

John Glenn's Space Reflight -- ten years ago, but politics still fresh

Jim's October 30 advisory to his news media clients:

1. This week is the tenth anniversary of John Glenn's second space flight -- on the shuttle mission STS-95. See [here](#) and [here](#).
2. Since Glenn's first mission was America's first orbital flight in project Mercury, in 1962, it seems a long, long time ago.
3. But the controversies and lingering bitterness over Glenn's second flight are in many minds still as fresh as the current presidential campaign. See my 2000 UPI story.
4. Glenn campaigned to get himself added to the crew of a science mission that had an extra seat. He wanted NASA to study his idea that the physical effects of aging might be related to some of the physical effects of space flight -- and better understanding of the two processes might improve treatments for both.
5. The idea was flakey from the start -- NASA had derisively rejected proposals in the mid-1980s to fly a 75-year-old friend of Reagan as a medical test subject -- but it got the blessings of the White House. And the NASA hierarchy jumped to obey.
6. In hindsight, all the medical promises of the idea, and associated experiments added to the flight, never panned out. Nothing useful was learned except that older people in good shape could endure the stresses associated with the shuttle's launch and landing -- stresses that are far gentler than other spacecraft such as the Russian Soyuz.
7. Glenn performed competently and honorably on the flight, and most folks thought it was a 'neat gimmick' to reward America's first man in orbit, especially because politics back in 1963 grounded him (JFK didn't want to risk losing a hero on a later flight), before a home fall injured him and medically disqualified him from further flights.
8. White House support for his second mission in 1998 could have been based on a number of logical considerations. His flight occurred during the mid-term elections, and was particularly exciting to older people.
9. Glenn had also earned a big chit from the White House the previous year with his blocking of the investigation into Chinese contributions into the 1996 election. The U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs could have granted immunity to witnesses, allowing them to be compelled to testify about higher-ups in that activity -- but Glenn refused to approve the immunity, much to the relief of anybody who might otherwise have been named. The Republican chairman of that committee was Fred Thompson.
10. Glenn denounced the whole process of influence-peddling for campaign contributions (what the Republicans were trying to pin on the White House, but due to the lack of witness immunity, without direct supportive testimony). He told newsmen he had come to the conclusion that "the only way we finally and at last clean up our campaign finance at the Federal level is by public financing of our campaigns." That was then, this is now. Oh well.
11. In recent days, Glenn has been campaigning for Obama in Ohio. His main message to voters is not to be too concerned about any extreme promises, such as strong trade protectionism, because Obama is too smart to actually do such things but has to say it to whip up the party's base.
12. As for his shuttle flight, the public remembers it fondly but astronauts I've talked

with remain bitter about the political pressures and phony medical breakthrough promises Glenn used to get aboard.

13. Glenn has always denied any overt 'deal' with the White House, and there need never have been such a spoken agreement. But he certainly knew how to earn credits from the political forces who had to approve -- or at least, not disapprove -- of his campaign to fly again. He had learned politics well.