

Gordo

Leap of Faith: An Astronaut's Journey Into the Unknown

Gordon Cooper with Bruce Henderson
HarperCollins / 279 pages / \$25

REVIEWED BY
Thomas Mallon

Large as they loom in memory, there wasn't a six-footer among them. Strictly a matter of regulations: each of the Original Seven Mercury astronauts had to be able to get into a capsule small enough to make orbit with just an Atlas rocket providing the boost. And if the astronauts' famously simple monikers—Scott and Gus and Gordo—also mark them as belonging to an earlier, small-town generation, it's useful to remember that Scott and Gus and Gordo were actually Malcolm (Carpenter), Virgil (Grisom), and Leroy (Cooper)—not so far removed from their nineteenth-century grandfathers who'd crossed the prairies and mountains.

Only four remain from this group of men who, at one point forty years ago, were getting 14,000 fan letters a day. Shepard and Slayton are recently gone, three decades after the *Apollo 1* fire killed Grissom. Over the last dozen years, a shelf of memoirs has appeared, for the most part hasty, ghostwritten affairs that have added less than they should to the serious history of manned space exploration, an effort that—from Shepard's suborbital launch to the departure of *Apollo 17* from the moon—lasted a little less time than Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. With *Leap of Faith* it's Gordon Cooper's turn to tell his part in this grand adventure that now seems more long ago than far away.

Cooper was the youngest of the Seven, six years junior to John Glenn. A cocky

Sooner, he's usually described, in the others' books and now his own, as a "good stick-and-rudder man," a guy so full of beans and himself that he buzzed Hangar Sat at Cape Canaveral a day before his first launch, so exasperating Project Mercury's operations director that he nearly lost his mission. But on May 15, 1963, Cooper took his place in *Faith 7*, so coolly confident atop the rocket that he fell asleep during a hold in the countdown.

In the course of his 22 1/2 orbits (total flight time five minutes different from Lindbergh's), the capsule lost electrical power, gyroscope function, and the automated control system. And what agonized radio cry did Gordo issue over these multiple calamities? "Things are beginning to stack up a little." He brought himself down manually, landing so close to the carrier he didn't even need the helicopter.

Two years later he crammed himself into *Gemini 5* with Pete Conrad, a gap-toothed, antic character who died in a motorcycle accident only the summer before last. Fearful of headline writers, NASA made them cover the "8 Days or Bust" slogan on their mission patch until they actually managed to complete the whole 191 hours in their claustrophobic two-seater. (The higher-ups hadn't liked the name *Faith 7*, either; NASA LOSES "FAITH"! was the unpleasant 288-point possibility that Deke Slayton recalls in his memoir.) The landing, this time, was a

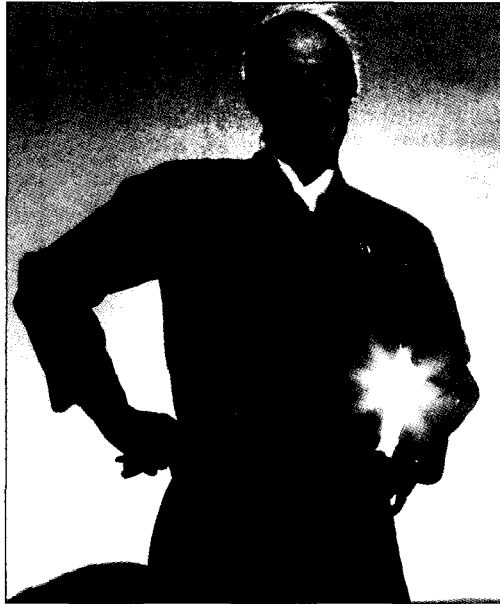
hundred miles off: "The genius mathematicians and astronomers who went through all these computer gyrations to

give us formula for our reentry had calculated that the Earth rotates 360 degrees per day when in fact it rotates 359.99 degrees. When you multiply the times 120 revolutions in eight days, it gets to be a significant figure. So we had loaded into the computer the wrong reentry calculation." It remains even thus: Last year

unmanned Mars Climate Orbiter was probably lost through a similarly bone-headed piece of programming.

Cooper, the only child of an Air Force colonel, grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma, a half mile from the airport. Amelia Earhart and Wiley Post dropped in on his father, and Gordo himself started flying before he was old enough for a license. While hotdogging, he watched out for the local FAA man's black Packard, and "when we needed gas, we did what was common practice among pilots then: kept an eye open for a gas station. When one came along, we'd land on the road, taxi up to the pump, and say, 'Fill 'er up.' Then we'd zoom off."

