



# JOHN GLENN, THE COLD WAR, AND AMERICA'S RACE TO SPACE

The Cold War produced a series of complex and impactful dynamics that continue to offer many valuable insights into our current global landscape.

In this [Life Stories Special](#), Jeff Shesol, speechwriter, historian and author of the acclaimed [Mercury Rising: John Glenn, John Kennedy, and the New Battleground of the Cold War](#) discusses the remarkable story of John Glenn and the era of Mercury Rising—highlighting how Mercury, the iconic astronaut John Glenn, and President John Kennedy shaped a new battleground of the Cold War. Shesol's expertise illuminates how the Space Race was intertwined with Cold War rivalries, influencing not only technological advancement but also redefining American identity on the world stage. Understanding this history provides crucial context for navigating many of today's complex geopolitical issues.

## BACKGROUND

John Glenn's story provides compelling insights into our broader understanding of the Space Race in the context of America's Cold War history. Beyond significant advancements in science and technology, Glenn's narrative highlights the influence of popular media, policy, and national pride in shaping public perception of geopolitical challenges.

## INQUIRY QUESTIONS

- Who was John Glenn?
- What was the Cold War? What role did the Space Race play in it?
- Who will be the first man in space?
- Why was the first orbit so important?
- How did space travel shape American identity? Why travel to space today?



Learn more about Jeff Shesol



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## USING THIS LEARNING RESOURCE

The curated interview clips, clearly defined themes (lower-third titles in the video), and discussion prompts offer schools, universities, and communities a flexible and engaging way to facilitate in-depth discussions and learning experiences based on Jeff Shesol's insights and scholarship.



▶ **PLAY PART I: OPENING - 13:52**

▶ **PLAY PART II: 39:37 - 41:40**

### QUESTION ONE: WHO WAS JOHN GLENN?

**Part I Themes:** *John Glenn and the Space Race, Re-discovering John Glenn, Glenn's Background, Religion and Faith, Admiring His Father: John Glenn, Sr., Passion for Flying, Becoming a Combat Flyer in World War II, His Wingman, Glenn's Risk-Taking, Project Bullet*

- Who was John Glenn?
- What do you learn about Glenn's early years and accomplishments that were new or surprising?
- Why do you think his story is important to know?

**Part II Theme:** *Annie Glenn*

- Who was Annie Glenn?
- What insights to John Glenn and to the era does their relationship reflect?



▶ **PLAY PART I: 13:55 - 17:53**

▶ **PLAY PART II: 30:10 - 39:37**

▶ **PLAY PART III: 44:44 - 50:48**

### QUESTION TWO: WHAT WAS THE COLD WAR? WHAT ROLE DID THE SPACE RACE PLAY IN IT?

**Part I Themes:** *The Cold War, Launch of Sputnik I, Soviet Achievements in Space*

- What was Project Mercury?
- Why was it a significant achievement in John Glenn's life?
- What role did Project Mercury play in the early years of the Cold War?

**Part III Themes:** *The Cold War Heating Up, NASA and Safety Concerns*

- How did President Kennedy navigate the escalation of tensions with the Soviet Union at this time?
- Why was the Space Race, its messaging, and its success such a critical part of Kennedy's presidency?

**Part II Themes:** *Vostok 1 and Yuri Gagarin, Fear Fuelling the Space Race, First Americans in Space, The Risks of Space Travel*

- What is your response to Jeff Shesol's perspective?
- What were the National Security implications of the Space Race?
- How did John Glenn and NASA navigate and communicate the inherent risks of space travel?



▶ **PLAY PART I: 17:55 - 30:10**

▶ **PLAY PART II: 41:46 - 44:42**

### QUESTION THREE: WHO WILL BE THE FIRST MAN IN SPACE?

**Part I Themes:** *NASA and Project Mercury, Introducing the First Astronauts, Alan Shepherd, Wally Shira, Scott Carpenter, Deke Slayton, Gordon Cooper, Gus Grissom, John Glenn, Who Will Be the First Man in Space?, The Three Finalists, Life Magazine's Coverage of the Space Race*

- What goals did the United States want to achieve by traveling to space?
- How were the first astronauts selected?
- What was the interplay between the military and the government at this time?
- What media strategies were used to influence public opinion?

**Part II Themes:** *Age and Space Travel, Naming Friendship 7*

- Who can be an astronaut?
- What was John Glenn's perspective on space travel?





▶ **PLAY PART I: 50:12 - 1:06**

## QUESTION FOUR: WHY WAS THE FIRST ORBIT SO IMPORTANT?

**Part I Themes:** *Launch Day Phone Call: February 20, 1962, The Three Orbit Mission, Orbital Flight: A Team Effort, The Heat Shield Dilemma, Returning Home, Democracy, and the Nation*

- What did you learn about space travel from John Glenn's experience?
- What risks were taken by Glenn and by the nation? Were these risks necessary?
- What did John Glenn and his flight restore to the nation?
- How did the nation respond to Glenn's first orbit? What does this response reveal about America during the Cold War?



▶ **PLAY PART I: 1:06 - 1:13**

## QUESTION FIVE: HOW DID SPACE TRAVEL SHAPE AMERICAN IDENTITY? WHY TRAVEL TO SPACE TODAY?

**Part I Themes:** *The Nation Celebration, Glenn Retires from NASA, 1964, Returning to Space at 77, Why Travel to Space Today?*

- What were the human costs of space travel during this period?
- How did space travel shape American identity?
- How did the Space Race and space travel change American foreign policy? How did Glenn's life reflect these changes?
- Does technology still reflect a nation's priorities and ideology? How?

## CONNECT TO TODAY

**Innovation as a National Imperative:** The Space Race demonstrated how a nation can mobilize resources and talent to pursue ambitious technological goals. Today, this underscores the importance of investing in research and development in critical areas such as renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity to stay competitive and address global challenges.

- *How can modern nations foster a culture of innovation and risk-taking to address global challenges like climate change and technological disparities?*

**The Power of National Unity:** The Space Race fostered a strong sense of national purpose and collective effort. In our increasingly polarized society, it reminds us of the importance of finding common ground and working together towards shared goals—be it combating climate change, enhancing healthcare, or upgrading infrastructure.

- *In what ways can governments and communities cultivate a sense of shared purpose during times of division and polarization?*

**Ideological Competition:** The Cold War was fundamentally a struggle over ideologies—democracy versus authoritarianism. Contemporary geopolitics reflect similar tensions, and understanding these dynamics can help us navigate the complex international landscape.

- *How do ideological differences influence international relations today, and what strategies can promote cooperation despite these tensions?*

**The Role of Soft Power:** The Space Race was not only about technological superiority but also about showcasing American values and inspiring the world. This highlights the importance of soft power—using culture, diplomacy, and humanitarian efforts to influence global perceptions and foster alliances.

- *In what ways can cultural diplomacy and humanitarian efforts serve as effective tools for strengthening a nation's global influence?*

**Risk and Resilience:** Project Mercury was filled with uncertainties, yet the willingness to take calculated risks and learn from failures was vital for success. This exemplifies the importance of embracing innovation amidst uncertainty and building resilient systems capable of withstanding setbacks.

- *What lessons from the risks taken during the Space Race can be applied to current efforts in areas like public health or technological innovation?*

**Global Cooperation and Competition:** Although primarily a US-Soviet rivalry, the Space Race laid the groundwork for future international collaboration in space exploration. Today, similar patterns emerge as nations compete and cooperate on pressing issues like climate change and global health.

- *How can countries balance competition and collaboration to effectively tackle global issues such as climate change, pandemics, and space exploration?*