

# Return of the Lost Spaceman: America's Astronauts in Popular Culture, 1959–2006

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IN JULY 2005, A PERIODICAL CALLING ITSELF “THE WORLD’S ONLY RELIABLE newspaper” broke the story that an American military aviator secretly rocketed into space in 1958 had finally returned to Earth. During his forty-seven years in orbit, Air Force Colonel “Hot Diggity” Corey had not aged a single day. In a brief exclusive, the *Weekly World News* described Corey as an uncomplicated, uncommunicative man—child utterly oblivious to the enormity of his journey through space and time. In his debriefing, Corey merely apologized for dozing off in orbit and registered his delight at the prospect of being crewed with one of the new, female astronauts on his next flight (Siegel 24). The very first question Corey had asked upon returning to Earth, though, had concerned the availability of popsicles. When told that they still existed in the year 2005, the simple-minded, skirt-chasing space monkey responded, simply: “Hot diggity!” (Siegel 25).

Stories “in which ordinary people . . . grapple with bizarre forces” often grace the cover of the *Weekly World News*, as do stories that twist the historical record in a satirical way (Bird 43). Why, though, is this particular gag news item so funny? For one, it flatters American readers’ hurt pride at not orbiting the world’s first human being. It also mocks spaceflight enthusiasts’ fondness for counterfactual narratives. Most importantly, though, the story of “Hot Diggity” Corey brutally satirizes a particular professional class—America’s pilot-astronauts of the early 1960s—and makes it clear that their kind no longer exists. In Corey’s flight, readers see, exaggerated, some of the absurdities of astronaut culture; they also see fifty years of effort by government and

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private industry to manufacture heroes and sell the idea of human spaceflight to the American people.

When the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced the selection of America's first group of spacefarers in 1959, it settled on men of few words: military test pilots whose flying skill and willingness to endure discomfort in the service of exploration marked them as public heroes. In 1969, these and subsequent astronauts fulfilled a challenge put to them by President John F. Kennedy to land on the Moon and return safely to Earth before 1970. While American astronauts walked on the Moon, though, the human spaceflight program was already undergoing a transformation. By December 1969, budget pressures had forced the cancellation of follow-up Moon missions (Lyons), and many of the "pilot-astronauts" who joined the space program in the late 1950s and early 1960s were resigning. The scientific community pressured NASA to increase its scientific return, and as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, an organization structured around the abilities of pilot-astronauts yielded to pressure to open the ranks of its flight crews to other kinds of people, including academic scientists. These new astronauts challenged the Astronaut Office's internal dynamics and complicated its public profile. Later, as the first private citizens flew in space decades later on the Space Shuttle, the nation looked ever wistfully to its aging veteran spacemen. This article suggests that the repeated, often troubled reconceptualizations of the astronaut—as pilot, scientist, average citizen, and, finally, domestic caretaker—reveal the close connection between public image-making and the most controversial evolutions in American human spaceflight policy.

## The Astronaut in Popular Culture

Popular culture about astronauts exploded with the accelerating Space Race, supplementing long-standing science fiction literature with semi-accurate portrayals of real-life space travelers. Relative openness was a design feature of the American human spaceflight program; while the Soviet space program generally concealed most details about its vehicles, personnel, and flights, the American endeavor made a particular effort to communicate to the whole world through a diverse range of popular media, including *Life* magazine. Astronauts were

dependent upon favorable public relations both for their jobs and for their “standard of living”: they shared in the royalties of exclusive press contracts for their life stories (Cunningham).<sup>1</sup>

Having thoroughly examined the role of state actors in spaceflight (McDougall), historians have recently turned to the role of popular culture in galvanizing extraterrestrial exploration (B. Kevles). Popular culture about space was not confined to state-sponsored propaganda; public enthusiasm for spaceflight was commonplace in both the United States (McCurdy) and the Soviet Union (Siddiqi) during the early years of exploration. Journalists debated space issues in the press, popular entertainment addressed the latest spaceflight controversies, movies romanticized and dramatized dangers, and corporations hawked spin-off products and timely marketing tie-ins (Baldaia). Hardly mere hired hands, even astronauts entered the public arena both to support government programs and to manipulate them. Eventually, space fiction became mass-market blockbuster entertainment. Like spaceflight and space fiction, cultural studies has emerged from “its modest beginnings in the 1950s” to become a diverse and potent discipline (e.g., Horrocks 22), and just as the study of mass communication continues to gain traction (see, e.g., Agee et al. 1982), spaceflight historians and popular culture scholars are increasingly examining the cultural nexus between space exploration and the public will.

