SCIENCESCOPE

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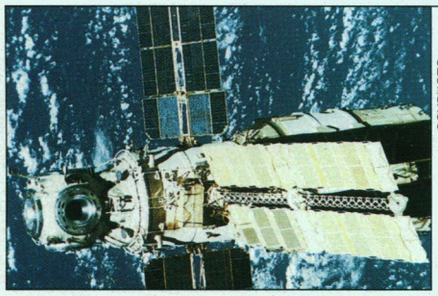

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Blind date. Mir readies for rendezvous with U.S. space shuttle.

Doing the Orbital Shuffle

In a cosmic game of Tinkertoys, Russian cosmonauts and their American colleague aboard the Mir space station are reshuffling scientific modules to make room for the U.S. space shuttle later this month. That joint mission will mark an important milestone in U.S.–Russian space relations and kick off what both sides hope will be long-term cooperation in life sciences and microgravity research, culminating in the international space station.

U.S., European, and Russian scientific equipment for the Mir shuttle mission finally arrived 1 June, when the Spektr module docked with the Russian station. The module was slated to go into orbit earlier this year, but a dispute between Russian customs officials and the Russian Space Agency coupled with technical problems delayed the launch from Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. A similar delay will likely hamper operation of the next module, a remote sensing laboratory called Priroda—Russian for "nature"—that is slated for a November launch, according to U.S. officials.

To fit Spektr and accommodate the space shuttle, the Mir crew moved the 18,000-kg Kristall lab module to another port using a robotic arm and conducted a series of space walks to alter the docking system. The two cosmonauts, with the help of U.S. astronaut Norm Thagard, also transferred Spektr from the center port to the side of Mir to leave a large parking space for the Atlantis orbiter. Once Russian officials signal that all is ready, NASA managers will give the green light for an Atlantis launch in late June.

A Departmental Meeting of Minds

What seemed to be clear-cut positions for and against a Department of Science now are taking on the blurred forms of political compromise.

The plan's author and Science Committee chair, Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), is rethinking which agencies should be merged into the proposed megadepartment, according to Barry Beringer, the committee's general counsel. Beringer told a meeting at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) last week that Walker is thinking of yanking the Environmental Protection Agency from among the components of a Department of Science (*Science*, 31 March, p. 1900) because its main mission is to regulate environmental quality rather than conduct research. "Nothing is carved in stone," Beringer told his audience when it pressed for details of the plan.

Meanwhile, White House officials are making conciliatory noises about a plan that Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) Director Jack Gibbons soundly rejected 2 months ago (*Science*, 21 April, p. 361). Cathie Woteki, OSTP's acting associate director for science, said at the same meeting that opposition to the bill should be tempered by the fact that "context is everything." The proposed elimination of the Energy and Commerce departments, she added, is forcing the White House to keep an open mind.

The academy, meanwhile, is taking a firm wait-and-see position. NAS President Bruce Alberts has not spoken publicly about the topic, and Robert White, outgoing president of the National Academy of Engineering, offered a comprehensive set of pros and cons at the meeting of the academy's Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. The lists were of equal length.

MIT Physicist to OSTP?

Ernest Moniz, chair of MIT's physics department and author of last year's White House document praising the benefits of basic research, is in line to become associate director for science at the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP).

Moniz would replace M.R.C. Greenwood, who left on 1 May to return to the University of California, Davis, as one of four associate directors under OSTP Director Jack Gibbons.

Moniz, 50, was a consultant to OSTP during the drafting of *Science in the National Interest*, the Administration's statement on the importance of peer-reviewed, university-based research. A nuclear physicist and former director of MIT's Bates Linear Accelerator Center, Moniz is described as a top-flight researcher and a strong administrator. "It's a tough job, but he knows he can do it, and he's willing to do it," says a colleague.

Moniz says he is one of several scientists with whom Gibbons has discussed the job, but that talk about a possible appointment is "premature." The position requires Senate confirmation.

Goldin Chastises Research Council

Given his frenetic management style, Daniel Goldin is known for his limited patience with the Washington bureaucracy. But while the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) chief can readily goad his own staff into quick action, he has found it harder to convince outside organizations like the National Research Council to pick up the pace. One study of microgravity research conducted for the agency, Goldin complained in a 31 May speech, took more than 2 years to complete.

And the council, part of the National Academy of Sciences, often takes a jaundiced view of the space program, claims Goldin: "There is a love/hate relationship between NASA and the academy. ...We would like it to be more objective."

Aware of Goldin's frustrations, academy President Bruce Alberts set up a panel of outside experts to examine the council's work. Alberts appointed Harold Forsen, a retired Bechtel executive, to scrutinize the council's Aeronautics and Space Engineering Board and the Space Studies Board. The six-member panel met 25 and 26 May to examine whether the boards' work is timely, responsive, and objective. Results are due this fall.

Goldin argues that the boards should take a new and faster approach. For example, it recently completed a study of the space physics mission Gravity Probe-B in about 6 months, "and we got a quality report that didn't have to reach consensus so it wasn't watered down," he says.

Academy officials say they sympathize with Goldin, but note that the studies are done by volunteers and often require in-depth review. "It's tough," says academy spokesperson Susan Turner-Lowe. "We want to be responsive, but there are limits."

Franz to Take Reins of Army Medical Institute

After 3 years of coping with difficult budget cuts and emerging disease threats, Army Col. Ernest Takafuji is leaving his job as chief of the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. The Army is rotating him into the top job at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, and his successor will be his deputy, Col. David Franz, 49. He is an 8-year institute veteran with experience both as an administrator and an investigator of malaria.

Takafuji

Franz faces a tough task. The institute's budget peaked in 1991 at $30 million and is expected to fall to $20 million by 1997; its staff is expected to shrink from 657 to 524 over the same period. "There are going to be cuts," he says. "My concern is that we do not get lumped in with health care as cuts are made."