

ALONE AGAIN

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

When astronomers began to point their high-powered radiotelescopes toward the stars in search of intelligent life, their hopes ran high. In Earth's neighborhood alone, half a dozen stars showed the slightly wobbling motion that should reveal orbiting planets. And if planets were quite common, surely life, even civilization, could not be rare. That was almost 20 years ago. Today the chances of locating extraterrestrial civilizations appear much poorer.

The idea that life abounds in the galaxy seems to be almost universal, at least among laymen, and some astronomers still claim that the best way to detect life out there is to search for the radio transmissions of distant technological societies. Many UFO buffs are equally convinced that extraterrestrial civilizations have already found us and are now paying visits here.

Neither group questions the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI). Author and researcher Robert K. G. Temple in 1976 said, "An attitude which asserts that

man is the only intelligent life form in the universe is intolerably arrogant. Anyone holding such an opinion today is an intellectual freak."

UFO lecturer Stanton Friedman is just as positive. "I consider the term *UFOs* a copout," he once declared. "They're not unidentified flying objects, they're flying saucers. . . . The evidence is overwhelming that we are being visited by intelligently controlled vehicles from off planet Earth. In other words, somebody's *UFOs* are somebody else's spacecraft."

The majority of the public concurs, according to numerous opinion polls conducted throughout the past decade.

Astronomers involved in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) remain almost universally hostile to claims of alien visitation. In 1976 a poll found most astronomers willing to concede that *UFOs* might be worthy of study but unwilling to bother doing the research themselves. *UFO* proponents, however, have been interpreting — some would say misinterpreting — astronomical research to provide scientific respectability for their

belief in the existence of alien cultures.

Recently a third point of view has forced its way into this bitter standoff. Humankind, it is suggested, may actually be alone in the universe. This notion enrages *UFO* buffs for obvious reasons, and SETI astronomers are understandably upset by the idea that their search is a waste of time and money (as Senator William Proxmire has declared).

Late in 1978 proponents of this third force in the ETI controversy gathered at the University of Maryland for a two-day symposium. Their topic, "Implications of Our Failure to Observe Extraterrestrials," was bound to be provocative. For most of those attending, the implications were clear: Since we haven't seen any trace of them, either they aren't there or there is something fundamentally wrong with our comprehension of the universe.

The consensus that emerged from the colloquium was heresy itself: "If we extrapolate ourselves into the foreseeable future, and then generalize our type of civilization across the galaxy, then we should not exist," declared Dr. Sebastian von Hoerner, of the Green Bank Radio Observatory. "If anyone is out there at all," insisted cochairman Michael Hart, a Texas astronomer, "then Earth should have been colonized millions of years ago, and 'us natives' wouldn't be standing here now."

The idea that life has arisen on millions of planets and that many developed high-technology civilizations raises a question originally attributed to nuclear physicist Enrico Fermi: "Well, then, where are they?" ETI advocates argue that such civilizations either refrain from, or are incapable of, interstellar flight. *UFO* proponents argue that some such civilizations do visit this planet but avoid detectable contact for any of several reasons.

The Maryland conference considered both arguments and found them wanting. Papers by such eminent space scientists as Freeman Dyson and Ronald Bracewell demonstrated the feasibility of interstellar flight and presented a timetable for the step-by-step occupation of the galaxy. Their estimates ran into the millions of



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UFO

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years, but the scientists concluded that one civilization would occupy the entire galaxy long before another could arise by chance.

Computer specialist Robert Sheaffer described unpublished details of many famous UFO sightings, providing details that make the cases far less impressive than they are made to appear in the popular press. Sheaffer also suggested that the residue of unexplained UFO reports is mere "noise" due to the unreliability of memory and eyewitness testimony.

This conference may be as significant a scientific event as the 1971 conference at Byurakan, in the Soviet Union, which legitimized the whole topic of SETI. It did not reach any formal conclusions, nor did it open up any new ways to deal with the possible existence of ETI. But it did underline a growing sentiment in the scientific community that the wild optimism for ETI in the 1960s and '70s may have been based on bad data and now-shaky theories.