Additionally, while many journalists and scholars have dissected public images of astronauts, most of these analyses focus on the fertile decade of the 1960s, when the mythology surrounding the astronaut first emerged. Equally interesting, though, is the changing image of the “spaceman” over subsequent decades, as the geopolitics of superpower competition, Cold War-era science, and the tastes of a clever and cynical public collided in the making of America’s newest kind of popular hero.

### The Public Astronaut: 1959–65

Early in director Philip Kaufman’s 1983 film adaptation of Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff* (1979), two hapless bureaucrats (played by Jeff Goldblum and Harry Shearer) pitch potential astronauts to a skeptical President Dwight Eisenhower in late 1957. The proposed candidates include a variety of daredevils and circus performers whose principal

qualifications appear to be their comfort with heights and the fact that they “already have their own helmets.” While no evidence suggests that NASA ever seriously considered selecting circus people as its first astronauts, nor was it obvious that they needed to be aviators. The scene from *The Right Stuff* suggests a larger problem in the early years of spaceflight—defining what, exactly, astronauts should be.

Instead of circus people, America drew its first seven astronauts—at Eisenhower’s insistence—from the all-male ranks of its military test pilots. NASA presented them to the public on April 9, 1959—two years before any of them actually flew—in a coming-out party disguised as a press conference. In the conference, humorously dramatized in the film adaptation of *The Right Stuff*, sympathetic reporters pepper the new astronauts with softball questions on various controversial topics, like their degree of religious observance and pride at being Americans. NASA’s intention had been to satisfy American anxiety with a slate of clean-cut, all-American family men. The press mostly accepted and parroted this characterization of the astronauts (Cunningham 211, et seq.), suppressing reports of adultery and boozing that often followed them (McCurdy 88–91). To the chagrin of some within NASA, though, the astronauts eventually received the lion’s share of the space program’s public attention (McCurdy 88). Though intended to serve as representatives of a large national technical endeavor, the astronauts—and not the program’s scientists, engineers, or managers—quickly became its popular face.

The test pilots that formed the early astronaut corps were not the nation’s most established or experienced. Rather, as Tom Wolfe wrote, they were status-conscious junior officers laboring at the bottom of an all-male pilot hierarchy. Their world was a hypermasculine one emphasizing ability to handle danger and discomfort without excessive verbalization or visible emotion. In the space business, women were largely absent, except as wives, mistresses, or support staff. For American human spaceflight’s first decades, there was little movement inside of NASA to increase women’s role in spaceflight. In 1961, thirteen female pilots were examined as potential astronaut candidates, unofficially and only briefly (Ackmann; B. Kevles). Spaceflight remained, at least publicly, a distinctly male preserve dominated by masculine discourse and traditional gender roles, very much like the military world that had birthed it (Cohn; Scott 48). Like any group of military officers in wartime, the astronauts were males tasked with manly responsibil-

ities, supported, wrote *Life* magazine in 1959, by “brave wives” who tolerated their risk-taking, and in whom the entire country could take pride (McCurdy 91).

While astronauts did not always view themselves in such highly gendered terms, theirs was as exclusive a fraternity as any in America, with all of its unseemly connotations. The astronauts referred to themselves as “Deke’s boys,” after Chief Astronaut “Deke” Slayton (Cunningham 285), and reveled in drinking and misogyny, insulting colleagues, for example, by comparing them unfavorably to female secretaries (Shayler 108). A certain amount of philandering was also to be expected. Deke, acting like a head coach, warned newly selected pilot-astronaut Cunningham and his colleagues that they were “big boys now”: they would “all . . . get a lot more play from the girls” and if they planned on “screwing around” they had “better be damn discreet about it (Cunningham 210).” The media was complicit in the concealment of such dalliances, portraying the astronauts as clean-cut heroes.

In *The Right Stuff*, Wolfe demonstrated that the carefully crafted public image of these men had been fabricated to conceal a more perplexing reality (T. Wolfe). Instead of public personalities, he found taciturn, foul-mouthed, hard-living risk-takers confident in their abilities and desperate to impress their peers. Ironically, some of the very public test pilots who dominated America’s space program in the 1960s often had very little to say, either to outsiders or to each other. If Tom Wolfe’s *Right Stuff* describes a culture of stolid risk-taking among the earliest astronauts, Norman Mailer, in his 1970 book, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, describes certain Apollo astronauts as interesting largely for their near total lack of visible affect. Many of America’s space heroes, Mailer writes, were sphinx-like and impenetrable even to their own families, rarely excited, seldom given to self-expression, and at times, distant (Hansen; Mallon). “Buzz” Aldrin, Lunar Module pilot on the pioneering Apollo 11 mission, Mailer wrote, admitted to rarely ever engaging in “free exchanges of sentiment” with Commander Neil Armstrong even during months of training (Mailer 334), much of which had been spent standing side-by-side in a compartment the size of a small bathroom.

