

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The question and answer session opened with Stephen Doyle requesting clarification from Roger Malina on the statement in his paper that objections from religious fundamentalists had played a significant role in the demise of the NASA SETI program. Malina had emphasized the role of religious pressures in terminating the program, but Doyle indicated that this was the first he had heard of this.

In response to Doyle's question Malina noted the substantial volume of „hate mail“ received at NASA centers concerning the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Malina noted that the NASA Advisory Council, of which he is a member, was aware and took into consideration this extremist opposition to the program.

Thomas Pierson, Executive Director of the SETI Institute, offered a point of clarification to the exchange between Doyle and Malina. It was his information that the decision to terminate the NASA's SETI program was primarily made because of the internal budget pressures within NASA. Pressures were mounting because of overruns on NASA's Space Station budget. Senator Bryant of Nevada, seeing that NASA could not agree as to where to cut its own budget, used the SETI program as a target because he knew about its many critics. Bryant's opposition eventually led to the closing of SETI efforts within NASA.

Roger Malina responded that it is well understood within NASA that SETI is a lightning rod and that is why it is not included in the NASA „Origins“ program at this time. Some educational work needs to be done here within NASA to reestablish SETI's goals and credibility.

The discussion next turned to Francis Lyall's paper „SETI And International Space Law“. Stephen Doyle requested clarification on the number of States that have signed the Moon Agreement of 1979. Dr. Vladimir Kopal noted that so far only nine States have become parties to the 1979 Moon Agreement. Five other States have only signed but not yet ratified it. The most active spacefaring nations are not yet amongst the parties to the Agreement. It was Dr. Kopal's opinion that it would be very desirable to obtain the signatures and eventual ratifications by other nations. Hopefully the provisions of this treaty can be expanded and applied to other bodies in space such as Mars. The essential question for the moment, Kopal noted, is to explore how to make the Moon Agreement acceptable for more nations.

Guillermo Lemarchand inquired as to whether the „common heritage“ language of the Outer Space Treaty could be used to force national governments to release information about a signal from extraterrestrial intelligence if such a signal were discovered. Professor Kopal noted that the language of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty was not „common heritage“, but the „province of all mankind“, which has been open for activities of all nations. The „common heritage“ principle appeared only in the 1979 Moon Agreement and its implementation is still subject to further negotiations. Francis Lyall noted that the only clear reference to life in outer space is in article 5.3 of the Moon Agreement. This requires that the Secretary General of the United Nations be informed of the discovery of any indication of organic life in outer space. This article was drafted, however, without SETI in mind. It is his opinion that this stipulation could not be enforced with regard to SETI.

Dr. John Billingham inquired as to whether the „Declaration of Principles Concerning Activities Following the Detection of Extraterrestrial Intelligence“, could eventually become a

treaty among nations. Francis Lyall noted to Dr. Billingham that treaties are agreements between States. States must sign and then ratify treaties. In order to initiate this long and difficult process you must have a sponsor country or countries to bring forth the issue.

Dr. Lubos Perek endorsed the idea of moving the „Declaration of Principles“ toward the treaty stage and recommended that we pursue the necessary steps to begin this process. Michael A. Michaud recommended that we do not push for a treaty at this stage. Such a move would be perceived as an attempt at overregulation. At present, the best strategy is to stimulate thought about the detection protocol rather than to seek to implement it at a treaty level. Professor Vladimir Kopal indicated his approval of Michaud’s suggestion.

Dr. Peter Schenkel proposed that we seriously consider a „landing protocol“ should an extraterrestrial spacecraft make a physical contact with Earth. Michael Michaud noted that this was an event with extremely low probability and that it would not be to our benefit to explore it. This is a matter that is clearly outside the traditional confines of SETI as an enterprise.

In closing, Dr. Roger Malina asked for guidance on establishing the boundary beyond which one should not go in speaking to the media as an expert on a subject. Dr. Malina noted the rush of media to interview him on the subject of „Mars life“, when he was actually not directly involved in the research. Seth Shostak noted that the people who actually do the work should speak as the real experts, but often they are not allowed to be forthcoming. As individuals we must identify what our connections or lack of connections with the project under discussion are. We must state our knowledge limitations. We must be careful in the future to not sequester the real experts from contact with the media.

The Scientific-Legal Roundtable on SETI and Society was then adjourned.

Donald E. Tarter
Rapporteur