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The Space Celebrities of the Astronauts Corps

One has fond childhood memories of lying flat-backed on the evening grass, a web of fingers as a rubric for the stars. With dreams of finding a connection between space and our mortality, one can develop a lifelong fascination with space and its exploration. Therefore, witnessing astronauts fly to the moon during one's childhood left an indelible mark. However, President John F. Kennedy's ambitious proposal to travel from the Earth to the Moon in a decade (1961 – 1972), amidst the Vietnam and Cold Wars, pushed the American space program into hyperdrive. As a result, the men who needed to take us there would undergo considerable life changes. This paper will discuss the identity shifts over time among a selection of the most significant contributors to the US space program astronauts. Finally, the facts will reprove the impacts of print and broadcast coverage on their personal and professional lives throughout reporting.

Competition is fierce when forced to innovate, particularly in the face of war and politics. However, one aspect people can relate to within uncertainty, especially globally, is a hero, someone, or something to support and intrinsic to belonging. Specifically, when the news broke of the first successful Earth orbit by the Soviets, President Kennedy did not have an overt focus on the "space race." The president was keenly aware, however, that the timing to put a man on

the moon was ripe "to regain credibility, to make himself viewed as a 'leader' again, to revive the American spirit, and most important[ly], to beat the Russians" (Keltner *From Myth to Metaphor* 23).

Print news and television were a novelty of the time and could provide global entertainment; however, between politics and government, the attitude was "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." As such, the President could effectively restore *his* identity with the news media's help. Further, the realities of war would hopefully fade as global audiences would be riveted to the screen, tuned in to "the Apollo program, space exploration, [and] man stepping foot on the Moon, returning safely to Earth" (Keltner *From Myth to Metaphor* 24). Little did President Kennedy realize, however, that he invited an era of media "space culture," creating its breed of heroes to suit the needs of the press.

Under the spotlight of the dominant reporting pundits of the 1960s, those chiefly affected by identity and by the press, aside from NASA itself, were astronauts Alan B. Shepard, Jr., Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Neil Armstrong, Jr., James "Jim" Lovell, Jr., and John Glenn. The American press was determined to create "mythical gods of space," and as Damjanov and Crouch agree, "profusely disseminated through television, magazines, and newspapers, the exploits of the astronauts in particular revived the heroic figure of the explorer" (Damjanov and Crouch *Section: Assembling Space Celebrity*). In addition, as we will explore, NASA had an extensive public relations campaign to keep their astronauts at celebrity status, from lavishing perks to demanding public appearances (Sherrod 16-17).

Alan B. Shepard and Virgil "Gus" Grissom

Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom were two noted astronauts on the Mercury and Gemini space missions for entirely different reasons. Shepard was known as the first American to fly into

outer space, cast to immediate star status, and celebrated with a visit to the White House and ticker tape parades (Stamm 6). Further identity change came through Shepard's lost flight status due to a severe and protracted battle with Ménière's disease (Altman 14). Determined to maintain his identity as an astronaut, he underwent an experimental surgery that could have left him with permanent hearing loss. *The New York Times (The NYT)* and several others pressed hard with coverage on the issue, with *The NYT's* Altman reporting that Shepard's surgery was a success, and Shepard returned to full flight status as an astronaut. (Altman 14).

Conversely, Gus Grissom received as much notoriety, if not more, after losing his capsule in the Pacific Ocean. For example, initial investigation and media coverage led one to believe this was Grissom's doing, only for his name to be later exonerated; sadly, this detail never came to light (Leopold 101). Sadly, his identity forever changed when he made the ultimate sacrifice during a communications check disaster for the Apollo 1 mission. Moreover, the media, unfortunately, focused more on the negatives of Grissom's NASA career than the original mission of space exploration and his accomplishments.

From an identity perspective, Guss Grissom's wife attached herself deeply to that of her late husband, indeed as an astronaut's wife within the "club." Still, she was quickly ostracized when she filed a civil wrongful death suit against NASA's main engineering contractor, North American Rockwell, to recover damages over the explosion during the Apollo 1 catastrophe, resulting in her husband's death (Callahan 1). In addition, a *NYT* article published decades later details Betty Grissom's objections to the exhumation of her late husband's Apollo 1 space capsule, to which she remained strongly connected, citing that the capsule should stay in its original state. (*Astronaut's Wife Fights Plans to Retrieve Mercury Capsule A21*). By osmosis, the crews sometimes concentrated on eclipsing NASA's accomplishments with their career feats;

the person of the astronaut became the focal point and not the process itself. As such, when things were good, all print and media ads centered on the glowing star of the astronaut. Conversely, when something went awry, the media negated NASA's work, dragging the astronauts down. (Boot 2).