Popular depictions of astronauts in the 1960s blended the real and the unreal. Media products emphasized the astronauts’ competence, rugged masculinity, and unique fortitude of character, but in their

quiet resolve, found chivalry and duty instead of carousing and lechery. Astronauts make frequent appearances on Rod Serling's innovative, surrealistic fantasy series *The Twilight Zone* (1959–65), bravely confronting new worlds, loneliness, and death. In "Death Ship," one noteworthy episode from 1963, the ghosts of three astronauts stubbornly refuse to acknowledge mounting evidence that they have already perished, and stoically determine to keep flying (P. Wolfe 100, 25). Larry Hagman's Major Nelson, from the television comedy *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), is a capable Air Force pilot who manages to do his duty despite good-natured interference from Jeannie, a temptress he found in a bottle on a beach after returning from space.<sup>2</sup> Images of the stolid, altruistic, superhuman astronaut persisted well into the mid-1970s, by which time the astronauts on which these characters had been based had retired. Colonel Steve Austin (Lee Majors), from the *Six Million Dollar Man* (1974–78) was an astronaut nearly killed in the crash of an experimental vehicle. Government scientists reassemble him as a cyborg who serves his country secretly, with unique courage and superhuman strength.

Astronauts, these media products declare, are, unlike their real-life counterparts, either too busy for women or, due to their risky work, not meant to find love. For the frightened, isolated astronauts of *The Twilight Zone*, wives and girlfriends are distant memories. To the stolid Major Nelson, women are a distraction. His single-mindedness proved part of his appeal; Nelson's eventual marriage to Jeannie in the show's fifth season received poor ratings and presaged the end of the series months later (Cox 191). And for Colonel Austin, no "normal" woman could be a proper mate. The astronauts in these media products espouse a "virginal ideal" intimately connected to their elite professional world. As Vivian Sobchack writes in "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film":

These virginal astronauts . . . tend to be more corporate than corporate. Indeed, it is their interchangeable blandness, their programmed cheerfulness, their lack of imagination, their very banality . . . that makes them heroes, that gives them that aura of mechanical competence which insists that nothing can go wrong, that everything is A-OK. . . . Offscreen or on, these men who figure in our public myths neither appeal to prurient interest nor really seem to have any. (Sobchack 108)

The spaceman cannot love, but he can fight. The theme of astronaut as stolid, mythic warrior was a common one from the 1960s through the 1980s; motion picture depictions of astronauts often ascribed to them military skills no real astronaut was expected to possess. The astronauts in the James Bond spy thriller *You Only Live Twice* (1967) fight their captors with expert hand-to-hand combat. Later, in the 1979 Bond film, *Moonraker*, Shuttle astronauts are laser-armed space warriors who help capture an enemy orbital outpost. In 1982's *Firefox*, an advanced Soviet fighter plane is stolen by a punch-throwing, tough-as-nails American pilot (actor/director Clint Eastwood) so skilled that one Soviet Air Force general assumes the thief must be a "NASA Astronaut." Only spaceflight's public visibility made it unlike combat: in one conversation with President Kennedy, astronaut John Glenn is said to have likened astronauts to soldiers who must accept, in addition to the dangers of public service, the indignities of public notoriety (Cunningham 194).

In *Space and the American Imagination*, Howard McCurdy explains how images like these helped establish the "aura of competence" surrounding spaceflight during the 1960s. By appearing to be an organization that could get things done, NASA increased popular confidence in both the space program and government as a whole, a powerful argument for the space program's continuation despite its high cost (McCurdy 84). Astronauts figured prominently in these calculations; selfless and skilled as aviators, they personified the competence of the space program and so thoroughly represented American values—courage, service, faithfulness—that any failure on their part would have reflected poorly on the nation that produced them (McCurdy 92). The American people, McCurdy argues, became invested in the astronauts' success in an endeavor treated as a national security emergency (McCurdy 106).

