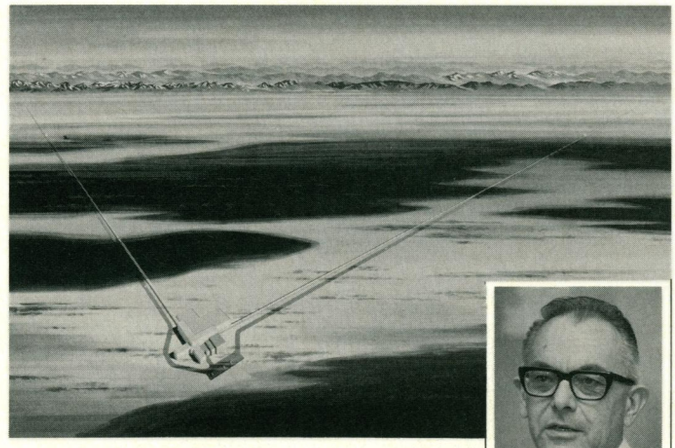
## LIGO in Limbo

■ The immediate future looks dim for the Laser Interferometry Gravitational Observatory (LIGO)—a proposed $211-million National Science Foundation (NSF) project to measure gravitational waves using laser interferometry. For the second year in a row, LIGO director and Caltech physicist Rochus Vogt has waged a public relations offensive aimed at persuading Congress to approve the $23.3 million needed to begin construction. And, also for the second year in a row, he is likely to come up empty.

LIGO's cause wasn't helped by a National Academy of Sciences committee that last month failed to mention LIGO when it ranked astronomical funding priorities for the 1990s. In the eyes of House science subcommittee chairman Rick Boucher (D–VA), this omission undercut the NSF's previously advanced argument that LIGO's expected astronomical benefits—in addition to its obvious value to physicists—helped justify the big expense. When Boucher asked the NAS committee for clarification, the reply was anything but reassuring: "[T]he secure scientific goals of LIGO for the 1990s are not astronomical."



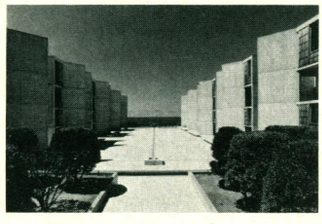
*Artist's conception of LIGO; Project director Rochus Vogt*

Science subcommittee members feel LIGO can wait while more pressing needs—such as modernization of academic research facilities—are dealt with, staffers say. Of course, the House appropriations committee will have the last say. But given another tight budget and the fact that this committee axed LIGO's funding last year, Vogt had better start warming up for round three next year.

## Salk's Presidential Quest: The Long and Winding Road

■ The troubled Salk Institute finds itself once again facing an extended search for a new president, just a year after Rockefeller University molecular biologist James Darnell turned down an offer to become its chief. Last week, Princeton University molecular biologist Arnold Levine, who had been enthusiastically supported by a search committee and the institute's scientists, took himself out of the running. And another leading candidate on Salk's short list is reportedly dismayed at the institute's public courting of Levine and could withdraw himself.

*Leaderless: the Salk Institute*



Levine's withdrawal has sparked rumors that Salk's board of trustees was reluctant to share its power with a scientist. Levine backed out after spending a weekend in La Jolla talking over the job with institute founder Jonas Salk and members of the board. Through a statement, Levine said he withdrew when he realized the job would demand "near total attention to fund raising and administration" and that it would "not allow much time to pursue my scientific interests." Levine did not return several telephone calls from *Science*. Board chairman Frank Dupar denies that there was any dispute about the president's authority.

Peter Preuss, a wealthy San Diego software entrepreneur who also directs a foundation for research into brain tumors, was on the search committee's short list along with Levine and is now considered the leading candidate for the presidency. The *San Diego Tribune*, however, last week quoted a friend of Preuss, William Otterson, who said that when Preuss read in the newspaper that Levine was being recruited, he said, "Well, maybe I'll do something else."

■ Now it's official. As *Science* reported 7 weeks ago (15 March, p. 1301), the world's largest optical telescope—the Keck—will soon get a twin. Last Friday, the Keck Foundation announced it would give the California Institute of Technology $74.6 million to build a companion to the first Keck, now nearing completion atop Hawaii's Mauna Kea. NASA has already agreed to contribute the rest of the $99.3 million total cost, starting in 1993, in return for getting one-sixth of the total viewing time. Construction on Keck II will begin early next year, and Keck operators could be seeing double as early as 1996.

## A Weekly Contraceptive?

■ In what it is calling a "major breakthrough in the international effort to develop better contraceptives," the Indian government will soon permit the marketing of a weekly birth control pill that prevents the implantation of a fertilized egg in the uterus. But some U.S. scientists are worried that the Indians might be jumping the gun.

The active ingredient in the new product—a drug known as Centchroman—was developed at the Indian government's Central Drug Research Institute (CDRI) in Lucknow more than 20 years ago. Only recently, however, have CDRI scientists completed "extensive efficacy and safety studies." Now the government has decided to license the new contraceptive for sale, as well as for distribution through the Indian welfare system. CDRI officials S. S. Iyer and V. P. Kamboj estimate that doses of Centchroman will cost less than 10 cents a week.

Current daily hormonal contraceptives work by suppressing ovulation altogether. Centchroman, on the other hand, is an estrogen antagonist similar to Tamoxifen, a drug often used in the West to treat breast cancer. According to Iyer, women need to take only one or two 30-mg pills a week for contraceptive protection equivalent to that afforded by hormonal contraceptives. "The only side effect," Kamboj says in a letter to *Science*, "is that about 8% of the menstrual cycles are longer than the normal duration." He expects to see Centchroman on the market in "about 6 months."

Some experts in the United States—like Gabriel Bialy of the National Institutes of Health—remain doubtful about these safety claims. Even if the drug produces a symptom as mild as occasional nausea, it may not win acceptance, says Bialy. "The history of contraceptive drugs teaches us that side effects tend to show up.... We need to reserve judgment."

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