

# 'Right Stuff' Probes American Mystique

By Michael Gallagher  
New York (NC) — "The Right Stuff" (Warners), the film version of Tom Wolfe's celebrated story of the original seven astronauts has become an extraordinary film.

All three-hours-plus of it, aspires to be nothing less than an American epic and it comes so close to fulfilling the expectations it set for itself that the difference hardly matters.

It begins at Edwards Air Base in California in 1947, in the midst of a bleak windswept desert where the families of the men whose job it is to lay their lives on the line for their country for three or four thousand dollars a year have to make do with substandard housing.

As Edwards test pilots try out new planes and equipment and set records, a narrator tells us: "Nobody even knew the pilot's name." Pilots and their wives and their girlfriends hang out at Pancho's, a bar that would fit right into a Western era except for one thing: Its walls are decorated with the photos of dead pilots.

Here at the beginning, writer-director Philip Kaufman gives us the image that sets the stage for an epic.

A tall, solemn-faced man on horseback looks down from a desert hillock covered with sparse growth on the X-1 rocket plane fueling up: Gary Cooper confronting a new age.

The man is Chuck Yeager (played by playwright-actor Sam Shepard). He's already a legend because of his exploits as a fighter pilot, and the next day he'll break the sound barrier in the X-1; but there'll be nothing in the papers about it, far less any headlines or ticker tape parades.

And he'll break that sound barrier, moreover — challenge the demon that sits out there in space — despite sustaining a broken rib when he's knocked off his horse by a cactus limb while in playful-earnest pursuit of his wife, Glennis (Barbara Hershey). That's the right stuff for you.

Yeager and his fellow pilots, including Gus Grissom (Fred Ward) and brash newcomer Gordo Cooper (Randy Quaid), keep on showing the right stuff at Edwards, "pushing the envelope" out a little bit whenever they get the chance, and nobody, of course, pays much attention to them.

Then comes Sputnik,

galvanizing the American space effort.

Ironically, Yeager, the man with the "rightest" stuff of all stays on at Edwards, but Cooper and Grissom volunteer for the rigorous testing process designed to ferret out any hidden physical or psychological disabilities.

At this stage the man destined to be the most illustrious of the astronauts and one who is still very much in the headlines, makes his appearance: John Glenn (Ed Harris).

Glenn is the straight-arrow of the group, a man with a burning sense of purpose, and, in one scene already famous from Tom Wolfe's book, he lashes out at those of his fellow astronauts whom he feels are compromising the integrity of their mission by marital infidelity.

In two later scenes, however, he shows a slightly different side. One is with his wife, Annie (Mary Jo Deschanel); in the other, in a phone conversation, he backs up Annie when she refuses to let Lyndon Johnson comfort her on national television after her husband's flight has been put off because of weather.

In the first scene he reveals a pleasantly depreciating sense of humor and in the second he doesn't hesitate to jeopardize his position by defying a space agency flack who demands that he tell Annie to let Johnson in.

Kaufman has done an excellent job both with the handling of his actors and in translating Wolfe's book into a memorable film that celebrates heroism at a time when in a cynical, jaded era, it seems to have fallen on bad times.

As might be expected in a picture that lasts three hours and 20 minutes, flaws there are. LBJ, for example, whatever his failings, doesn't deserve the clownish depiction he gets here.

Then, too, some of the epic strokes are a bit smudged. Notably a cross-cutting in the AstroDome for the astronauts and their wives featuring a fan dance by Sally Rand — venerable enough, apparently, to qualify as a living national treasure — to Yeager, the lone cowboy, trying to set a new altitude record at Edwards.

Kaufman makes his point but then lingers over it, giving you time to think about how come it's night in



Ed Harris as astronaut John Glenn waves to the crowd during a New York ticker tape parade in "The Right Stuff."

Houston and broad daylight in California. (The two events actually took place 17 months apart.)

Another difficulty is the prominence given to a bit of competitive, if unseen, masturbation between two of the astronaut candidates in

the course of their laboratory tests.

"The Right Stuff" captures an authentic American legend of gallant endeavor in a style that's at once respectful yet exuberant and which never once mistakes warts for substance. It's a lavishly entertaining and most inspiring

film. Because of the unfortunate masturbation sequence, "The Right Stuff" is mature fare, and the U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-III, adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG, parental guidance suggested.