Both NASA and the astronauts themselves conspired to cultivate their notoriety (McCurdy 91). *Jeannie* is a particularly good example of the voluntary cooperation between media and government in astronaut image-making: NASA vetted scripts for the series and collaborated with associate producer Sidney Sheldon to ensure accuracy and keep the show "on message."<sup>3</sup> From the earliest days of Project Mercury, NASA's astronauts, too, leveraged their visibility to ensure that human piloting remained central to the space program. They found themselves under siege on two fronts: from NASA engineers who sought to place them in

automated capsules designed for expendable lower-order primates, and their fellow test pilots, who regarded the astronauts as little more than laboratory monkeys (Catchpole 160)—“spam in the can.” Various popular and academic accounts seize upon astronauts’ supposed antipathy toward apes and computers, but while the attitudes of pilot-astronauts toward primate research and capsule automation are difficult to generalize, astronaut memoirs tend toward measured, professional skepticism (Slayton and Cassutt 67). A close reading of *The Right Stuff* reveals that astronauts were afraid of apes not because they were more competent in the cockpit (Haraway 138), but because a vehicle that an ape could “fly” was more apt to fail catastrophically and held no professional interest for trained pilots. Imagined conflicts between astronauts and either apes or computers, though, are obligatory in popular materials about spaceflight.<sup>4</sup>

In such works, the astronaut emerges as an archetypal figure representing the very best of mankind—resourceful, brave, and destined for leadership. In 1968’s *Planet of the Apes*, based on a French novel by Pierre Boulle, a mechanical glitch lands American astronauts on a future planet in which humans have been enslaved by hyper-evolved gorillas, orangutans, and chimpanzees. Astronaut George Taylor (Charlton Heston) destabilizes the ape society through diplomacy, wit, and physical prowess. By movie’s end, we find Taylor, clad only in a loincloth, on horseback with his rifle and mute wife, ready to take the planet—Earth—back from a bunch of “damn dirty apes.” Part Adam, part Abraham, part Moses, part ape himself, Astronaut Taylor is the symbolic father of reborn humankind and a liberator of slaves. He proves once and for all that anything an ape can do, man can do better.<sup>5</sup>

### Scientists can Fly: 1965–72

To support the growing needs of the lunar program, NASA selected additional groups of pilot-astronauts in 1962, 1963, and 1966. The 1959 and 1962 groups consisted entirely of graduates of military test pilot schools, and test pilots dominated later selections. For these pilots, quiet confidence in their abilities—and often bitter private competition for flights—substituted for a professional “moral economy” (Kohler). Behind closed doors, pilot-astronauts ruthlessly jockeyed for position, often dismissing or denigrating colleagues to improve their



own standing. “If you can’t say anything good about someone,” pilot-astronaut Walter Cunningham reminisced, “don’t hesitate” (Cunningham 112). Astronauts aggressively promoted themselves as pilots, and potential colleagues perceived as lacking flying skills were subject to derision.

By 1965, though, NASA’s Astronaut Office was unable to resist pressure from America’s scientific community—including NASA’s own scientific leadership, to broaden participation to working scientists. Astronaut selections in 1965 and 1967 specifically recruited civilians with doctorates in engineering, medicine, or one of the natural sciences. Most had no flying experience, but were taught to fly jet aircraft as part of their NASA training. The new “Science Pilots” of 1965 and 1967 would face a difficult challenge—acclimating themselves to the ways of the Astronaut Office while maintaining their professional identities as working scientists. As the new face of American “space science,” they would need, as well, to become convincing public spokesmen for NASA’s often haphazard scientific efforts. This task would prove nearly impossible, and the broadening of astronaut selection to include the scientists undermined NASA’s carefully crafted image.

Many in the public took an immediate dislike to them. In science fiction of the late-1960s, the scientist aboard a space vehicle was invariably a helpless and untrustworthy figure,<sup>6</sup> and so a real-life space program that would blast “mild-mannered assistant professor Myron Schwartz” to the Moon, was, to author Lois Philmus, “Lunar lunacy” (230). Her 1966 mock-history *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Moon* poked fun at bumbling pilots “Sky” Sawyer and “Wrong-Way” Conners, but saved the greatest sarcasm for the academic—Myron<sup>7</sup>—mistakenly chosen by NASA’s “Scientist-Astronaut Program” to “be a passenger on America’s first moon shot” (Philmus). In one illustration by Natalie Bigelow, Myron—three-feet tall and with the physique of a rhesus monkey—stands between and one step behind the sturdy, gentle<sup>8</sup> flight crew. Of course, monkeys had flown in space and lived to squeak about it, but Myron, it seems, is barely strong enough to survive the trip. Only a colossal error could place him in a capsule next to America’s space heroes.

The “reluctant astronaut” was a common theme in 1960s entertainment (Don Knotts starred in one 1967 iteration of the concept), but the real concern to many was NASA’s serious consideration of

underqualified personnel for high-prestige missions. The mere fact that NASA would seek to broaden its ranks in this way could only be the result of political pressure—why would NASA seek to shatter the “aura of competence” it had worked so hard to maintain? Robert Altman’s 1968 film *Countdown* earnestly hypothesized on the dangers that might ensue if a committed but under-trained civilian pilot (played by James Caan) were chosen to land on the Moon over a more-qualified military aviator played by Robert Duvall. “Who’s going to help him on the Moon?” Duvall’s character shouts, as Caan stumbles off a lunar lander mockup during training.

