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# John Glenn's Big Disappointment: Running For President

By [HOWARD WILKINSON](#) (/PEOPLE/HOWARD-WILKINSON) • JAN 17, 2020

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*John Glenn and his wife Annie greet supporters at Glenn's campaign headquarters on Feb. 5, 1984, in Keene, N.H.*

JIM COLE / AP

There are so many people who have known the late John H. Glenn, Jr. – fighter pilot, Mercury astronaut, United States Senator from Ohio – who believe he would have made a very good president of the United States.

I agree.

But while he probably would have been a successful president, he wasn't that good at being a presidential candidate, which is something of a prerequisite for the job.

Glenn ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984, putting himself forward as a candidate who could run and win against the Republican incumbent, Ronald Reagan.

As a reporter for the Cincinnati Enquirer, I went to New Hampshire, the first primary state, in February 1984 for the express purpose of covering the Democratic primary and, most importantly, the campaign of our U.S. senator.

The New Hampshire primary is a politics reporter's dream to cover.

It is a small state – you can drive from the Massachusetts border to Dixville Notch in the northern tip in a few hours.

And, in the two New Hampshire primaries I covered (1984 and 1988), I encountered several blizzards that would have ground the entire state of Ohio to a screeching halt. But, in New Hampshire, blizzards were but a minor irritation; the road crews had the highways nearly spotless within a couple of hours.

And, being as small as it is, New Hampshire was just crawling with presidential candidates. You could hardly turn a corner without running into one.

But by the time I flew into Boston and got a rental car for the short drive to New Hampshire, John Glenn's campaign was on its last legs.

The senator – despite being an historic, iconic figure for being the first American to go into space and orbit the Earth 22 years before – had one last chance to keep his presidential ambitions alive – the New Hampshire primary on February 28, 1984.

I arrived the week before the vote. It had barely been a week since Glenn was stunned by the results of the Iowa caucuses. He had finished a distant sixth in a crowded field; the establishment candidate, former Vice President Walter Mondale, smashed all the competition in Iowa.

When I finally caught up with Glenn and his wife Annie in the southern New Hampshire town of Nashua, he was putting on a brave face, but I could tell he knew his campaign was in deep trouble.

Annie Glenn, one of the kindest, most gentle people I have met in politics, probably put it best when she stopped at the Small World Day Care Center in South Nashua to greet parents as they picked up their kids.

"All you can do is grit your teeth and keep going," Mrs. Glenn told me.

Her husband was up in Keene, N.H., that day, but he joined his wife the next morning in Nashua, where the Glenn campaign had arranged for a free lunch, open to all, at a Nashua VFW hall.

John and Annie Glenn were gracious hosts, greeting all the hungry voters and sharing a lunch with them.

The candidate and I talked for a while and he told me that he was trying to get a message through to New Hampshire voters that may have escaped the Iowa caucus-goers. It was on signs and banners hung in the VFW Hall: *John Glenn: More than just an American hero.*

He wanted desperately for people to understand that he was not just the astronaut who risked his life circling the Earth in a tiny Mercury capsule. He was a U.S. senator, deeply involved in serious national and international issues and well respected on Capitol Hill.

"Nobody ever said this was going to be easy," Glenn told me. "All I can do is keep plugging away."

The pundits were saying he lost so badly in Iowa because his campaign relied too heavily on TV advertising and too little on the face-to-face, close-to-the-ground retail politics that Iowa (and New Hampshire) voters expect out of their presidential candidates.

But that kind of retail politics was never John Glenn's strong suit. He never seemed to enjoy the back-slapping, baby-kissing, shake-every-hand-in-sight kind of campaigning.

It was not that he was unfriendly – he was a very friendly man. He enjoyed talking one-on-one with people and he enjoyed making speeches. He was very much still the small town boy from New Concord, Ohio, where people did not push themselves on to others. Where humility mattered.

That's not New Hampshire.

Hundreds of Ohio volunteers – including then-governor Richard Celeste – showed up in New Hampshire to greet voters on street corners and in the bars and restaurants of dozens of towns.

I remember Celeste walking down a street in Manchester, tailed by a bunch of local kids who seemed to think this tall man was running for president. *Kids, run home and bring your parents*, Celeste told them, repeatedly.

They never did.