## Capsule Film Reviews

### "Beyond the Limit" (Paramount)

This film version of the Graham Greene novel "The Honorary Consul" (the inane title change is a bad omen that proves true), directed by the talented John MacKenzie and written by playwright Christopher Hampton, is a plodding, uninspired effort, given some merit only by Michael Caine's performance as the hapless honorary consul in an Argentine backwater whom an inept band of revolutionaries kidnap by mistake. Richard Gere, a total mistake as Greene's introspective protagonist, is the equivalent of a large hole at the center of the picture. Because of some extensive nudity, it has been classified O, morally offensive by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R, restricted.

### "Brainstorm" (MGM-UA)

Some altruistic scientists invent a device to enable one person to experience another's thoughts and sensations, and some nasty military types, a portrayal in keeping with the current Hollywood fad, try to take it over for their own purposes. Directed by Douglas Trumbull and starring the late Natalie Wood. A thoroughly muddled film which attempts to get by on special effects. Because of one very brief but graphic sexual sequence, it has been classified A-III, adults by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG, parental guidance.

### "Final Option" (MGM-UA)

Elite anti-terrorist unit battles fanatical peace activists who take over an embassy in this extremely violent and simplistic melodrama directed by Ian Sharp from a screenplay by Reginald Rose. Mediocre entertainment with cardboard characters. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-III, adults, because of its violence. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R, restricted.

## Religious Broadcasting Highlights

Sunday, Oct. 16, (ABC) "Directions" — In Rome, Father Paul Boyle, Passionist superior general, and Luigi Barzini, author and historian, examine the changing papacy since Pope Pius XII's death 25 years ago. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

Sunday, Oct. 16, (CBS) "For Our Times" — CBS presents a program about the journey for peace in the Middle East. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

Sunday, Oct. 23, (ABC) "Directions" — ABC examines a major religious news story. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

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Sunday, Oct. 16, (SPN) "World Report" — NC News presents a weekly report on news of religion and ethical and moral concerns. (Please check local listings for exact time and cable channel in your area.)

Sunday, Oct. 23, (NBC) "Guideline" — The first of two programs with the "Incomparable Hildegard," a singer and entertainer, is aired.

Sunday, Oct. 23, (CBS) "For Our Times" — Today's program highlights the growth of the American Orthodox community. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

### Radio

Sunday, Oct. 16, (NBC) "Guideline" — The first of two programs with the "Incomparable Hildegard," a singer and entertainer, is aired.

## BOOKS

# 'Nuclear Ethics' Probes The Case for Pacifism

"Nuclear Ethics," by Father David Hollenbach, S.J. Paulist Press (New York, 1983). 100 pp., \$3.95.

### Reviewed

By Anne Bingham

NC News Service

Among the books proliferating on publishers' lists about appropriate Christian responses to the arms race is this slim volume that makes a case for the pacifist position. The writing is

wonderfully lucid and concise, a joy to read despite the gravity of the subject matter, and the book would be very helpful to any adult who wants to catch up on the issue.

The author looks at the origins of both pacifism and the just-war theory and points out that the latter, in its original formulation, was not a legitimization of violence and war but a theory of exceptions to the general obligation to non-

violence, to be applied only when all other avenues for the pursuit of justice have failed.

Father Hollenbach asserts that both pacifism and the just war theory bear witness "to an essential part of the Christian mystery" and that the church needs both traditions to teach authentically.

In history, he writes, "it is simply not possible to embody the fullness of the kingdom of God in a

single form of life or a single ethical standard."

Having said that, however, he goes on to argue for nuclear pacifism on the grounds that the effects of even the most minimal nuclear strike far outweigh any possible good that could be achieved.

His discussion of deterrence, which includes careful examinations of no-first-use, unilateral disarmament and other strategic stances, ends on

a more ambiguous note, but several positions, including those of Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia, Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen of Seattle and Michael Novak, are dissected carefully.

Father Hollenbach, who serves on the board of directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America, teaches moral theology at the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass.

As mentioned earlier, he is a splendid writer and apparently a careful editor as well. The text appears to be free from typographical errors (although I didn't look closely at the chapter notes), something few books in these days of slushy publishing have achieved.

(Anne Bingham is managing editor of the Allied Industrial Workers International Union and a frequent contributor to the Catholic press.)