If civilian pilots could not be trusted to be first on the Moon, scientists seemed to have no place there at all. In Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke’s novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, scientist-astronauts are literally dead weight. Dispatched on a voyage to Jupiter, they are frozen and vacuum-packed before launch, to be thawed upon arrival. En route, the ship’s computer decides that the mission would be better accomplished without interference from these eggheads and murders them. The two pilots accompanying the frozen crew, though, prove much harder to kill. They are immediately recognizable as asexual military-astronaut-types (Sobchack 108): they jog, shadowbox, and give bland press interviews, and are utterly unflappable in the face of a homicidal computer in deep space. The film ends shortly after the emotionless hero, astronaut/warrior David Bowman, has engaged in the equivalent of hand-to-hand combat with an IBM System/360 mainframe computer.

Despite their relative weakness in the Astronaut Office, the scientist-astronauts were unnerving to pilot-astronauts precisely because they undermined the pilots’ carefully constructed image. The pilots “quickly decided that the new breed was inferior,” wrote Cunningham, and feared that the presence of these “milquetoast academic types” would signal that many more people could be astronauts than actually were (Cunningham 285). An organization that habitually distinguished military test pilots from military operational pilots found the scientist-astronauts a “luxury”—and a liability; the American public, Cunningham feared, “might not know the difference, or even care” (Cunningham 284–85). In fact, scientist-astronauts were as white, male, and athletic as their pilot counterparts, and despite Cunningham’s concerns, the scientists were neither accepted as pilots nor valued as scientists.

Astronomer Brian O'Leary (1967) resigned from the astronaut corps in 1968 during jet training. He recoiled at the danger and wondered why it was necessary. Among the answers Deke Slayton provided was that Soviet nonpilot cosmonauts tended to get sick in space, a comment that seemed to label scientists as weaklings (O'Leary 68). When Slayton asked O'Leary why he wished to resign, O'Leary responded that flying jet aircraft wasn't his "cup of tea" (O'Leary 198). The remark seemed to confirm every criticism the nation had voiced about the scientists—they were weak, spoiled, and maybe even a little feminine. Even the manner in which they expressed themselves bore this out; O'Leary's verbal insouciance stood in stark contrast to the speech patterns of Slayton, a man so given to halting grammar and foul language that "people who knew him cringed every time he got near a microphone" (T. Wolfe 143). To O'Leary's chagrin, Slayton repeated this private comment to the press, an act that appeared calculated to embarrass him (O'Leary 200–01).

In an opinion piece appearing in the *New York Times* in 1970 and his subsequent memoir, *The Making of an Ex-Astronaut* (1970), O'Leary summarized the complaints of many of his colleagues at the time. With all of the active-duty astronauts bound by a contract with Time-Life controlling their life stories, none could afford to be as brutally frank in their observations (O'Leary 84). Several other scientist-astronauts, including Chapman (1967) and Curtis Michel (1965), also complained publicly, and eventually resigned (Slayton and Cassutt 211). An article in the *New York Times* concerning Michel's departure in 1969 was entitled "Astronaut Resigns to Pursue Science," a telling indictment of NASA's manned spaceflight efforts ("Astronaut Resigns to Pursue Science").

That so many of the scientists stayed in NASA despite NASA's repeated devaluing of their skills was a puzzle to many; O'Leary concluded that they had been taken in by their own press. NASA arranged field trips to launch tests, for example, cultivating awe in the scientists even as it denied them flying opportunities. The scientist-astronauts—even the skeptical O'Leary—were smitten. He called it "launchitis, that euphoric disease which I temporarily caught when I saw that Saturn go up and which was sufficiently intense to keep me going in the program for the remainder of my six months in Houston" (O'Leary 148). By the end of the Apollo program in 1975, only four of the seventeen scientist-astronauts selected in 1965 and 1967 had flown.

The last of them flew sixteen years after selection on NASA's new Space Shuttles,<sup>9</sup> for which it had issued the first contracts in 1972.

