



North American
AstroPhysical Observatory

North American AstroPhysical Observatory (NAAPO)



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[Article in magazine started on page 35]

Letters:

By: Editors

Letters are always welcome but owing to the volume it is not possible to acknowledge all of them. Also due to space limitations we reserve the right where necessary to condense or edit the contents. Letters may be addressed to: Editorial Dept., **COSMIC SEARCH**, P.O. Box 293, Delaware, Ohio 43015.

COSMIC SEARCH:

Enclosed, please find a copy of a letter I recently received from Senator William Proxmire on the subject of his efforts to squelch the NASA SETI program. The thrust of his argument is the unlikeliness of detection, decoding ability and usefulness. The portion of the Congressional Record he enclosed, indicates that he cited heavily from Professor Tipler's papers to support his contention that the 'best' scientists believe ETI does not exist.

Barry A. Perlman
Fox Observatory
Dania, Florida

Nov. 2, 1981

Mr. Barry A. Perlman
P.O. Box 31
Dania, Florida 33004

Dear Mr. Perlman:

It was good of you to let me know of your opposition to my amendment which deleted funding for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

I am enclosing a copy of a statement I made on the floor of the Senate outlining why I believe this is not the time to spend Federal tax dollars on such an effort.

Although I was interested to learn that the Soviet Union is pursuing its own search for extraterrestrial intelligence, the mere fact of Soviet involvement does not mean that we would be foolish not to continue our own program. The Soviet Union does not always make wise expenditures any more than the United States does, and I think that as unlikely as it is that we will receive radio signals from an extraterrestrial source it is more unlikely by far that such signals will contain technological information of significant value to the Soviet Union or the United States, even assuming that we could decipher the signals into meaningful language.

In any event, let me assure you that I'll keep your views in mind as debate on the

issue continues.

Sincerely,
(Signed) *Bill Proxmire*
William Proxmire, U.S.S.
U.S. Senate
Committee on Appropriations

Congressional Record

Senate

July 30, 1981

Mr. PROXMIRE. Mr. President, I send an amendment to the desk and ask for its immediate consideration.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The amendment will be stated.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Wisconsin (Mr. Proxmire) proposes an unprinted amendment numbered 338:

On page 29, line 9, immediately before the period, insert the following:

Provided: That none of these funds shall be used to support the definition and development of techniques to analyze extraterrestrial radio signals for patterns that may be generated by intelligent sources.

Mr. PROXMIRE. Mr. President, 3 years ago, NASA requested \$2 million for a program titled "Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence" — SETI for short.

The idea was that they are going to try to find intelligence outside the solar system. Our best scientists say that that intelligent life would have to be beyond our galaxy. I have always thought if they were going to look for intelligence, they ought to start right here in Washington. It is hard enough to find intelligent life right here. It may even be harder, I might say, than finding it outside our solar system. At any rate, this \$2 million would have funded the initiation of an all-sky, all-frequency search

for radio signals from intelligent extraterrestrial life using existing antennas of Deep Space Network at Goldstone, Calif., and some state-of-the-art hardware that was to be developed specifically for the program. The total cost of the program was to be \$15 million over 7 years.

These funds were stricken from the fiscal year 1979 HUD-independent agencies appropriation bill a few months after I gave NASA a "Golden Fleece" for the proposed project, which I thought should be postponed for a few million light-years. [Note the incorrect use of the term "light-years"; the correct term should have been "years".]

I have since discovered that the project has been continued at a subsistence level despite our decision to delete these funds 3 years ago. In 1980 NASA spent \$500,000 on the project. The 1981 budget was \$1 million. NASA plans to spend an additional [sic; "additional" should be "additional"] \$1 million in 1982 to continue the definition and development of techniques to analyze extraterrestrial radio signals for patterns that may be generated by intelligent sources.

