

Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Van Allen Wins Space Nobel

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the folks who bring you the Nobel prizes, late last month awarded James Van Allen the Crafoord Prize for his "pioneering exploration of space," including his 1958 discovery of Earth's radiation belts. Van Allen had already been immortalized with the naming of the belts, but the academy added the distinction of a gold medal, a diploma, and a quarter of a million dollars.

Van Allen's career of studying magnetospheres and the charged particles trapped there ascended from World War II work on nearly Earth-bound radio-proximity fuses for artillery shells to progressively higher flying rockets that carried his instruments around Earth, to Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn, and ultimately toward the stars. At age 75, he is on the science team of the Galileo spacecraft scheduled for launch to Jupiter on 17 October.

The Crafoord Prize was established in 1980 by a donation

to the academy from the late Holger Crafoord, the founder of the company that developed the artificial kidney machine. The award rotates annually among the fields of the geosciences, the biosciences (particularly ecology), and mathematics and astronomy. Next up: the biosciences.

Tech Transfer Triggers Protest

The president of Quadrant Technology, Inc., a Haywood, California, electronics company, is charging Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory with playing favorites in the way it transfers federally financed inventions to industry.

Quadrant head John Woodman contends that lab officials improperly granted nChip, Inc., of San Jose exclusive patent rights on integrated circuit technology developed at Livermore. NChip was founded by three Livermore workers who developed laser pantography, a method for connecting integrated circuits with laser-etched gold foils.

Woodman says Livermore and its management at the University of California knew of his firm's licensing interests well

before the license was issued to nChip last June. The exclusive license, he contends, is anti-competitive and deprives the government of royalties.

Also in question is the conduct of the three nChip researchers, with whom Quadrant officials met late last year to discuss obtaining a federal license before they left Livermore. Quadrant says the researchers informed them at the end of the meeting that a decision had already been made—3 months previously—to negotiate exclusively with nChip on the license.

House Energy and Commerce Committee investigators and the Department of Energy are checking out the situation. Aides say they are not just concerned with this particular case, but with the larger potential for abuse of technology transfer programs by insiders at federally funded laboratories.

Peace Corps to Help Environment

Two of President Bush's allegedly favorite things—volunteerism and the environment—will be merged in a new agreement between the Peace Corps and the Environmental Protec-

tion Agency.

Of 6000 Peace Corps volunteers serving worldwide, 600 of them are working in conservation programs. But beginning next year, new recruits, as part of their standard preparation for duty, will receive training to deal with a range of environmental problems including water pollution, waste disposal, and reforestation. The first project will be a pesticide management and safety training workshop for volunteers now working in agriculture programs in Latin America.

Would It Be Mars Without NASA?

If Americans ever head outward to the moon and Mars, as President Bush proposed last July, will NASA be signing their paychecks?

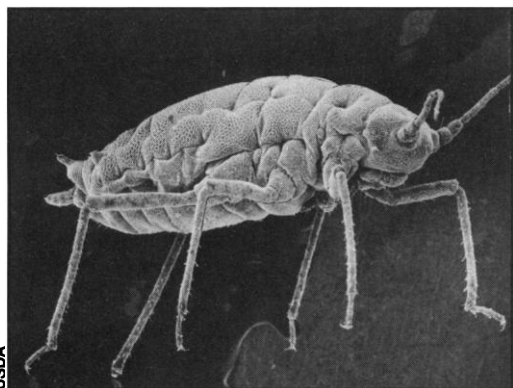
Maybe not. The National Space Council, headed by Vice President Quayle, has been wondering whether the management of Bush's Moon-Mars initiative ought to be vested in some other organization, such as Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Few expect NASA to be shut out of the initiative, if only because it still employs most of the nation's experienced space engineers. Nonetheless, the space council's idea suggests that some people in the White House see NASA as a ponderous, aging, and entrenched bureaucracy that is badly in need of shaking up. Indeed, that opinion seems to be shared by many inside the agency. "It's a legitimate question," says one anonymous NASA insider: "Is NASA, as currently constituted, capable of doing this thing? No."

Of course, there is a more cynical interpretation of the space council's study: if peace really does break out, and if Star Wars becomes a distant memory, then weapons labs like Los Alamos and Livermore are going to be desperate for something to do. The Moon-Mars initiative could be it.

Russian Bugs Drafted in U.S. War

The Agriculture Department has imported several species of Soviet wasps and beetles to do battle with compatriots—Russian wheat aphids—that are destroying crops in many areas of the West. The aphids, after somehow hitchhiking to



Russian wheat aphid. Poses different problems than a familiar western aphid, the green bug.

Mexico, have spread to 16 states since they blew across the border 3 years ago.

The USDA says the insects are the first exchanges of biological pest controls to result from agricultural research agreements signed last year with the Soviet Union.

The tiny aphid, particularly damaging to wheat and barley, has cost farmers an estimated \$123 million in crop losses and chemical controls. Colorado has been particularly hard hit.

The Agricultural Research Service has been looking in areas of the southern U.S.S.R. as well as Turkey and North Africa to find suitable enemies of the aphid. A number of species are now in quarantine in this country, including a gnat-like parasitic wasp and beetle predators. The ARS hopes to start field tests next spring, says Robert Burton of the ARS Plant Science Research Laboratory in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

The busy aphid has already made its way to Canada. Burton says, Australia, also a big wheat producer, is "very concerned" that it may show up there.