### *Star Trek*, Space Shuttles, and “Averagenauts”: 1972–2006

In February 1972, an unexpectedly enormous group of science fiction enthusiasts descended upon the Statler-Hilton Hotel ballroom in New York City to share reminiscences of a television series whose brief run on NBC had ended in 1969, the same year Apollo astronauts first stepped on the Moon (Papazian 241–44). The series, set in Earth's distant future, chronicled the adventures of a handful of outsized personalities serving in a quasi-military organization devoted to exploration of the galaxy (see, e.g., Kreitzer).<sup>10</sup> Beginning in 1973, the groundswell of enthusiasm for *Star Trek* brought the series' characters back to life in syndicated reruns of the original episodes, an animated series, motion pictures, toys, clothing, and, like Apollo, a commemorative postage stamp. What should spaceflight look like in the late-1970s? Fans of the series provided the answer—on a planet without poverty or social strife, Americans (and the Earth of the future appeared to be dominated by them) seamlessly integrated terrestrial activities with flight into the deepest reaches of the galaxy. *Trek* enthusiasts formed a core of support for NASA; to avoid angering them, the space agency humored their fantasies (B. Kevles 49). When the first Space Shuttle rolled out of the factory in 1976, pressure from *Trek* fans forced NASA to change its name from *Constitution* to *Enterprise*, the vessel that propelled the *Star Trek* cast “where no man has gone before” (Heppenheimer 100–01).

White elite aviators had remained at the helm of *Star Trek*'s space vehicles, average characters in the show could fly in space as passengers. Similarly, crew expertise did not figure as prominently in the publicizing of the Space Shuttle as it had in earlier programs. NASA pitched the Shuttle less as an exploration machine than as a “space truck” and general-purpose laboratory (Broad “Reusable Space ‘Truck’ for Orbit Experiments” 33), challenging to its two pilots but in which almost anyone could ride. In 1978, NASA selected thirty-five additional pilot- and scientist-astronauts to crew future Shuttle missions. NASA had relaxed initial application requirements to draw from as large a segment of the general population as possible, to ensure that capable women and minority candidates—who had filled *Star Trek*'s cast but

had been excluded from NASA's astronaut corps—would be well-represented among the nominees and selected personnel. In fact, the relative comfort and sophistication of the Shuttle, and the lack of anything for most crewmembers to do during launch, re-entry, and landing, created an ideal opportunity in the 1980s and 1990s for relatively untrained personnel (Oberg 124–40)—teachers, journalists, politicians, retired space heroes, foreign dignitaries—to fly in space (Atkinson and Shafritz 140–41, 86).<sup>11</sup>

The broadening of participation in the astronaut corps in the 1980s did not undermine NASA's aura of competence, but it did make its work seem less exciting. The Space Shuttle Orbiter *Enterprise* was a test vehicle never intended to fly in space (Heppenheimer 100–01); subsequent Shuttles were ill-equipped to go anywhere humans had not already been. Instead of a reflection of organizational decay, NASA's invitation in 1984 to fly the first private citizen in space—an elementary or secondary school teacher—suggested the degree of automation and safety NASA had achieved in its flight hardware (Boffey “First Shuttle Ride by Private Citizen to Go to Teacher: Hopes of Others Dashed” A1). At the news conference announcing the teacher-in-space program, NASA administrator James Beggs described the Shuttle as a “benign, shirt-sleeved environment” that “allows a reasonably healthy person to fly there with nothing more than relatively rudimentary training . . .” (Boffey “First Shuttle Ride by Private Citizen to Go to Teacher: Hopes of Others Dashed” A1). Many were struck by this new conception of the astronaut. Russell Baker, evoking a new kind of nostalgia for astronauts of the Apollo era, noted that “the kind of people who look at home in space vehicles . . . always strike me as human slide rules, incapable of error as they are unforgiving of it.” A teacher, by contrast, could offer nothing but “useless curiosity” (Baker 23). What, furthermore, would a teacher's flight say about the glamour and danger of spaceflight? Necessary neither to fly the vehicle nor generate scientific product, commentators noted, a teacher served no obvious purpose in space, taking up a seat better filled by a pilot or more qualified knowledge worker (B. Kevles 105–06).

Criticism of the average-person-as-astronaut program accelerated after the loss, during launch in 1986, of the Shuttle *Challenger* and its seven-person crew—including the first teacher-astronaut, Christa McAuliffe. Fellow astronauts had greeted McAuliffe warily; Bettyann

Kevles recounts that during training for her flight, McAuliffe was instructed by mission commander Dick Scobee not to touch any of the switches in a cockpit simulator (B. Kevles 105–06). *Challenger's* destruction, attributed to a cracked gasket in a solid rocket motor, had nothing to do with the crew's performance, but the incident still reflected poorly on NASA. An aura of dangerous negligence hovered over the agency for the first time in decades; once mocked merely for allowing goofy dunces into its pristine operations, NASA was increasingly criticized for systemic incompetence.

