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Pal Smurch Would Never Make It Today

James Thurber once wrote a story about a garage worker from Iowa, who, using special, floating auxiliary gas tanks, becomes the first man to fly nonstop around the world. The story is called "The Greatest Man in the World" and is set in 1937. In the story, Jack ("Pal") Smurch, for such is the aviator's name, is the kind of guy who is not hard to get to know. Emerging from the plane at the end of the flight with a now empty gallon of bootleg gin, Smurch is ready to tell the world that he has put one over on Lindbergh and is set for the parties and the big money. During the flight, however, a tremendous popular feeling has welled up for Smurch, and to preserve national decorum and international amity, he is hustled off to a special debriefing session with leading congressmen, selected members of the press, and the President of the United States. But as the session proceeds it becomes only more and more obvious that Smurch will never grasp the ethics of heroism. And so, when he strays over to an open window to listen to the newsboys shouting his name in the street far below, at a grim nod from the President, he is pushed out, falling to what is immediately mourned as a tragic, accidental death.

Less extreme measures for promoting national decorum and international amity are sufficing for the space age. We were lucky with Lindbergh, but we do not have to rely on luck any longer. Despite his undeniable daring, Thurber's Pal Smurch would never have made it as an astronaut. The space age has the advantage of picking its heroes and it is evident that this advantage is being put to good use. The natural ability of the astronauts in achieving laurels is matched only by their natural ability in accepting them gracefully. Lieutenant Colonel John Glenn, it is generally agreed, behaved as ably in his appearances before the nation, and before the world, as he did when operating the Friendship 7 spacecraft.

The space program is supposed to demonstrate something about the character and power of this country, and the virtues of the astronauts, of course, are not the whole of this demonstration. As Glenn pointed out in his address last week to the joint meeting of Congress, it is of more than passing interest that the information gained from these flights is available to all nations and that the launch was conducted openly with reporters from all over the world present. It would have been a bit difficult, of course, to conduct the launch secretly, but this does not mean that we are making the best of a bad situation but rather that we are dramatizing a good one.

If we now find ourselves sailing this new ocean, it is because we believe that our successes will hearten us and our friends and will give our foes second thoughts. To point this out is not to deny that these successes have something to do with the advancement of science. In his address to Congress, Glenn also touched on the scientific aspect of the space program and reminded us that knowledge begets knowledge. But if the funds for the space program had been allocated solely for the advancement of science, they might have been spent a bit differently. The way these funds are presently allocated it is as though the new Cultural Director at the White House were given a very generous sum for the support of music and spent it all on grand opera.—J.T.