to be successful in their missions.

Due to *Life*'s deal with NASA, it was not unexpected that their coverage of the incident defended Grissom; however, the rest of the press, those that were not directly connected to NASA, still depicted the events in a very sympathetic manner by painting NASA as the victim of bad luck. *Time Magazine* described the *Liberty Bell* capsule as "a functioning—if not always perfect—vehicle" that was sunk by the unforgiving Atlantic Ocean.[80] This was the same

[78]Carpenter et al., *We Seven*, 224-228.
[79] Virgil S. Grissom, "It Was a Good Flight and a Great Float," *Life Magazine*, July 28, 1961, https://books.google.com/books?id=nlQEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA4&dq=life%20july%2028%201961&pg=PA27#v=onepage&q=life%20july%2028%201961&f=false.
[80]"Saga of the Liberty Bell," *Time Magazine*, July 28, 1961, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,938191-1,00.html.

magazine that had harshly criticized NASA for wasting money just eight months prior. One newsreel from *Universal Studios* epitomized this, saying, "Unlike the Russians, who have never given any advance billing to their attempts and no information on their failures, the United States has invited representatives of all nations to witness our success or failure."[81] This set up the description of the blown hatch and subsequent sinking of the capsule in a sympathetic light, even describing the incident as a "heartbreaking tragedy", while also challenging the Soviets to greater transparency.[82] One newspaper report from Grissom's home state of Indiana, printed the evening after the flight, wasn't overly positive toward the success of the mission but still celebrated Grissom, describing how the governor of Indiana signed a proclamation declaring the day of his flight "Gus Grissom Day," showing the immense popularity of the astronauts and the pride held by their hometowns.[83] While Grissom's flight did yield valuable data and information for NASA, the loss of the capsule was viewed by the organization as an avoidable mishap that turned a victory in space into a failure.

Contrasted to Grissom, whose success was largely diminished due to the sinking of the capsule, John Glenn's orbital flight represented the high point for the Mercury program, despite having some minor malfunctions of its own. In his retelling of the *Friendship 7* flight in *Life Magazine,* Glenn described the procedures that he went through as well as how his training had prepared him for anything that may have arisen.[84] As a testament to the competence of the astronauts, one newspaper lauded the fact that Glenn took manual control of the spacecraft after

[81]Universal Pictures Company, "Universal Newsreels, Release 60," July 24, 1961, http://ezproxy.taylor.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1787214?account_id=25244&usage_group_id=90659.
[82]Universal Pictures Company, "Universal Newsreels, Release 60."
[83]"Grissom Has Narrow Escape; Craft Sinks," *The Palladium-Item*, July 21, 1961, 1.
[84]John Glenn, "If You're Shook Up, You Shouldn't Be There," *Life Magazine*, March 9, 1962, 29, https://books.google.com/books?id=RlUEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PA25#v=onepage&q&f=false.

there was an issue with the automatic system, using language about how Glenn was "firmly in command." This same article minimized any issues with the capsule itself, the most significant being NASA's concern that the heat shield may have malfunctioned, leaving Glenn vulnerable to being burned alive when reentering the atmosphere.[85] Even when the life of the astronaut was believed to have been in danger due to a failure of the capsule, the press coverage—including those unaffiliated with NASA—remained focused on the capabilities of the astronauts rather than the mistakes of the space program.

A *Time Magazine* article from March 2, 1962, described how valuable Glenn's successful flight had been for the American morale, as it had marked a victory for an open society and justified the billions of dollars spent in doing so.[86] Less than a year and a half prior, the same magazine that published an article describing the failures of Mercury and its exorbitant spending was now hailing the program as a triumph. It continued to speak about how the flight was a victory over the Soviets as all of NASA's findings would be shared with the world rather than kept in secret, as the Soviets had done. Describing John Glenn, the article spoke about his capability as he took control of the capsule, thus proving that man was capable of great feats in space. What the article did not detail was the reason why Glenn took control, which was due to a failure of the automatic guidance system, demonstrating the fact that the press's primary interest was in the astronauts rather than the program. As a description of the malfunctioning guidance system would have lessened the success of Glenn's flight—and perhaps hinted at some incompetence in the American space program—the *Time* article chose to focus on Glenn's abilities rather than the technological error.