Neil Armstrong, Jr.

For example, the first man ever to land on the moon, Neil Armstrong, was quickly identified by the press as "God-like," known forever from that era as a veritable Columbus of space exploration (Hsu 4). Before becoming an astronaut, Armstrong identified as a NASA engineering test pilot. While he was successful in his engineering role, Neil Armstrong's life would not have been recognized with such accolades had he not been part of the space program. Despite losing his toddler daughter to cancer, Neil remained a focused, unflappable man dedicated to honoring his late daughter within his work. As he left the moon, his identity again took on a new dimension, naming a small piece of the moon after his daughter, "Muffie's Crater," and leaving a legacy for her and his family (Barbree 45).

Again, with each mission milestone achieved, media coverage would grow or decrease depending on its significance. For example, when the Apollo 13 mission launched, NASA had become a back-burner piece, coined by *The Hill* as "boring; nobody wanted their soap operas or game shows interrupted to watch another pair of heroes bouncing about the lunar surface (Whittington para 4). As a result, media coverage of space exploration virtually died.

James "Jim" Lovell, Jr.

Upon entering the NASA space program in 1962, Jim Lovell identified as a US Navy pilot by trade. (Kluger 188). Lovell may have enjoyed some notoriety that came with initial press coverage but certainly did not bargain for its effects. Lovell flew in the Gemini 7, Gemini 12,

Apollo 8, and Apollo 13 missions, of which Apollo 13 established his identity within the press and popular culture. (Kluger 337). The rupture of the service module tank of the Apollo 13 mission thwarted landing on the moon and put the lives of the crew in jeopardy, creating dramatic press and sealing the identity of the astronauts, whatever the outcome. As shown, to suit the demands of the networks and public opinion, the media initially had little to no interest in the Apollo 13 mission until the astronauts' lives were in jeopardy. After that, coverage would dramatically change, as would Lovell's identity.

Touted as a hero due to a safe landing after the now infamous "Houston, we have a problem," Lovell had to accept his legacy as one of the successfully failed missions that did not set foot on the moon. (Hagerty 2). Finally, evidenced in a 2016 *MIT News* interview, Lovell emphasized that he now identifies stress and problem-solving in a different light, stating that without a positive attitude, he would likely still be up there. "Crises don't bother me anymore. I just look at them and figure out how to get out of them, and that is it" (Chu 2).

John Glenn

Perhaps John Glenn was most affected by the NASA "space celebrity" identity and the media, and the astronaut who held the most professional and pop culture titles: Marine Corps pilot, decorated war hero, engineer, astronaut, senator, and presidential nominee (Glenn and Taylor 557). Glenn was one of the original seven selected to put a man in space and fly the Mercury missions, and one of the first Americans to orbit the Earth (Launius 185). However, as former NASA Administrator Charles Bolden comments in a 2016 interview on the day of Glenn's passing, Glenn never flew again until 1998, as President Kennedy prevented him from doing so given his iconic and beloved status; he could not "risk putting him [Glenn] back in space again" (*Nasa Remembers* 6:40-7:00).

A familiar public face of NASA, Glenn was “most fawned upon by the press and most lionized by the public” with his electrifying personality (Launius 177). However, the oldest man to fly in space (Wild 1) may never identify with anything other than the husband and father outside the capsule. For example, an incident related to Glenn’s family occurred that was all but favorable. Due to several scrubbed missions of Glenn's Mercury-Atlas 6 in 1962, Vice President Johnson pressured the family to support NASA with a press conference to boost public opinion and ratings. To persuade the family, Vice President Johnson leveraged his executive power with *LIFE* Magazine, which had negotiated mandatory press junket contracts with the astronauts and their families. (Sherrod 18).

Unfortunately, Glenn's wife, Annie, is sensitive about an overt stuttering problem and refuses to subject herself and the family to a public interview. (Koppel 3). As a result, an identity change occurred overnight for Annie due to the press coverage. Moreover, NASA threatened to pull John Glenn from the flight rotation within the astronaut flight crew if the interview did not go forward. (Koppel ch 7). The incident resulted in Annie Glenn’s refusal to give the interview on principle and John Glenn retaining his flight order status. (Koppel ch 7).

As proven, press coverage of the NASA astronauts had an ebb and flow to satisfy the time's political and socioeconomic demands. As chronicled above, these events affected identity in the private and professional lives of the great men and their families chosen to pioneer as astronauts. Although all who flew in the NASA space program experienced some form of identity change due to media attention over their tenure, the above were the most reported and highlighted within the “golden pioneer days” of the space program.

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