Dr. Ben Zuckerman, another of the conference organizers, was rather low-key in his new-found skepticism. "There aren't many compelling scientific arguments on either side of this issue," he remarked, "although I think the weight of evidence does suggest that we have the biggest brains in the galaxy." Dr. Zuckerman, who helped conduct the sophisticated OZMA-2 radio search of 600 nearby stars in the mid-1970s, explained what changed his mind: "Carl Sagan has been asserting that life and intelligence are just natural extensions of stellar and planetary evolution, that it is all a step-by-step inevitability. That seemed too strong for me."

Recent scientific discoveries have borne out Zuckerman's caution. The much-touted astrometric, or star-wobble, evidence for the existence of large planets around nearby stars has been discredited as resulting from instrument error. The obvious cause-and-effect relationship between slow stellar rotations and the presence of a family of planets has been shot down. But the existence of totally sunlike stars many billions of years older than ours has been established, thus affording aliens innumerable opportunities to expand into our solar system—if they are out there at all.

The origin of life on Earth remains problematic; the progress of evolution seems increasingly uncertain and freakish, and the rise of intelligence and technology could well have been a fluke. The stability of a hospitable planet over the billions of years needed for life to spring up and undergo changes now seems less likely. Internal variations and external deviations caused by solar variability, passage through interstellar dust clouds, and unlucky proximity to sterilizing supernovas are much more probable than was once believed.

Thus, there are no scientific reasons to suggest a priori that other intelligent beings must have developed just because it has happened here. If other such life forms did arise, the conferees concluded, either their transgalactic activities would be overwhelmingly obvious or they would have settled in the solar system eons ago.

Boston University astronomer Michael Papagiannis suggested that they might have settled in the asteroid belt and may still be there. Other participants in the conference described how star-faring civilizations would be able to "terraform" likely planets into life-bearing worlds, wherever they chose to colonize. The absence of evidence for such developments thus becomes evidence for the absence of ETI. At least, that was the theme of this budding SETI counterreformation.

Such an opinion is anathema to the pro-ETI astronomers and to UFO buffs. The vehemence of believers in UFOs may be spurred by a poorly recognized aspect of the UFO camp itself. It, too, is critically split over the issue of ETI. Several leading spokesmen have abandoned the "alien spacecraft" theory altogether. Dr. J. Allen Hynek, for example, calls such an explanation "naïve and simplistic."

Dr. Hynek, a former air force consultant on UFOs, deserted his debunking campaign in the mid-1960s and founded the Center for UFO Studies, in Evanston, Illinois. He is still convinced that UFOs represent a *real* phenomenon. At the same time he's unimpressed with the ETI explanation for them. "There is a lot that the spaceship concept doesn't explain about UFO phenomena," he told an interviewer in 1977. "You have to disallow or neglect or overlook all sorts of things if you accept the idea that nuts-and-bolts craft are coming here from outer space—the so-called extraterrestrial hypothesis. I think they're something much more metaterrestrial than extraterrestrial." The term *metaterrestrial* refers to the suggested link between UFOs and psychic phenomena, poltergeists, "parallel realities," and other planes or vibration levels of existence. Modern science rejects all such theories, but they have been receiving support from such UFO theorists as Jacques Vallee (see *Omni* Interview, January 1980), John Keel, Peter Kor, and Alan Greenfield.

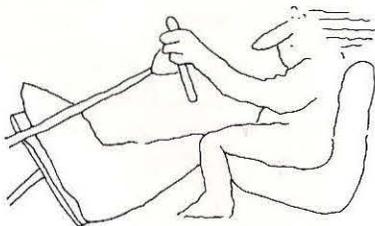
So the three-way battle over ETI continues, with shifting alliances and varied fortunes of war. The concepts remain exciting, and the hard data remain sparse. Neutral parties can watch the skirmishing from the sidelines with a mixture of amusement and confusion, as claims and counterclaims are thrown back and forth with all the subtlety of thermonuclear bombs.

The ones who would be most amused, of course, would be the ETs themselves, if they exist. Picture them silently watching Earth's civilizations develop, seeking criteria to confirm the existence of TI—terrestrial intelligence. Perhaps this debate is the final exam in that test. **OO**

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