---

[85]Howard Benedict, "Glenn Carves Nation's Name in Outer Space," *The Sumter Daily Item*, February 20, 1962, 1, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zosiAAAAIBAJ&sjid=vKkFAAAAIBAJ&pg=1374%2C3382420.
[86]"The New Ocean," *Time Magazine*, March 2, 1962, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,939866-1,00.html.

As they had found out early on that the space program held such high national interest, the press did not need to find controversy within the program to maintain public attention. At times, they even watered down the consequences of the space program to reflect a greater sense of competence in NASA, as is evidenced by Glenn's *Friendship 7* flight, when the instruments in the capsule indicated that the heat shield had come loose. The consequences of a malfunctioning heat shield would be dire, yet the national broadcast of Glenn's flight did not mention the very real danger that Glenn might burn up in reentry until after he had safely landed.[87] The very fact that the press downplayed the dangers of the flight demonstrated how high public interest was, as the news media skimmed over the perils to highlight the men of Project Mercury. Looking at any other source of media attention, from politics to sports to celebrities, controversy and danger were overplayed to retain the interest of the public, but the Mercury program already held the public's attention so highly that this was unnecessary.

Throughout the entire Mercury program, the public's view of its success lay in the perception of the astronauts. From the lowest points, including the string of failed launches or Grissom's sunk capsule, to the highest, namely, Glenn's *Friendship 7* flight, the portrayal of NASA flowed out from the astronauts rather than the actual successes of the program. The mindset of NASA at the time lay mainly in the idea that "rockets might explode, but the astronauts shined."[88] When the public fixed their gaze on the astronauts, malfunctions were easily forgotten and a sense of the competence of the United States space program quickly grew.[89] Out of this sense of competence, NASA worked to catch up to the Soviets in the space race while still maintaining the trust and funds of the American public.

---

[87]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 87.
[88]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 177.
[89]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 87.

Projection Against Soviets

Within the mindset of the space race as a surrogate for war, it followed that the United States space program wanted to win both the technological race as well as the ideological battle with the Soviets. To accomplish this, the press corps projected the image of the Project Mercury astronauts against that of the Soviets by depicting the Mercury Seven as representatives of the American ideal. As a result, the press focused its attention on three primary aspects of American values that would contrast most with their Soviet counterparts, namely their faith, family, and freedom.

As John Glenn was in many ways the "poster boy" for the Mercury program, the press discussed how his faith played a role in his desire to go to space, thus linking the idea of space travel with a religious backing that contrasted the United States with their communist competitors. From the very beginning, during the introductory press conference, Glenn spoke of how his faith compelled him to a standard of work and a desire to further explore space by saying, "If I use the talents and capabilities I happen to have been given to the best of my ability, I think there is a power greater than I am that will certainly see that I am taken care of if I do my part of the bargain."[90] Additionally, a *Life* article written by Anna Glenn in 1959 described the importance of her and her husband's faith in their lives and how that was a central component to being able to understand them and their motivations.[91] This revealed how John and Anna Glenn perceived space exploration as a religious endeavor, which appealed greatly to the religious aspect of American culture and contrasted them to the "godless communists" with which they were competing.

[90]NASA, *Mercury Astronaut Team*, 17.
[91]Anna Glenn, "Seven Brave Women Behind the Astronauts," 142.

Further on in her article, Anna Glenn described a conversation she had with her pastor about John Glenn's mission in which he reassured her, "there is no religious reason why mankind, and John in particular, should not explore space."[92] While the article was a genuine explanation of how she and her husband had wrestled with the idea of space exploration concerning their faith, her conclusion echoed similar language to a 19th-century manifest destiny which described divine support for exploration and expansion. Reflecting on the introductory press conference, Gordon Cooper described how the press—independent of NASA—ate up the religious answers of the astronauts.[93] Seeing the stakes of the space race for the Cold War, the reporters willingly did their part to set the United States program apart from that of the Soviets, so they emphasized the religiosity of the astronauts.

