



At the movies

The final frontier...



No doubt "The Right Stuff" is mythic stuff. It's the story of America's last jockless (male) heroes, the seven married Mercury astronauts who grabbed for the cosmic brass ring, rocketing America into an exciting, giddy space race.

The film's advertisement tells us it's the story of "when the future began," sounding strangely like "I've seen the future and it works" — which if you remember Warren Beatty's "Reds," was John Reed's reference to the Bolsheviks. And like the first reds, the Mercury astronauts were the vanguard of a revolution, taking manned flight and language from "the outside of the envelope" to "the final frontier."

But — the question begs (or rather nags) — is "The Right Stuff" presidential stuff?

Much has been made of the fact that one of the astronauts portrayed in the film is presidential candidate John Glenn, played by Ed Harris, is better looking and five going on 10 years younger than the real Glenn was at the time, and that the movie Glenn is much less uptight and thus more appealing (if no less sanctimonious) than at least the John Glenn we see in Tom Wolfe's book.

Could it be that a younger, now-of-voting-age generation will discover and fall in awe with a glamorized Glenn? And that the older generations will rediscover a

man who, despite all the hype (which is one of the movie's main themes), was truly heroic, one of the most worthy knights of Kennedy's "Camelot"?

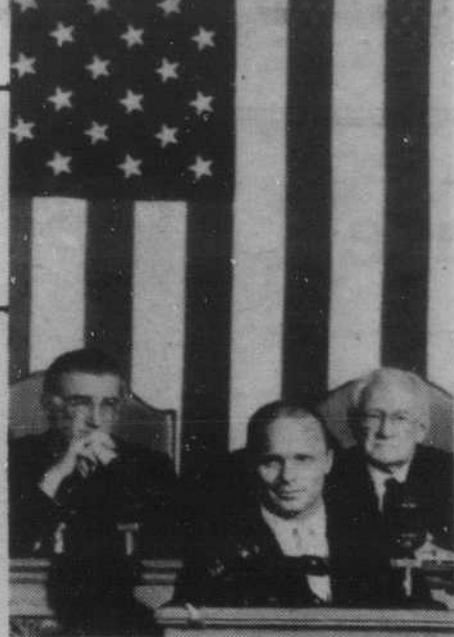
By the way, the first American sent into space in reality and in "The Right Stuff" was a chimpanzee. Now what does that mean if a potential president is upstaged by a monkey?

But back to "The Right Stuff." This is a big movie (over three hours long) made from a big book (nearly 500 pages long) that is well worth seeing merely for what may be the best and most smoothly coordinated flight sequences in film: a combination of documentary footage, studio shots, visual effects by Gary Gutierrez, and breathtaking space vistas of Mother Earth so effective that each part is indistinguishable from the whole.

In "The Right Stuff," director and screenwriter Philip Kaufman has synthesized a rambling, raucous epic, distilling and retaining its major ingredient — that is, the right stuff itself.

And the guy with the rightest stuff of all is Chuck Yeager — played Gary Cooperishly by playwright Sam Sheppard — the "fighter jock" who broke the sound barrier in the late 40's, and whom the original screenplay left out altogether.

After Kaufman shows Yeager to have been the apotheosis of the right stuff, he deflates the astronauts, showing them to be squeaky clean, virtuous media images on one level, and on the other to be boozers making the most of astro-groupies, and the



"The Right Stuff," a movie about the seven Mercury astronauts, is advertised as being the story of "when the future began."

least of already failing marriages. (Glenn is the conspicuous exception here.)

The independent "fighter jock" personalities of these astronauts are brought together and subjected to the sterile "team-player" world of the NASA laboratory. There they live like lab rats, under the yoke of prodding-and-testing, humorless scientists. Yeager himself ridicules the astronauts and the capsules, calling them "spam in a can."


One viewer who weathered the long lines of the film's premiere summed up the triumph of the astronauts and of the film itself: "They were a lot more human than I thought they would be."

"The Right Stuff" is not all grim, grueling struggle, not at all. When Kaufman leaves the slow, old-west, John Ford landscape of Yeager's wild blue yonder for the stainless steel of Cape Canaveral, he faithfully retains the book's slapstick, wacky, irreverent, jazzy verve. There are, in short, a lot of scenes that will make you laugh in "The Right Stuff," and John Glenn is in one of them.

Brooks Dareff



Current presidential hopeful John Glenn, played by Ed Harris, is portrayed in the movie as the astronaut who actually fit his squeaky-clean image.



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