In 1994, an episode of long-running animated series *The Simpsons*<sup>12</sup> blasted inept nuclear plant technician Homer Simpson into space under NASA's fictional program to launch a "blue-collar slob" into orbit. The mythical Space Shuttle that carries him is named *Corvair*, after the automobile Ralph Nader famously described as "unsafe at any speed" (Nader). While Homer's training is grueling, his duties aboard *Corvair* are not. He is accompanied by "veterans": real-life astronaut Aldrin and a fictional pilot, "Race Banyon," borrowed from an earlier animated adventure series. Like a passenger plane, the Shuttle can accommodate up to five "averagenaut[s]" unable to contribute substantially to flying the vehicle, as long as two trained pilots accompany them, and they do not do anything remarkably stupid, like fill the cabin with potato chips or break the experimental ant colony with their bulbous, beer-and-radiation-soaked craniums.<sup>13</sup>

Why had NASA sent a lummoX-like Homer into orbit? Because the public had not supported the previous decades' science-heavy Shuttle flights. At the beginning of "Deep Space Homer," NASA managers struggle to understand the American people's lack of enthusiasm for the voyage of a previous crew comprised of "a mathematician, a different kind of mathematician, and a statistician." Representations like this suggest popular fatigue both with safe, dull voyages undertaken by college professors, and a space program that sought favorable press by providing once-in-a-lifetime trips to single members of select—and often privileged—professional groups. In *The Simpsons*, Homer's flight is at first a public relations coup, but his achievements are soon overshadowed by those of an "inanimate carbon rod" that saves the crew, a joke at Homer's expense, and that of NASA's faulty hero-making effort. In reality, NASA was no more successful cultivating public interest with scientist- and private-astronauts than it had been with test pilots.

Veteran astronauts emerge from “Deep Space Homer” relatively unscathed. By the 1990s, movies were increasingly portraying them as heroes, even as writers poked fun at their spare tires, weak eyes, and gray hair. Director Ron Howard may have begun this trend with 1995’s *Apollo 13*, a meticulously detailed retelling of a real-life Apollo lunar flight. The film lionized 1960s vintage astronauts (especially Jim Lovell, played by Tom Hanks) as problem-solvers who kept their cool when mechanical problems threatened their lives. Fictional space tales soon followed. In *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Space Cowboys* (2000), a gaggle of over-fifty Hollywood leading men—Robert Duvall (seemingly reprising his role from *Countdown*), James Garner, Tommy Lee Jones, Donald Sutherland, and Clint Eastwood play test pilots returning to the cockpit to save humanity from impending disaster.

NASA itself inspired these tales: 1967 Group scientist-astronaut Franklin “Story” Musgrave flew five Shuttle missions until NASA forced his retirement at age sixty-two (Cunningham). In 1998, seventy-seven-year old Senator John Glenn, one of America’s first astronauts, returned to space aboard the Shuttle. On the flight, Glenn served principally as a biomedical experiment; Hollywood’s versions seemingly exaggerate Glenn’s accomplishments, attempting to prove that old, bold pilots do exist, and that they are better than the kids, girls, and eggheads that replaced them. Even Cunningham, writing about Glenn’s flight in 2003, was convinced. In his highly critical 1977 memoir *All-American Boys*, Cunningham had argued that astronauts over forty-five lacked the stamina for spaceflight’s grueling training regimen (Cunningham and Herskowitz 290). Twenty-five years later, though, an older, wiser Cunningham placed his comments in the past tense. “That represents our thinking in the Seventies!” Cunningham remarked (Cunningham 340).

The veterans’ victories in these films are both physical and cultural. While the old pilots in *Space Cowboys* dodge age-related jokes, most of the laughs are on their younger, stronger, healthier colleagues, who prove unable to endure the stresses of spaceflight. In *Space Cowboys* in particular, younger, better-educated astronauts are ridiculed, and the excesses of first-generation spacemen—womanizing, drinking, anti-intellectualism—are celebrated. Some of the old codgers are widowers, and such diversions are played up as evidence of the veterans’ authenticity and continued vitality. Whereas Eastwood, in 1992’s *Unforgiven*, attempted to demythologize the brutal gunslingers he played in a

string of 1960's westerns, *Space Cowboys* is an homage to behavior NASA once tried desperately to conceal, now interpreted as gusto.

## Conclusion

If the return of "Hot-diggity" Corey nearly half-a-century after blast-off reminds Americans how far the Astronaut Office has matured since 1959, it also reminds America of what, perhaps, had been lost. The popular media satirized the image of the first pilot-astronauts almost immediately upon their selection, but however comical test pilots appeared, many of the nation's media gadflies and comedy writers preferred to see test pilots in space capsules over virtually anybody else. Any national endeavor that a scientist, or an average citizen could perform, could not be that dangerous, or worth doing.