Anna Glenn's sentiment of there being a religious nature to space exploration was shared by many of the American public, as the astronauts received an abundance of mail in which Americans would detail their pride, concerns, or experiences in intimate detail with the recipient. John Glenn compiled a selection of the mail he received following his flight of the *Friendship 7* into a book, and he dedicated an entire section to the religiously motivated mail, ranging from prayers and faith-healing advice to scorning sentiments toward the danger of space exploration on faith. One of the positive letters, addressed "From a Woman in Freehold, New Jersey," told Glenn, "I believe that God will allow us to go on exploring space—and giving us men such as you and your fellow astronauts to help us."[94] In another letter, "From a Man in Baltimore, Maryland," the author described his concerns about how a Russian radio broadcast described

[92]Anna Glenn, "Seven Brave Women Behind the Astronauts," 142.
[93]Gordon Cooper, *Leap of Faith: An Astronaut's Journey into the Unknown* (New York, NY: HarperTorch, 2000), 21, https://avalonlibrary.net/ebooks/Gordon%20Cooper%20-%20Leap%20of%20Faith%20-%20An%20Astronaut%27s%20Journey%20into%20the%20Unknown.pdf.
[94]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn*, 7.

how their exploration had yielded no evidence of God, thus relegating Christ to mythology. In response, he asked that Glenn write to him after his orbital flight and describe how he would respond to the Russian claim.[95] For many Americans, space exploration was more than just a surrogate for war, it was deeply correlated to a religious component that they felt needed to remain intact. The two letters described above demonstrate two different aspects of how space flight was tied to religion, one showing the proof of God through the flight and the other searching for God in space.

While many Americans sought to find answers to their religious questions through the flights of the Mercury astronauts, others followed the narratives and events of the space program tirelessly. Each time NASA launched a rocket, whether manned or unmanned, crowds of people would flock to Cape Canaveral in the days leading up to the launch to witness the spectacle. For many of them, the journey to the Cape and the reverence with which they held the space program was a sort of "American pilgrimage", innately tied to the imagination of space.[96] To be able to witness the launch of the rockets was to view the ascension of American saints into the heavens. One historian noted the phenomenon from the motive of the press, saying, "They wanted to demonstrate to their readers that the Mercury Seven strode the Earth as latter-day saviors whose purity and noble deeds would purge this land of the evils of communism by besting the Soviet Union on the world stage."[97] The American people held the entire space program with such reverence that witnessing the success of a launch was to witness the very defeat of evil. Religious language such as this permeated the whole program and its ensuing press coverage to

[95]Glenn, *Letters to John Glenn*, 8.
[96]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 86.
[97]Launius, *Reaching for the Moon*, 67.

the point that the religious nature of American culture versus their Soviet counterparts was made a central part of the space race.

Following the idea that the astronauts were the embodiment of American values, the next realm where they were contrasted to the Soviets was their role as family men. This is tied to the presentation of the astronauts as extraordinary, ordinary men as discussed previously, in which they were depicted as average, middle-class Americans tasked with an extraordinary job. The *Life* issue from September 21, 1959, contained a series of articles written by the astronauts' wives and gave a unique perspective on the astronauts that further endeared them to the public. Betty Grissom's article described the career of her husband through the military and his role as a test pilot, and she discussed some of the challenges they had faced in their journey leading to his selection as one of the Mercury Seven. Both Gus and Betty Grissom came from humble beginnings in rural Indiana and struggled to make ends meet when Gus studied at Purdue University.[98] This description of their lives showed the modesty of the astronauts while also demonstrating the reality of the American Dream as a humble Midwesterner could work to become one of the most popular and highly esteemed men in the country.

Similarly, Trudy Cooper, the wife of astronaut Gordon Cooper, wrote an article in which she recounted the time she and her husband visited his grandmother to celebrate the news of his selection to the Mercury program. His grandmother, who was a pioneer in Oklahoma in 1895, was so excited by the news, Cooper explained, "You would think the Indian wars were on again."[99] Cooper's description of this encounter echoed the sentiment of the Grissom's while also evoking the language of manifest destiny by making comparisons between the bravery of

[98]Betty Grissom, "I Guess I Will Worry," *Life Magazine*, September 21, 1959, 152.
[99]Trudy Cooper, "I Want to Watch It Go," *Life Magazine*, September 21, 1959, 157.

the pioneers of the 19th century and the astronauts. Following the idea of the astronauts as the epitome of American ideals, the comparisons to the American pioneers built up an identity and legacy of Americans being explorers and pioneers.

