SCIENCESCOPE

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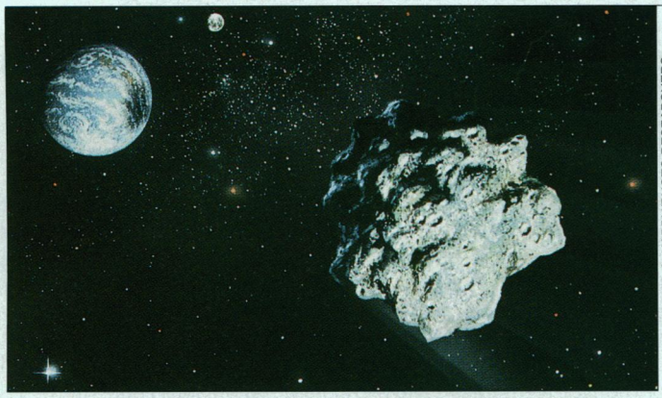

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Alien target? Earth-bound asteroids may be monitored by the Air Force.

Air Force May Aid Asteroid Watch

With the Cold War fading into memory, the U.S. Air Force is searching for new sources of high adventure, and it appears to have found one: helping astronomers track asteroids or comets that might collide with Earth.

Last year, a House science committee held a hearing on the hazard of objects striking Earth and altering climate. After ascertaining that the threat is remote but real, committee chair George Brown (D–CA) asked the Defense Department if it had any assets to study interstellar interlopers.

This prompted a "first date" between civilian and military experts last month at Air Force Space Command in Colorado Springs. The Air Force said that one, or perhaps a few, of its satellite-tracking telescopes might be made available to jump-start the "Spaceguard" survey, a $50-million plan proposed in 1992 by an advisory panel to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The plan calls for building a network of telescopes to map the orbits of large asteroids homing in on Earth.

With Spaceguard languishing in NASA's tight budget, the Air Force offer might allow the survey to move forward, says Clark Chapman, an astronomer on the Spaceguard panel. "We were all intrigued [about this] unexpected and plausible prospect," he says.

Air Force officials offered a second goody: a promise to try to rapidly notify scientists after military satellites spot bursts of light from asteroids burning up in the atmosphere. A big strike over the Pacific Ocean last year registered on a military satellite, but no civilians were told for weeks —even though a research plane in the vicinity could have been diverted to sample debris.

Singer Ends Libel Suit, Claims Victory

Atmospheric scientist and contrarian S. Fred Singer is claiming victory in a verbal duel with biogeochemist Justin Lancaster. Last week, the two scientists finalized an agreement in which Lancaster retracted a charge that Singer had coerced the late Roger Revelle, Scripps' global-warming guru, into coauthoring a paper highlighting scientific weaknesses in the global-warming theory.

The crux of the dispute is an April 1991 article in the journal *Cosmos* coauthored by Singer, Revelle, and retired nuclear engineering professor Chauncey Starr. In 1992, Lancaster, a former student of Revelle's, began asserting publicly that Singer had pressured Revelle into lending his name to the piece (*Science*, 30 April 1993, p. 618). In April 1993, Singer sued for libel.

One year later, on 29 April, Lancaster signed a statement in which he retracts "as being unwarranted any and all statements...which state or imply that Professor Revelle was not a true and voluntary coauthor... or which in any other way impugn or malign the conduct or motives of Professor Singer...." Not that Lancaster intends to let the matter rest there. "Our agreement leaves us free to debate the scientific content of the *Cosmos* article," he told *Science*.

Varmus Prods Peers to Join Review Panels

Maybe they're freeloaders. Or maybe they think the rules don't apply to them. Whatever the case, researchers who have received numerous National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants but haven't served on the agency's peer-review and advisory panels will soon be put on notice to become more involved. Fed up with his colleagues, NIH director Harold Varmus now plans to send letters prodding them to "do their duty."

NIH officials say the letters, expected to go out this summer, will be the first such solicitation from an NIH director. Jerome Green, director of NIH's Division of Research Grants, estimates there are about 100 scientists who have received at least $200,000 a year from NIH for the past dozen or so years who, during that time, have never sat on a chartered advisory committee. "Serving on these panels is a form of community service," says Varmus. "But there are some people out there who don't see [it] that way."

Of course, some researchers may have a good reason for turning down the thrice-yearly, $150-per-diem labor of love. They may be on sabbatical, starting a new job, or up to their eyeballs editing manuscripts for journals. Or they may simply be unfit for the job—"temperamentally unsuited," as Green says. NIH, he says, does not desire the services of "reluctant handmaidens" who arrive late, leave early, and generally fail to take their duties seriously.

Varmus says his letter is part of a broad NIH effort to squeeze every last ounce of scientific value from available resources. In an era of belt tightening, he says, a few days of public service isn't much to ask of those who have received millions of federal dollars.

Russia Could Lose Valuable Research Ship

One of Russia's top research institutes, which has so far survived the country's economic crisis by selling its wares to the West, is getting a harsh lesson in Western-style capitalism. Thanks to what it claims is a deal gone sour, Moscow's Shirshov Institute of Oceanology is in danger of losing a prize research ship.

Over the past few years, the Shirshov has hired out vessels from its 11-ship fleet for tasks ranging from pure research to searching for sunken treasure (*Science*, 27 May, p. 1278). But one of the institute's best ships—the *Akademik Ioffe*, built in 1990 for polar research—was seized on 18 April when it arrived at Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, to begin an Antarctic tourist cruise. Orchestrating the grab were six German shipyards trying to force the *Ioffe's* sale to pay off debts for repairs to its sister ship, the *Sergei Vavilov*.

Selling the *Ioffe* would erase the debt, says institute director Leonid Savostin. But it would also be an "enormous loss," he says: Although the ship is worth about $50 million, it would fetch much less in a forced sale. Hoping to avert the loss, the Shirshov has paid $206,000 of $1.5 million claimed by the six shipyards.

But the Shirshov disputes the rest of the charges, which it has no money to pay. When the repairs were carried out, says Savostin, the *Vavilov* was managed by a German firm, Polar Shipping. He claims the deal was for Polar Shipping to pay for repairs and profit from subsequent charter fees. So far, however, Polar Shipping has disavowed responsibility for the debt.

Port Stanley's Admiralty Court is expected to rule that the institute—as the *Vavilov's* legal owner—is liable for the debts. Savostin's best hope of saving the *Ioffe*, he says, is to persuade Russia's strapped finance ministry to pony up $1 million to prevent the sale.