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SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Display-advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers, if any.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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Space Exploration as Propaganda

Since Veblen introduced the idea of conspicuous consumption, we have recognized that many expenditures are made neither for comfort nor for use, but to maintain one's position in the community. Scientists and public officials in Washington are now wondering to what extent an analogous principle applies to a country seeking to maintain its position in the community of nations. Much of the debate over the adequacy of our space program concerns the question whether comparison of Soviet and American achievements in placing very large payloads in orbit is adversely affecting our prestige abroad.

Among those who see the influence of the United States suffering because of our showing in space is George V. Allen, director of the United States Information Agency. In testimony this year before the House Science and Astronautics Committee, Allen said that many people throughout the world do judge a nation's science and technology in terms of what they can understand of its space efforts. As things have turned out, the testimony continues, Soviet achievements have greatly exceeded world expectations, while our efforts have fallen short. One immediate result of Soviet success, according to Allen, is the better reception now accorded Soviet technological and cultural exports.

A key spokesman for the view that our present rate of achievement in space is adequate is also a key figure—or, rather, the key figure—in the administration. At a news conference, President Eisenhower said that he found no reason for us "to bow our heads in shame." If Soviet efforts have had a greater appeal to the imagination of the public, he continued, actual examination of the record will show that we have done good, hard work.

To consider space exploration in terms of conspicuous consumption is not meant to imply that such exploration is not of genuine scientific import. A Cadillac will get you there and back. Nor is such consideration meant to imply that space exploration is the best indicator that economists can devise to measure a nation's scientific and technological prowess. The question at issue is simply whether space exploration is a measure of power accepted by the people of countries that we want to influence. We may not feel inferior, we may not be inferior, but the question is what does the rest of the world think of us.

To estimate what the rest of the world does make of us, a certain amount of data can be gathered, and a certain range of arguments can be based on that data. If outer space is a subject for research, so is its effect on the opinions and behavior of people. And here we are struck by one aspect of Allen's testimony. He cites in support of his views the results of public opinion polls conducted overseas and also the reports of our government offices overseas.

The information that we now possess, of course, may be too meager to have much influence on our policies, but if such is the case, it is simply an argument that we do something about getting better information. How important space exploration is as propaganda is a question over which sincere men can disagree, but the answer is not simply a matter of intuition.—J.T.