The personalization of the astronauts through the *Life* articles went a long way to endear them to the public, especially when compared to the Soviets. By giving the American public an intimate look into the lives of the astronauts through the articles written by their wives and the pictures of their children, NASA and the American government was given a face. This was very important as the American space program wanted to differentiate itself as much as possible from the nameless, faceless Soviet program which had shrouded itself in secrecy. The Universal Newsreels depicted the differences between the American and Soviet programs exactly how NASA had hoped, as they described every minor triumph on the American side while only alluding to the Soviet program and never referring to the Soviet cosmonauts by name.[100] By refusing to even name the Soviet program, the cosmonauts were further depersonalized in the minds of the Americans, especially when compared to the tight-knit, devout Christian families of the American astronauts.[101] The *Life* articles written by the astronauts' wives served to make the astronauts more relatable and approachable to the American public—as is exemplified by the quantity of mail received by the astronauts—while also depicting them as the embodiment of the American ideal. As one author described it, they were "a living re-creation of a Norman Rockwell painting."[102]

[100]Universal Pictures Company, "Newsreels: 1961 Year in Review—Headlines."
[101]Anna Glenn, "Seven Brave Women Behind the Astronauts," 143.
[102]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 107.

While the astronauts were thought of as "latter-day saviors,"[103] in reality, they followed the pattern of the usual crowd of test pilots, "a hard-living, hard-drinking lot,"[104] some of whom were unfaithful to their wives and reckless in behavior.[105] Although it was commonplace for their line of work, this lifestyle did not fit the mold that the American public craved, so the press highlighted the specific aspects of the astronauts' lives, such as their faith or family, while smoothing over the rough edges to make them more desirable to the public. Their marketability to the American public played a role in the selection of the Mercury Seven to the program, thus their personal lives were largely sanitized and they were forced to attend a "charm school," which taught them how to present themselves and talk to the press.[106] Concerning their bravery and courage, the astronauts certainly lived up to their public image, but they often fell short in their personal lives, despite being portrayed as the ideals in all areas of life. Despite the reality of their lifestyles, the depiction of them as family men compared to the Soviets served as a weapon in the ideological war.

Finally, the third aspect to which the astronauts were compared to the Soviets was freedom. Beginning with the introductory press conference and through the entirety of the program, the rhetoric of the astronauts leaned heavily on their love of country. This was most embodied in John Glenn's address before Congress in 1962 following the successful flight of *Friendship 7*, in which he said, "I still get a hard-to-define feeling inside, when the flag goes by and I know most of you do, too."[107] Comments such as this served to reassure the American public of the greatness of the astronauts, as there was, surely, no one better than the best America

[103]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 107.
[104]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 107.
[105]Launius, "Heroes in a Vacuum," 175.
[106]DeGroot, *Dark Side of the Moon*, 106.
[107]John Glenn, "John Glenn Handwritten Speech to Congress After Friendship 7 Flight," (speech, Washington, DC, February 26, 1962), Ohio Memory Collection, https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p267401coll36/id/11633.

had to offer. The personalization of the astronauts served another purpose as well. In the decade before the space program took off, Americans had associated science with doomsday scenarios of atomic warfare, but the space program proved to be a refreshing reminder that "science under control" meant progress, not doom.[108] In the astronauts, the American public found safety and competence as things to believe in, whereas the Soviet competitors were viewed as an antiquated and nonrepresentative group.

As representatives for their country, the astronauts spoke of a sense of duty that compelled them to participate in the space program. In the issue of *Life* from September 14, 1959, John Glenn described that he felt it was his patriotic duty to volunteer for the program and he was proud to be able to be a part of it all.[109] Three years later, Glenn described in another issue of *Life* how he was honored to be able to represent Americans, demonstrating a self-awareness of how he was perceived by the American people.[110] The honor went both ways, as thousands of Americans would turn out to celebrate the astronauts as they were paraded through Washington, DC, and their hometowns. Following Grissom's flight, the 3,500 people of his hometown of Mitchell, Indiana, joined by an estimated 8,000 "out of towners," took to the streets to celebrate, parading his family members in convertibles led by the high school band.[111] Not only did the astronauts feel that they represented the nation, but the Americans were proud to be represented by such men. One NASA historian described the relationship between the astronauts and the American people by saying, "Certainly, [the astronauts] carried on their shoulders all the hopes and dreams and best wishes of a nation as they engaged in single combat the ominous

[108]McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination*, 95.
[109]John Glenn, "Space is at the Frontier of My Profession," *Life Magazine*, September 14, 1959, 38, https://books.google.com/books?id=BUoEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA26&pg=PA26#v=onepage&q&f=true.
[110]Glenn, "If You're Shook Up, You Shouldn't Be There," 25.
[111]"Mitchell Hails Hometown Space Hero; Family and Father 'Relieved It's Over'," *The Terre Haute Star*, July 22, 1961, 1.

specter of communism."[112] The public viewed the astronauts as an extension of themselves, therefore, they followed the events of the program tirelessly as an understanding of their patriotism.