In the current Shuttle program, spaceflight is neither an adventure conducted exclusively by the nation's most elite military test pilots, nor a purely scientific pursuit, nor an activity in which all citizens are able to participate. A softened image has accompanied the newest astronauts, who come from a variety of backgrounds and lack the uniformity of physical appearance common in early selection groups. Instead of a steely pilot with a demure and faithful wife, the astronaut ideal has been most recently embodied by recently retired Space Shuttle Commander, Air Force Colonel, wife, and mother, Eileen Collins.<sup>14</sup> Though she is as talented an aviator as any NASA has employed, NASA tried very hard to convince the public that she is also very "nice" (Schwartz), and maternal toward her crews. In the twenty-first century, the new astronaut "plays well with robots," the space vehicle is a thoroughly domesticated environment, and spaceflight itself is "women's work," deprived of adventure, danger, or high return. As the United States, thirty years after Project Apollo's end, prepares once again to send a small number of carefully selected, highly trained individuals to the Moon and possibly beyond, the question of who should fly in space looms larger than ever.

## Notes

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1. In the early years of NASA's human spaceflight program (when the number of astronauts remained relatively small), royalties from these contracts exceeded the astronauts' government salaries, and kept, in the words of "Original Seven" astronaut "Gordo" Cooper, their "heads above water" (Cunningham 192–96).
2. While surrounded by oddball characters (including Nelson's colleague, Major Roger Healy) it is Hagman's Spartan space traveler that is the show's role model, intended to be "one of NASA's best" (Cox 58). Major Healy (Bill Daily), is, by contrast, a pompous extrovert reputedly based on Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Shepard vigorously denied any similarity (Cox 60–62).
3. In one letter to Sheldon, NASA objected to *Jeannie's* emphasis on the lives of military personnel. Wrote NASA Public Affairs officer Walter Whitaker, "[we] try to project the image of the program as peaceful, scientific exploration of space. This is an important part of our international relations" (Cox 58–61).
4. Ape- and computer-related subplots figure prominently in such films as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Right Stuff*, and *Space Cowboys*.
5. The most recent deployment of this imagery, though, hints at cosmic reconciliation. The cover art for folk–rock musician Tom Petty's 2006 album *Highway Companion* features a spacesuit-clad human holding a monkey's hand on a barren planet, their 1950s-vintage rocket visible in the distance. At the end of this long journey, the graphic suggests, the monkey is the astronaut's only friend.
6. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Richard Fleischer's *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966–69), and Irwin Allen's *Lost in Space* (1965–68) are among the many 1960s movies and television shows that featured vehicle crews compromised by creepy scientists.
7. Philmus's choice of a Jewish-sounding name for her protagonist is intriguing. Daniel Kevles notes that American Jews during mid-century were comparatively well-represented in the sciences—one of the few professional pursuits that would have them (D. J. Kevles 210–15, 78–79).
8. The religious homogeneity of the early astronauts has been a standing joke. At the end of Woody Allen's 1971 film *Bananas*, a faux news bulletin flashes across the lower screen announcing that the astronauts have just opened the first "all Protestant cafeteria" on the Moon.
9. By comparison, NASA's "Original Seven" astronauts waited only five, and the highly successful 1962 Group, only three.
10. Another rich bit of Cold War Americana, *Star Trek* has enjoyed its share of critical analysis (see, e.g., Kreitzer).
11. The *New York Times* followed these stunts in excruciating detail (Boffey "Shuttle to Orbit with Journalist: NASA Seeks Applicants Who Want to Fly into Space," B10; Broad "Shuttle is Ready to Begin Mission: 5 Americans, a Saudi Prince, a Frenchman and Mexican Satellite to Be Aboard," A20; Wilford "For Glenn and the Nation, a Trip Back in Time; for Glenn and the Nation, Trip Aboard the Shuttle is a Journey Back in Time," 1; Wilford "Garn, Head of Senate Space Panel, is Chosen to Fly Aboard Shuttle," A1; Wilford "Teacher is Picked for Shuttle Trip: New Hampshire Woman Says She Will Keep a Journal to Demystify Outer Space," 1).
12. *The Simpsons*, written by a rotating team of Ivy League humorists, has become the rare animated television series accorded the status of cultural touchstone—cited, quoted, dissected, and analyzed by scholars (see, e.g., Dobson).
13. An ant colony built by high school students actually flew on a Shuttle flight in 1983, but the ants within it died before liftoff ("Space Ants Died before Takeoff," B2).
14. In May 2006, with the Space Shuttle flying virtually grounded due to safety concerns, Colonel Collins announced her retirement from NASA. She joins a long list of senior astronauts who left the space program once flying opportunities dissolved.

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