The storytelling possibilities here, and from Cooper's test-pilot days at Edwards Air Force Base, are considerable, but he's pretty much ghosted out of existence in *Leap of Faith*. Much of the book is soporific, and, to take one example, a description



of how his Atlas booster “stood in the pitch lark like a lone sentry, eerily bathed in columns of white light thrown skyward by huge spotlights”—sounds pretty adventurous and high-falutin’ for a guy whose ‘twang’ we’ve always heard about. By now Tom Wolfe owns the Original Seven as surely as Tennyson does the Light Brigade, and all the shorthand IDs for Wolfe’s *Right-Stuff* ensemble players show up here. Carpenter is the “poet”; Shepard has his “ruthless” side; and Glenn is a “born politician.” It doesn’t help that in the course of boilerplating *Leap of Faith*, the writer makes at least one big programming error of his own: that Atlas booster dropped into the Atlantic, not the Pacific, on that May morning in ’63.

Fortunately, a few solid new pieces of trivia await the space buff. As “the first lifetime nonsmoker in space,” Cooper turned out to consume only a fraction of the Mercury-capsule oxygen required by Shepard and Schirra. And he came closest to dying the day *after* he splashed down near Hawaii. Asked to drop an Armed Forces Day tribute, from a helicopter, onto the new Arizona memorial, he “released the wreath, and in my still somewhat weakened state, nearly popped out the door with it. Only a crewman’s strong grasp saved me.” Finally, he reports on a visit to JFK’s Oval Office, where he was kidded by NASA bureaucrats about having been spotted with some girls in a bar near Cape Canaveral. “Observing this banter from his rocking chair nearby was President Kennedy. A few minutes later he got up, came over, and whispered in my ear, ‘You and I have the same problem.’”

Leap of Faith has, alas, a surprise sales angle. This, the publicity states, is one astronaut memoir that will take the reader “into the government world of UFO cover-ups.” Oh, brother. Now, it’s true that Cooper has always had a soft spot for this stuff. My falling-apart copy of 1962’s *We Seven* (“by THE ASTRONAUTS themselves”) has him carefully stating that “there have been far too many unexplained examples of unidentified objects sighted around this earth for us to rule out the possibility that some form of life exists out beyond our own world.” Forty years later, throwing caution to the windlessness of space, *Leap of Faith* takes up the subject in a gloriously green-cheesy way:

“
So coolly confident was
he atop the rocket that
he fell asleep during a
hold in the countdown.

I would be the last American to fly alone in space.

But had I really been *alone*?

Cooper now says that he and his Air Force squadron buddies saw flying saucers over Germany in 1951: “They moved at varying speeds—sometimes very fast, sometimes slow—and other times they would come to a *dead stop* as we zoomed past underneath them.” He has other evidence, too: A “good friend” who was at Roswell in ’47 assured him that what they recovered there “sure wasn’t a weather balloon,” and somebody else showed him photos of “a classic saucer, shiny silver and smooth.” Like the Babushka Lady’s camera in Dealey Plaza, these pictures were soon, supposedly, confiscated—same as some film Gordo himself shot from *Gemini 5*. “‘Son,’ the president [LBJ] said somberly, ‘I ordered it classified.’” Years later, at a NASA reunion, the fellow who seized the film nervously explained things to Cooper: “You had the most magnificent pictures of Area 51”—which the astronaut characterizes for non-*X-Files* viewers as the place “where top-secret black-budget research, development, and flight testing, perhaps using reverse technology from captured extraterrestrial vehicles, was rumored to be taking place....” In 1978 Cooper asked a U.N. panel to coordinate data on UFO encounters “to determine how best to interface with these visitors in a friendly fashion.” In a rare demonstration of good sense, the U.N. failed to follow up.

By about page 200, a reader begins to worry that Gordo may soon be claiming to have had a second meeting with Amelia Earhart. Actually, it’s worse. He tells of his association twenty years ago with someone

named Valerie Ransone, who claimed to receive signals from “a ‘space civilization’ of beings more advanced than humans”—a “physically exhausting” process for her, and frustrating, too, since the messages “sometimes reached her at inconvenient times—such as while driving or in the shower—when she had no way of writing down the often technical and detailed information.” I can’t find a single reference to Valerie Ransone on the Web, but I’ll take Gordo’s word for her existence—even if I can’t take hers for *Theirs*.

It’s not that They aren’t out there. Recent, proliferating discoveries of planets in orbit around stars—another ten were announced early in August—almost guarantee that, somewhere, another solar system has given rise to intelligent life. Indeed, steady congressional bullying of NASA’s modestly funded Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) during the 80’s and early 90’s should be remembered as a yahooistic disgrace. The program now thrives as a privately funded operation, with direct, practical participation by over two million non-scientists who have SETI@home software on their personal computers and use it to analyze data collected by the project’s Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico.

