Metric System Counted Out in House

The House Rules Committee last week deferred action on a bill (H.R. 10329) to provide $2.5 million for a study of U.S. conversion to the metric system.

The Committee, which schedules the flow of legislation for consideration by the full House, was urged to act favorably on the bill by Rep. George P. Miller (D-Calif.), chairman of the Science and Astronautics Committee. Miller, according to the Associated Press, pointed out that Great Britain had begun a 10-year conversion to the metric system. "We'll be one island, isolated, using a system that has little rhyme or reason," he said.

Rules Committee Chairman Howard W. Smith (D-Va.) who is 82 years old, replied: "I got my education in a one-room red school house. We took our degrees in the three R's. Just to make an honest confession, I don't know what the metric system is."

Miller explained that by metric measure, actress Gina Lollobrigida's measurements would be 93-71-89.

"Are you talking about meters or inches?" Smith asked.

"Centimeters," Miller replied.

"Oh, we haven't come to that yet," Smith said.

With the long session now drawing to a close, Miller decided to put the issue aside until next January.—D.S.G.

the sort expressed at a mid-1962 hearing by Sen. Robert Kerr of Oklahoma, who was chairman of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee until his death a short time later. Kerr suggested that the Defense Department's policy of developing technological "building blocks" against the day when new military space systems might be needed could lead to wholesale encroachments on NASA's preserves. His committee's legislative jurisdiction extended only to NASA; for him to express such concerns was not surprising.

When MOL was taken up by the National Aeronautics and Space Council in July, its approval already was virtually assured. It had the support of Administrator James E. Webb of NASA, as well as that of Secretary McNamara. Although managed by Defense, MOL would make use of NASA's Gemini spacecraft and perhaps of a modified Apollo life-support system for the laboratory; moreover, some scientific experiments were to be conducted for NASA.

In March, in one of his first speeches as chairman of the Space Council, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey had indicated his support of the MOL. "We are a peace-loving people, but we would ignore the real interests of the free world if we diminished our military efforts in space," he said. "That is why, even today, four great companies in the United States are competing in the design for a manned orbiting laboratory."

Humphrey, long associated with arms-control causes, was careful to look at MOL from the standpoint of the United States commitment to the peaceful use of outer space. The members of the Council, which in addition to its chairman is made up of the heads of NASA, the Defense Department, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the State Department, were asked to provide the answers to 21 questions; at least some of these questions were concerned with the broad political implications of MOL overseas and were considered by specialists in the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

Some NASA tracking stations are located in neutral countries, but MOL will rely on Defense Department facilities and thus is not expected to compromise NASA's reputation for openly conducted space exploration for scientific rather than military purposes. It seems unavoidable, however, that by undertaking the highly secret MOL program the United States will arouse fears abroad that it has pushed the arms race into space; the initial reaction in the foreign press already indicates as much. The Space Council had, in fact, to consider whether MOL promised enough advantages to make it worthwhile to establish the precedent of sending a manned military system into space.

Just how these questions were weighed and decided has not been revealed; but it is obvious the Council believed the MOL would demonstrate that a manned satellite is a more efficient intelligence gatherer than even the highly successful unmanned satellite Samos, which already has lifted somewhat the veil of morbid secrecy drawn over the Soviet Union's closed society. Samos, which officially doesn't exist, has taken thousands of pictures and shown that effective photoreconnaissance need not depend upon vulnerable U-2 spy planes. Samos cannot exercise the selectivity that a trained human observer might, however.

The five MOL flights not only will test man's efficiency as a reconnaissance observer, but will try his tolerance for the prolonged space flights probably necessary if MOL is to advance economically from an experimental to an operational system. The MOL astronauts must be fit to perform many duties, which will include repairing equipment, assembling a large antenna, and investigating natural phenomena of military interest, as well as conducting experiments in photoreconnaissance.

There is the hope, at least, that by indicating the futility of trying to avoid surveillance, MOL (or successor systems) will encourage Soviet acceptance of such arms-control proposals as those currently offered by the United States at Geneva. The U.S. has urged, for example, that the Atlantic alliance and the Soviet bloc explore the possibility of a "verified freeze" on the number and characteristics of strategic nuclear offensive and defensive weapons.

It is argued that such a freeze would impose inspection requirements far less intrusive than those necessary for general disarmament. Even so, it would involve continuing inspections of declared weapons plants and a certain number of other inspections as a safeguard against cheating. From the view of the Soviets, with their aversion to inspection, the U.S. proposal must seem