Perhaps the climax of the Mercury program, John Glenn's address to Congress was simple yet elegant, capturing his audience of congressmen for the entire seventeen minutes. One reporter who witnessed the speech described it by saying, "He held senators and representatives of the United States, the most important government in the world, as spellbound as Boy Scouts hearing how the scoutmaster killed a nine-foot snake."[113] The same reporter described Glenn as an "uncomplicated symbol," the perfect embodiment of what Americans wanted in their heroes, as they showed intelligence and stature without coming across as pretentious or arrogant.[114] This speech was significant as it tied NASA's success in space very close to the American government. In describing the availability of the data gathered from the *Friendship 7* flight, Glenn said, "The launches are conducted openly and with the news media of the world in attendance. Data is released as it is available and evaluated. This is certainly in sharp contrast with similar programs conducted elsewhere in the world and raises the peaceful intent of our program above suspicion."[115] Without naming the Soviets directly, Glenn alluded to the secrecy within the communists' program while putting the American program on a pedestal to be held in awe by all.

From the beginning of the Mercury program in 1958, the press frequently made comparisons between the American and Soviet programs, as was natural given the nature of the

[112]Launius, *Reaching for the Moon*, 63.
[113]Dora Jane Hamblin, "Applause, Tears and Laughter and the Emotions of a Long-ago Fourth of July," *Life Magazine*, March 9, 1962, 34.
[114]Hamblin, "Applause, Tears and Laughter," 35.
[115]Glenn, "John Glenn Handwritten Speech to Congress," 3.

space race as a form of proxy war. Through the use of the *Life* exposés, the astronauts became the personification of the program as well as the nation as a whole, thus linking victories in space to the system of democracy. The accessibility to the astronauts and their lives provided by *Life Magazine* allowed Americans to feel as if they knew the astronauts personally, holding their love of God, family, and country closely while contrasting them to the nameless, faceless communist program.

Conclusion

In many ways, the Mercury program was unlike anything the United States had seen before, as it turned the eyes of the world upward and ventured into space, but perhaps the most unique aspect of the program was the unwavering, unquestioning support it received from the general populace. For five years NASA held the American people spellbound as they followed every step of the program with the faithful investment of a small-town sports fan, tracking every injury, roster change, victory, or loss with eager expectation. Yet despite the myriad of setbacks in the first half of the program, when NASA was in many ways a technological liability, the program was seldom questioned by the American people. What kept the people invested through it all was not the success of the program but the portrayal of the seven astronauts through the press and NASA's publicity efforts.

By playing off the imagination of Americans toward space, combined with the fears of the Cold War, NASA shaped the perception of the astronauts to be the saviors of the nation and champions of space. Out of this, the astronauts became the face of NASA and diverted the attention of the public away from the technological mishaps that were occurring so that they would focus on the positive aspects of the program, namely, the astronauts themselves. Subsequently, the press quickly picked up on people's investment in the program and found that

negative reporting was unnecessary to hold the interest of their audience, so they continued to build up the fame of the astronauts. Rather than viewing the popularity of the astronauts as a given, as if their popularity was sustained naturally and without any other influence, it is beneficial to look at the way the press coverage of the Mercury program as a whole affected the perception of both the astronauts and NASA. In doing so, one can look at the mythical status of the astronauts as a constructed persona, manufactured to garner greater support from the American public during a time of great consequences for the United States in the Cold War context.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Benedict, Howard. "New Era Dawns for U.S. and World." *The Sumter Daily Item*. February 20, 1962. https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zosiAAAAIBAJ&sjid=vKkFAAAAIBAJ&pg=1374%2C3382420.

Carpenter, M. Scott, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Virgil I. Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan B. Shepard, and Donald K Slayton. *We Seven*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1962.

Cooper, Gordon, and Bruce B. Henderson. *Leap of Faith: An Astronaut's Journey into the Unknown*. Avalon Library, 2018.

Cooper, Gordon. "First Rocket We Will Ride." Edited by LIFE Magazine. *LIFE*, October 3, 1960. Google Books.

Glenn, John. *Letters to John Glenn*. Houston, TX: World Book Encyclopedia, 1964.