The problem with UFO believers—who have done more to damage SETI science than promote it—is this fantasy that ETs are so enthralled by the particular existence of people here on Earth that they can’t resist making repeated trips across interstellar space to study, instruct, abduct, and copulate with us. We should be so interesting! The citizen army of SETI@home searchers, their hard drives humming automatically through the night, are by contrast conducting a Platonic cosmic romance—something as poignant as it is epistemologically hardheaded. They are looking for no one in particular, and whoever they find will not have been looking for them. If the laws of physics are what we believe them to be, the discovered beings will probably never get here any more than we will get there. *But we will know that they exist.* And the human race’s still nearly pre-Copernican sense of its own importance will collapse; for the

first time we shall be looking not into a mirror but through a pane of glass.

What's saddest about Cooper's book is the way it shows a man who once did real, heroic work getting us over the next hills—to the Moon, and Mars—being reduced, by our 30-years-long national indifference toward manned space exploration, to a preoccupation with this sort of pixilated crap. On some level, Cooper must know it himself: "Mars was lost to our generation when the manned mission, originally planned back in the mid-1960's for a 1981 launch—which, as the youngest Mercury astronaut, I believed I was in a good position to command—was canceled." The ex-astronaut blames Senator William Proxmire (those "Golden Fleece" awards), but every president

since Nixon, and every Congress since about the 92nd, is guilty.

You won't hear a serious word about manned space exploration during the fall campaign. Any candidate who uttered one would find himself drowned out by a rapid-response team's tut-tuttings about "priorities here at home." If a discussion of the issue were somehow to last more than half a minute on an MSNBC split-screen, the word "hubris," in connection with man's boorish need to place himself on other spheres, would surely be spoken—as if mapping the human genome, potential medical miracles aside, hasn't been, in its way, an act of monstrous self-absorption. *Leap of Faith* might better be titled *Loss of Faith*. Ah, Gordo, what can you do? The fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves. ❁

funding. Highway congestion got you down? Vice President Gore proposed nationwide telephone traffic-jam hotlines. Tired of waiting at the airport? Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater ordered the airlines to improve their service, or else. And the list goes on and on.

As Bovard chronicles in his new book, "*Feeling Your Pain*": *The Explosion and Abuse of Government Power in the Clinton-Gore Years*, such pronouncements are good for public relations, but little else. Thousands of major and minor federal programs and regulations expanded or created during the last eight years—from Housing and Urban Development vouchers to loans for farmers to federal disaster aid—failed to solve the problems they were designed to address. In fact, the "solutions" often were more harmful than the problems, as in the case of increased availability of government flood relief resulting in more people moving to flood and hurricane-prone areas, or how EPA mandates for smog-reducing additives in gasoline ended up contaminating drinking water with cancer-causing chemicals.

Obviously, President Clinton is a master of empathy. He is so empathic that he has no problem changing his position on a issue completely, depending on the audience he is addressing. This flip-flopping often quite remarkable. For example, Bovard points out how the president has been, at various times, for and against the Superfund environmental clean-up program. In February 1993, Clinton told a gathering of businessmen that the program was "a disaster" that entailed too much money going to lawyers. In 1994, he proposed a bill supposedly to fix Superfund, which Congress did not pass because it perpetuated the worst aspects of the program. When it became obvious that Congress wasn't biting, Clinton announced that Superfund was necessary; if it wasn't reformed, there would be "poison in the ground." After the 1996 election, Clinton was back to denouncing Superfund as an inefficient boondoggle. Finally, in the presidential election year of 1996, Clinton was again trumpeting the still-unreformed program in campaign speeches as a huge success.

This PR-over-substance approach is also evident in President Clinton's promotion of the Brady Handgun Violence

Giving the People All the Painkillers They Don't Need

"Feeling Your Pain": The Explosion and Abuse of Government Power in the Clinton-Gore Years

James Bovard

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REVIEWED BY

Tracy Robinson

The 1992 presidential election may perhaps best be described as the triumph of empathy over experience. The youngish, upstart governor of a small and backward state cared his way to victory over one of the more experienced public servants ever to hold the office of President of the United States. Empathy had come into its own; failing to understand how a supermarket scanner worked could cost you valuable support from working moms, and fumbling to explain during a debate how the deficit has *personally affected you* (in truth, an absurd question), could be deadly.

TRACY ROBINSON is deputy editor of *The American Spectator*.

Politics has not changed much since then. Now we have a race between a "compassionate conservative" governor and a virtual-lifetime officeholder who is for "the people," not "the powerful." Empathy is still accepted as a necessary trait of a successful candidate. Thus far, no one in politics is challenging the government policies that arose from the empathy-fest of 1992, asking if they actually worked to make people better off in the last eight years.

As *American Spectator* readers are aware, it is this gap in the political discourse that James Bovard strives to fill with his reporting. Americans might be better off now than before President Clinton took office, but according to Bovard, that's no thanks to the myriad of feel-good money giveaways that were created or expanded under the Clinton-Gore regime. If you had a problem, the administration came up with a government program to address it. Nearly every day one administration official or another could be heard speechifying on a new, narrowly targeted tax credit, federal grant, or community empowerment program to help you, the voter, make it in this world. Kids getting in your hair? President Clinton called for more daycare