

Come On, Give Us The Secret!

By Charles McDowell Jr.

WASHINGTON

The time has come for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to make a full disclosure of the facts, and we don't mean the scientific and human details of John Glenn's orbital flight. They have been disclosed just fine.

What we want now are the facts about the personnel-testing system or whatever it was that led to the selection of this man.

American industry is waiting to hear exactly how NASA hit upon John Glenn. Madison Avenue is waiting to hear. Hollywood and Broadway and several colleges that need presidents are waiting to hear. The Democratic and Republican parties are waiting, too, and they are breathing hard.

Come on, NASA, how did you start with a whole nation to pick from and come up with John Glenn?

Most people have read that you sorted out 500 more or less qualified pilots five years ago. Most people can imagine how you evaluated their experience and tested their skill, knowledge, intelligence and reflexes, and even their courage.

But how did you know that he could make that speech to Congress?

How did you test him for ticker-tape parades?

How did you know, NASA, that he could talk about his mother and the flag and faith and always keep it from getting out of hand by telling a joke on himself?

Humility and Pride

How many test pilots can do that, and hit the right balance between humility and pride, and answer a Senate committee's questions without looking bored or uncomfortable, and look like everyone's vision of the American hero all the while, and have a wife who looks exactly right, too, and put the Vice President or Caroline Kennedy at their ease, and smile steadily for a week without seeming to force it once, and speak in grammatical sentences, and somehow give off the preposterous impression that he is just like all the rest of us?

Some of us wouldn't have thought, off hand, that there was anyone like that. But there was, and you found him, NASA, and unless you consulted witch doctors you owe us all a frank explanation. If it was witch doctors, break it to us slowly.

John Glenn was a pre-selected hero. NASA knew five years ago that the first American to make an orbital flight was going to become at least a Lindbergh, and NASA knew exactly what a Lindbergh in the age of television was going to go through.

If psychological testing produced John Glenn, then the fantastic advances in psychological testing are comparable to the advances in space science. If psychological testing played a small role—if ordinary mortals using their common sense picked this man—then somebody ought to say so and put the psychological testers in their place.

A Great Secret?

Come on, NASA, speak up. If you have discovered a great secret of personnel selection, let the country know about it.

Your system could revolutionize our business and industry, education, entertainment, foreign relations and politics. We could come up with professional baseball players who could go abroad as ambassadors. Our teen-age singing idols could lecture in the schools on Eighteenth Century poetry and atomic physics. Our politicians not only would play in symphony orchestras, but they would make speeches full of quiet inspiration and humor about themselves.

John Glenn made a great impression on the politicians in Washington, by the way. All of them expressed the highest admiration for him, and more than a few mentioned how glad they were that he wasn't running against them this year.

After his speech to Congress, we noticed several Republican leaders in animated discussion, nodding now and then toward Colonel Glenn. Do you have any reassuring words, NASA, for Messrs. Nixon, Rockefeller, Goldwater and Romney?