Mr. President, clearly the Congress intended to stop this research back in 1978 when it terminated funding for the program. However, NASA has quietly continued the work under its exobiology program. I believe the rationale for the reduction we made 3 years ago still applies, and the amendment I have just sent to the desk would reaffirm that decision by prohibiting NASA from using funding provided in today's bill to pursue the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

Why should we stop this program, Mr. President?

First, if NASA launches a full scale SETI program the total cost will be at least \$50.9 million over 10 years. This is a luxury we can ill afford at a time when we are making a herculean effort to cut Federal spending.

Second, there is an excellent chance that extraterrestrial intelligent beings do not exist. An article appearing in the April 1981 issue of Physics Today, written by a professor of mathematical physics at Tulane University, Frank J. Tipler, spelled out this thesis in great detail. Professor Tipler's central point is that if intelligent beings did exist elsewhere and possessed the technology for interstellar communication they would have developed interstellar travel and thus would already be present in

our solar system. Certainly, there is not a scintilla of evidence that intelligent life exists beyond our solar system.

Third, even if a radio message had been beamed to our planet from some distant civilization, it could well have originated well over a million years ago. The Earth itself is 4 1/2 billion years old while some solar systems are even older and millions of light-years from Earth. Thus the intelligent life that sent the message might well be extinct by the time we received it or, certainly, by the time we responded. Communication over such great distances is almost meaningless.

Finally, Mr. President, if we continue to allow NASA to pursue this effort to intercept signals from some hypothetical intelligent civilization, we are sending exactly the wrong signal to the American taxpayer.

We should worry more about improving our ability to communicate with our neighbors on planet Earth and worry a little less about interstellar conversation. In this year of all years we should not fritter away precious Federal dollars on a project that is almost guaranteed to fail. I hope my colleagues will support my amendment to stop this ridiculous waste of the taxpayer's dollars.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Who yields time?

Mr. GARN. Mr. President, on this amendment, the Senator from Wisconsin and I do not disagree. I realize he has a great deal more experience, having been in the Senate a lot longer than I and trying to find intelligence in Washington. I suppose that, at the very least, if we were going to spend the money, it would make more sense to transfer it for that search, but that probably would be just as wasteful as the Senator has pointed out. I am willing to accept the amendment.

Mr. HUDDLESTON. Mr. President, on this side, we, too, are willing to accept the amendment of the Senator from Wisconsin and commend him for his diligence in ferreting out unnecessary expenditures and seeking to reduce them.

Nov. 5, 1981

Senator William Proxmire
5241 Dirksen Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Promire:

Thank you for your letter of November 2nd in which you express your views of my earlier correspondence. I have read your letter and attached statement you made on the Senate floor several times and because of its familiarity dug up some historical information I had kept for some years.

I discovered that in the mid 1800s, one of your colleagues made an almost identical speech on the floor of the Congress in which he labeled as a waste of the taxpayer's money the proposal of Mr. Morse to construct a telegraph line between the city of Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Md. In his presentation, he outlined the lack of feasibility, practicality and usefulness of such a project. In retrospect, of course, we now know he was right. After all, who would want to communicate with Baltimore, anyway?

Sincerely,
Barry A. Perlman
Dania, Florida

The "Proxmire Effect"

Please note that Senator Proxmire cites Tipler in support of his contentions. Tipler, in turn, bases his argument on one whopper of an assumption, namely, that a technological civilization would build highly-intelligent self-replicating Bracewell probes which would over run the galaxy in a few million years. (See "People and Places", page 33; also **COSMIC SEARCH**, no. 2, page 48). Since we have no evidence of such probes in the solar system, Tipler concludes that we must, therefore, be alone in our galaxy. One of a number of flaws in Tipler's argument is that if the technological civilization had a Senator Proxmire, its probes would never have been launched. Thus, the "Proxmire effect" could stagnate a civilization and nullify the "Bracewell effect". In other words, if other civilizations are afflicted with the "Proxmire effect", Senator Proxmire's arguments are invalid and THEY really might be out there without our knowing it until such time as we chance upon some of their incidental radio signals.

— Ed.



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Designed by Jerry Ehman.

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