

# Right stuff

[Science](#), [Astrology](#)



In attempting to define “ the right stuff”, I came up with several characteristics and traits that may qualify one as having “ the right stuff”. There was, however, no single, broad and sweeping definition that truly seemed to encompass “ the right stuff”. For the intent of this essay, I will define “ the right stuff” as the unspoken qualities a person possesses that motivate them to attempt/accomplish feats not ordinarily attempted as well as continue to challenge themselves to the point that few can relate and the masses are viewed as inferior beings. In the novel “ The Right Stuff” Tom Wolfe profiles the lives and careers of several fighter pilots. While Wolfe never fully defines “ the right stuff”, he does lend a few attributes that were forbidden to be spoken namely “...death, bravery, danger, fear”. Wolfe writes “...it was not bravery in the simple sense of being willing to risk your life.

”, yet those who did have “ it” also had “ the uncritical willingness to face danger”. Are those characteristics part of what motivated these men to become test pilots of machines capable of reaching heights never attempted and being chosen the first astronauts as a result? Or was their motivations simply to not be left behind? I believe it is safe to say that motivation is the seed that bears the fruit of success. While none of the pilots were necessarily motivated to become the “ Mercury 7”, not being chosen, to them, was the same as being left behind. Being left behind meant that you were not a possessor of “ the right stuff”. Attempting to become the first man in space meant opening their minds to whatever challenges may lie ahead, unknown as they may be. Though the competition to be the first man in space was looked upon as saving a nation, the competition between the

pilots extended not outside of the seven as evidenced by John Glenn's thought " Competition was competition, and there was no use pretending it didn't exist" (Wolfe). From the challenge to become a pilot, to fighter pilot, to test pilot, to setting and breaking records, to being selected to become an astronaut, to being the first in space, to the first in orbit, to the first on the moon...the challenges were never-ending.

Each step of the way you are climbing a ladder and becoming one of the ever more elite few, one to be remembered, regaled. Not only was one who was considered made of " the right stuff" one of the elite few. The challenges he overcame allowed him to look down his nose adoringly at the " average" person. The " feeling of superiority, appropriate to him and to his kind, lone bearers of the right stuff" (Wolfe) placed the pilots, in their minds, on the same order and deserving of the same adoration as the Pope himself. There are not many others who can feel they deserve papal treatment for career accomplishments, hence the reason Wolfe places the first seven astronauts on a pedestal. Let us assume the reason there may not be one all-encompassing definition of " the right stuff" is because that same " right stuff" does not apply across the board to everyone as evidenced by the selection of pilots to become astronauts (mere convenience). Consider the fact that "...more fighter pilots die in automobiles than in airplanes" (Wolfe).

Their invincibility seems to pertain only to their exploits off the ground for which they have trained and conditioned for years. One could argue that astronauts are no more made of the right stuff than race car drivers, fire fighters, combat soldiers, teachers or parents even. In conclusion, " the right

stuff” seems as elusive and indefinable as the term “ stuff”. To further deduce stuff to right stuff is even more complicated. On a broader plane, I believe that Wolfe relates the something that not every man possesses to the astronauts because they were a nation’s role models. They defined an era, a moment in history not to be repeated. They set a standard that can continue to be built upon, but will only be surpassed in a day and age that none of the currently living will be alive to witness.

Moreover, “ the right stuff” can be applied to anyone. Not everyone can do everything, yet there is a certain characteristic a person must possess to accomplish the feat he or she sets out to conquer. Once achieved, one is now a possessor of “ the right stuff” in his or her own rite. Annotated Bibliography Wolfe, Tom. *The Right Stuff*. New York, NY: Picador, 1979. Wolfe’s novel recounts the experiences and lives of fighter pilots and astronauts of the first manned space program.

He tries to relay to the reader what it is these individuals possessed that gave them the ardour to accomplish the unknown, the never before attempted.