

WORD PROCESSOR: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE COLLECTION

Report: Possibility of Intelligent Life Elsewhere in the Universe
Or, the virtues of starting at home
Sarah Leonard

In 1958, America plunged into her most fantastical Cold War adventure: the Space Race. Sputnik had been successfully launched, the Soviets were gaining intergalactic territory, and American experts in Manifest Destiny called for conquest on a new frontier. Go up, young man! This was national security as adventure, patriotism as fantasy, the search for client states on Mars. And in this spirit of destiny, we did the all-American thing: we formed a congressional committee. The Select Committee on Astronautics and Space Exploration began America's space program in earnest by founding the permanent Congressional Committee on Science and Astronautics that year, and by establishing NASA.

One can imagine two types of American eyeballs on NASA's Apollo 11 when it gained the moon in 1969. Children who gathered around television sets gazed at an impossible landscape, the stuff of dreams. The cooler eyes of veteran cold warriors beheld a vision of scientific triumphalism. "I just can't tell you how proud we all are of what you have done," intoned Nixon to the astronauts. "For every American this has to be the proudest day of our lives, and for people all over the world I am sure that they, too, join with Americans in recognizing what an immense feat this is." *The Soviet Union better recognize.* And space exploration would continue to embody this tension between power and fantasy. The congressional report, produced in 1977 for the House Committee on Science and Technology, was published in the year that both NASA's Enterprise and George Lucas's Star Wars were launched into orbit.

Star Wars itself quickly came to inhabit that sweet spot between nerdy fantasy and blow-em-up national security. Actor-president Ronald Reagan's notorious "Star Wars" program tilted far enough toward fantasy to yield mostly derision. The purpose of the program was defense, the scientific deployment of our resources against enemy nukes. But the system proposed by Reagan was impossible, an absurdity of cosmic retribution better suited to his films. Nonetheless, our perpetual mocking of Reagan's folly seems like an attempt to reaffirm our own ability to distinguish between what the government can actually do, and what we saw in a Tom Cruise movie once. This is really possible; that isn't. This is a pipe dream; that is hard-nosed defense spending. But really, in a world dominated by unmanned cyborg-drones, who can tell? Reagan is hardly the outlier in drawing a hyphen, not a line, between science and fiction.

Witness NASA's late Institute for Advanced Concepts. *Wired*, drooling all over this cyberutopian bat cave, celebrated the institute as a "mashup of Willy Wonka's factory, DARPA and your crazy uncle's garage workshop". Until its 2007 shuttering, the institute worked on such implausibles as a "Single-Fluid Consumable Infrastructure for Life Support, Power, Propulsion, and Thermal Control" (I think this is edible gasoline?) and "Antimatter Driven Sail for Deep Space Missions." The IAC revels in mysticism, notably in a section of its website entitled "What is Revolutionary?":

The term "Revolutionary" has many interpretations in the context of a multitude of recognized fields of endeavor. It is not unusual for synergy between seemingly unrelated disciplines to inspire creative paradigm changes resulting in "Revolutionary" breakthroughs. In the context of a focus on advanced concepts, NIAC defines "Revolutionary" as possessing one or more of the following six attributes:

1. The genius is in the generalities, and not the details.
2. The new idea illuminates a pathway toward an expansion of knowledge and may address a significant roadblock.
3. It inspires others to produce useful science and further elaboration of the fundamental idea.
4. It contributes to a major change in the framework of aerospace possibilities.
5. It triggers a transformation of intuition.
6. Revolutionary paradigm shifts are simple, elegant, majestic, beautiful and characterized by order and symmetry.

All this mumbo jumbo about synergistic revolutions fits neatly with more up-to-date technoutopian projects like *Wired* editor Kevin Kelley's *What Does Technology Want?* Regarding technologies to which we have affixed utopian missions, it makes sense to put our money and our time at their disposal and just "see what will happen." Who are we to thwart the world-historic mission of our computers?

The congressional report before you is a comical attempt to be reasonable. It seeks to impose some control over our starry futuregaze with the rigorous indexing and reporting characteristic of its dry, dry genre. I suspect it is included in the library's collection for its artistic renderings of animals on other planets. The location of the bandersnatch's mouth(s) may surprise you! To be fair, these animals were created for a rather inventive Smithsonian exhibit called Pick-a-Planet, but their inclusion here does not enhance the credibility of the report. Entitled "Possibility of Intelligent Life Elsewhere in the Universe," it seems dedicated first and foremost to taking all our insane dreams about outer space and stuffing them back within the bounds of rationality. But our fantasies keep slipping out.

"As we learn more and more about ourselves and the universe we live in," writes Florida congressman Don Fuqua in the opening letter of transmittal, "the more likely it appears

that intelligence beyond the bounds of our planets may exist. If we are to react rationally to such possibilities we must study and understand the knowledge which currently exists in this field. This document is a contribution to that understanding." The slim document is meticulously organized into sections and subsections of subsections. It explores the possibilities of life on specific planets, modes of potential communication, relevant aircrafts, and so on. Should we save space on our radio spectrum for alien contact? What are the odds of life on Mars? On each new page, the report struggles to pin logical categories on a slippery reality based mostly in fantasies about outer space. "There are, of course, certain risks involved in coming into contact with an alien, probably superior, intelligence, and the consequences depend in part upon whether the contact is a face-to-face encounter in which 'they' have arrived at our doorstep, or if we have intercepted a radio signal from them." Right, or whether they arrive as a gaseous substance that kills on contact or enormously intelligent hamsters. By the end of the report, but just before the appendix of bandersnatches and hexalopes, the author has capitulated to absurdity. "Any discussion of what social attitudes aliens might have or their intentions toward Earth is as speculative as describing their physical characteristics, since we have only ourselves as an example. Since their history is apt to be vastly different from ours, we are unlikely to have very much in common."

But at least the hexalopes are cool. The struggle to impose order on all these fantasies has been dumped into the lap of government scientists and regulators by a nervous national security apparatus in pursuit of space domination. The proper custodians of our star fantasies might be novelists, philosophers, fiction-writers, explorers of our relationship with the infinite. Fiction is more fun, anyway. One need only watch "To Serve Man," a 1962 episode of the Twilight Zone, to get a quick diagnosis of human hubris in space. Tall, humanoid aliens land on Earth, heal the environment, end the Cold War, and leave the humans a book with the translated title *To Serve Man*. As cryptographer Michael Chambers prepares to board the aliens' ship for a trip to their world, his fellow code-breaker runs screaming toward him, having just translated the rest of the book. "Stop, stop!" she cries. "It's a cookbook!" Personally, I feel more prepared to deal with aliens already. And with the last space shuttle now launched, it remains to be seen how next we will pursue intelligent life.

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