Glenn, John. "John Glenn Handwritten Speech to Congress After Friendship 7 Flight." Speech, Washington, DC, February 26, 1962, Ohio Memory Collection.

Glenn, John, "If You're Shook up You Shouldn't Be up There." *LIFE*, March 9, 1962. Google Books.

Glennan, Keith. *The Birth of NASA: The Diary of T. Keith Glennan*. NASA History Series. 1993. https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4105.pdf.

"Grissom Has Narrow Escape; Craft Sinks." *The Palladium-Item*. July 21, 1961, 1. https://indianastatelibrary.newspapers.com/image/252892053/?terms=%22grissom%22%20mercury&match=1.

Hamblin, Dora Jane. "Applause, Tears and Laughter and the Emotions of a Long-ago Fourth of July." *Life Magazine*. March 9, 1962.

Grissom, Virgil. "It Was a Good Flight and a Great Float." *LIFE*. July 28, 1961. Google Books.

"Hoosier on Space Trip List." *The Indianapolis Star*. April 10, 1959. 1. https://indianastatelibrary.newspapers.com/image/105717761/.

LIFE Magazine. "The Astronauts – Ready to Make History." *LIFE*. September 14, 1959. Google Books.

LIFE Magazine. "Seven Brave Women behind the Astronauts." *LIFE*. September 21, 1959. Google Books.

"Mitchell Hails Hometown Space Hero; Family and Father 'Relieved It's Over'." *The Terre Haute Star*. July 22, 1961. Indiana State Library.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration. *Mercury Astronaut Team.* Washington, DC. April 9, 1959. https://history.nasa.gov/40thmerc7/presscon.pdf.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration. *Post Launch Report for Mercury-Atlas No. 1 (MA-1)*. Project Mercury Space Task Group. Washington, DC. August 2, 1960. https://tothemoon.ser.asu.edu/files/mercury/mercury_atlas_1a_postlaunch_report.pdf.

"Science: Sage of the Liberty Bell." *Time Magazine*. July 28, 1961. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,938191-1,00.html.

"SPACE: Lead-Footed Mercury." *Time Magazine*. December 5, 1960. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,895065,00.html.

"SPACE: The Man." *Time Magazine*. March 2, 1962. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,939868-1,00.html.

"SPACE: The New Ocean." *Time Magazine*. March 2, 1962. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,939866-1,00.html.

United States. Department of State. Historical Office. United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences. (1963). *Documents on International Aspects of the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, 1954-1962: Staff Report.* Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off.

Universal Pictures Company. "Newsreels: 1962 Year in Review – Headlines." January 1, 1963. https://www.buyoutfootage.com/pages/titles/pd_nr_038.php#bottom_synopsis.

Universal Pictures Company. "Universal Newsreels, Release 60." July 24, 1961. http://ezproxy.taylor.edu/login?url=https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1787214?account_id=25244&usage_group_id=90659.

Secondary Sources:

De Groot, Gerard J. *Dark Side of the Moon: The Magnificent Madness of the American Lunar Quest*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006.

George Leopold. 2016. *Calculated Risk : The Supersonic Life and Times of Gus Grissom, Revised and Expanded*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1259106&site=ehost-live.

Henriksen, Margot A. *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

Higgins, Will. "When 2 Mercury Astronauts Tried to Keep Their Indy 500 Entry Under Wraps." *The Indy Star*. May 24, 2017. https://www.indystar.com/story/life/2017/05/16/when-2-mercury-astronauts-tried-keep-their-indy-500-entry-under-wraps/100878104/.

Launius, Roger D. "Heroes in a Vacuum: The Apollo Astronaut as Cultural Icon." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2008): 174–209. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20700214.

Launius, Roger D. *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race*. Yale University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrcxzx.

McCurdy, Howard E. *Space and the American Imagination*. Smithsonian History of Aviation Series. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997.

Swenson, Loyd S., James M. Grimwood, and Charles C. Alexander. *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury*. Washington, DC: National Aeronautics And Space Administration, Nasa History Office, Office Of Policy And Plans. n. d. Accessed September 4, 2022. https://history.nasa.gov/SP-4201/toc.htm.

Werth, Karsten. "A Surrogate for War—The U.S. Space Program in the 1960s." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2004): 563–87. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41158096.

Webb, Sheila. "The Consumer-Citizen: 'Life' Magazine's Construction of a Middle-Class Lifestyle Through Consumption Scenarios." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (2012): 23–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416397.