In the meantime, Glenn was going into restaurants and veterans' halls all over the state, talking with voters.

He wanted them to question him about foreign policy, about the national debt, about the economy, about science and technology. Instead, he usually got a slew of astronaut questions.

*Did you get dizzy orbiting the Earth?*

*Were you claustrophobic in that little capsule?*

*How did you go to the bathroom?*

*Did you really drink Tang in space?*

The ones who really frosted him were the ones who thought he was the first man to walk on the moon.

*No, he would say, that was another astronaut – Neil Armstrong. He's from Ohio, too. I was the first American to orbit the Earth.*

Glenn would answer them all politely. And then look somewhat crestfallen when he would walk away.

All of this happened to be going on while a movie, *The Right Stuff*, based on Tom Wolfe's book about the Mercury astronauts, was playing. Everyone wanted to talk about that, too.

Glenn – who was played by actor Ed Harris in the movie – tried to avoid the subject of the movie, even though he was, rightfully, portrayed as a brave and decent man.

It got under his skin, though, that there was a scene in the movie where the astronauts were having medical tests done. They were all shown – from behind toilet stall doors – giving semen samples. It wasn't graphic at all; and it was played for laughs.

Glenn didn't like it.

"I don't really think it's appropriate to show us like that," Glenn said. "That was just a minor part of what we had to do to become astronauts."

But, for some reason, some of Glenn's Democratic opponents, started making fun of him as "Mr. Right Stuff," which Glenn thought was denigrating what he did for his country.

He boiled over on the subject at a debate among the eight Democrats at St. Anselm College, a Benedictine school near Manchester. It was a big moment for all of the candidates.

Glenn lit into Jesse Jackson for continually calling him "Mr. Right Stuff."

"Jesse, you know I came from the period when Martin Luther King had the right stuff and he was working for it. And John Kennedy had the right stuff."

Then, he started mimicking the thick Southern accent of Sen. Ernest "Fritz" Hollings of South Carolina, a long-shot candidate.

"There's been some laughs at my expense," Glenn said, accusing Hollings of ridiculing his Mercury flight.

"He's talked about me ' being in the *cap-suwl* up there' ... there were a lot of folks back then, working in a lot of different areas – academic and scientific and civil rights – and it was a time when we were moving ahead.

"And I'm very proud of having had some of the right stuff in those days, thank you very much."

It was like a benediction on his campaign for the presidency.

Four days later, Glenn came in third with about 12 percent of the vote. The surprise winner over Mondale, the early favorite, was Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado.

Glenn's campaign limped along for another month before he called it quits.

Four years later, there was much talk about that the Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis, would name Glenn as his running mate. It didn't happen.

It was the end of Glenn's presidential dreams.

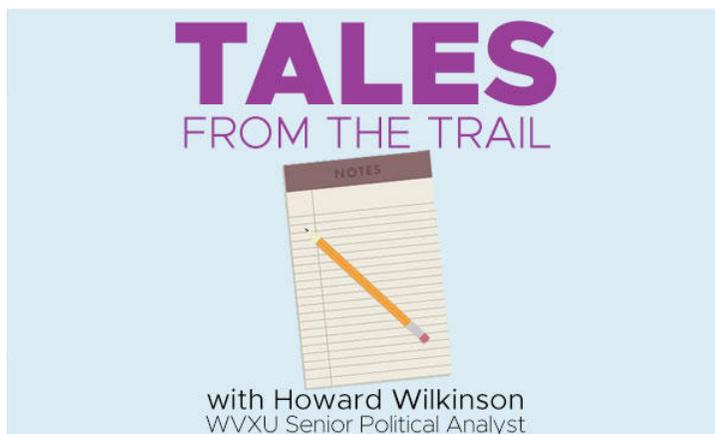
But it was not the end of John Glenn.

In October 1998, after retiring from the Senate, he became the oldest person to fly in space when he was a crew member of the space shuttle Discovery for nine days.

He was 77 years old at the time.

No doubt about it, senator. You had the right stuff.

*This story was first published on Feb. 2, 2019.*



***Tales From The Trail*** is Howard Wilkinson's weekly column that gives a behind-the-scenes look at his more than 40 years covering the campaigns, personalities, scandals and business of politics on a local, state and national level.

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