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Glenn takes flight in address on conserving world energy

BY BO PETERSEN

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GREENVILLE - The man who hurtled around the Earth nearly a half century ago moves with a shuffle now, leans on an arm as he climbs a step. His voice is still the friendly Ohio kid next door.

His mind moves point to point talking environmental issues as directly as the fighter pilot once powered jets.

"It affects the whole world what we do. We're the biggest user of energy. We're the biggest polluter," John Glenn said. "Societies basically succeed or fail based on how they use energy."

Glenn, 85, gave the keynote address Monday for "The Environment: Critical Issues of the 21st Century" at the fourth annual Riley Institute National Conference.

"You look back and see that tiny little blue band," he said. "We don't live in a huge mass of air that can take anything you throw at it. We live in a tiny little film. And if we foul it up, there may be no coming back from that."

"The bee in my bonnet" is that the country is not researching large-scale storage of electrical energy, he said before the address. "We can convert all the forces of nature to electrical energy, but we can't store it. I'd like to see a 'Manhattan Project' for storing energy," he said, referring to the 1940s project that created the atomic bomb.

Japan is working on energy storage, but an earlier effort in the United States fell apart when it didn't make money. It's a way to bypass the fossil fuel process.

"The first person who gets a handle on doing exactly that is going to change the energy patterns of the world."

Glenn is the Navy aviator who in 1962 became the first American to orbit the Earth. He rode the spacecraft Friendship 7 for three orbits in about five hours.

He returned to space as a 77-year-old in 1998, orbiting 134 times aboard the shuttle Discovery. He set a transcontinental speed record in 1957 flying a Navy jet from Los Angeles to New York in about 3 1/2 hours. He would circle the Earth in less than two hours 41 years later.

Glenn, who served as U.S. senator from Ohio from 1974-98, "was the science education man in the Senate," said Don Gordon, institute director. He has been a pivotal figure in a half century of technological explosion that defined not only the nation but the world.

"We came from a very small town," said Annie Glenn, his wife, with a wonder in her voice. "The things that have happened to us are wonderful."

The Riley Institute is a politics and policy research think tank at Furman University in Greenville.

The conference is sponsored by the institute, the S.C. Research Authority and four environmental organizations including the Charleston-based Coastal Conservation League.

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