



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 20, 2012

John Glenn Marks 50th Anniversary of Historic Spaceflight

Glenn's first spaceflight came nearly a year after Soviet Cosmonaut [Yuri Gagarin](#) had orbited the Earth on April 12, 1961 — a significant escalation in a "Space Race" that began with the U.S.S.R. launching the first satellite—*Sputnik I* — on October 4, 1957. The United States often lagged behind the Soviet Union in the early years of the "Space Race," and accomplishments such as the successful flight of the *Friendship 7*'s three orbits of the Earth were avidly followed by millions of Americans who viewed the heavens as one more contest in the ongoing Cold War.



Now, five decades later, Glenn is one of two surviving astronauts from the first seven astronauts recruited for the Mercury program; Scott Carpenter, the other remaining member of the "Mercury Seven," was the second American to orbit the Earth, and he joined Glenn at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida on February 17 for a celebration of the anniversary. (To this day, Carpenter's connection to Glenn's flight is remembered for two things that he said to Glenn just prior to the launch of *Friendship 7*: "Godspeed John Glenn," and "Remember, John, this was built by the low bidder.")

Glenn is marking the actual anniversary of the flight with his involvement in events today at Ohio State University — including a talk with astronauts on board the International Space Station.

Glenn was not only the first American to orbit the Earth; he also became the oldest person to do so, when he flew aboard the Space Shuttle *Discovery* in October 1998 at the age of 77 — a flight which was ostensibly intended to measure the effects of space flight on the elderly, but which was criticized by some as a "[junket for a politician](#)." Glenn served in the United States Senate from December 1974 through January 1999.

Speaking at the anniversary event in Cape Canaveral, Glenn dodged the question of whether he was a "hero." [As reported by CBSNews](#), Glenn declared, "I think people need heroes.... I don't know whether I am one or not ... but if we can help encourage some of the young people of today in ... their education and technical matters also, it's well worth the effort."

Carpenter, however, took a slightly different approach to the question of Glenn's heroism: "Maybe one day before too long the great hero John Glenn himself may be replaced by another national hero who represents the command of a Mars crew returned safely."

"John, thank you for your heroic effort and all of you for your heroic effort," Carpenter told the Mercury old-timers. "But we stand here waiting to be outdone."

However, if the new national standard in "space heroism" would be the commander of a mission to Mars, Americans may have many years to wait if such a flight is left up to the NASA and the Obama administration. While the President is [proposing over \\$900 billion](#) in new deficit spending in 2013 —



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including, among other things, a 5.5 percent increase in funding for “[arts and humanities endowments](#)” — NASA’s budget for space exploration is among the few items Obama is willing to cut, with [all Mars expeditions](#) beyond a mission scheduled to launch in late 2013 having been cut.

Photo of John Glenn: NASA



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