

THE FORUM FORUM

Most Americans may not realize it, but the United States Government now has what amounts to an official intra-galactic policy. Our position was formulated in the decision to allow the Pioneer and Voyager space probes to go beyond the solar system carrying messages designed to communicate with alien beings. Included among

the items for alien perusal are: pulsar-based maps that give the exact location of the earth; pictures of the tree toad, the DNA structure, and the human sex organs; musical selections from Bach, Beethoven, and Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode"; recorded sounds of whales, mudpots, and a hyena; and a message from President Carter very reminiscent of his early campaign speeches.

Despite what might seem a clear parallel between intra-galactic and international affairs, foreign policy considerations were apparently ignored in adopting this open-door posture. Neither Kissinger nor Brzezinski, for example, were consulted, although passing over Kissinger may have been a charitable act: one shudders to think of the myriad possibilities under a balance of power approach on an intra-galactic scale. Instead, the policy was proposed by NASA and apparently considered by Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter to be a scientific, not a political, matter. Yet if there is anything serious about these efforts at communication — and the large consultant fees spent in preparing the messages suggests this was the case — one might well question the wisdom of substituting a scientific judgment based on the precept of a free and universal exchange of knowledge for a political judgment based on assumptions derived from the conduct of international affairs. Our decision to allow open communication carries the equivalent danger of an aboriginal tribesman's advertis-

Intra-Galactic Politics

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ing his tribe's existence by sending a smoke signal to an unexplored world "out there." Unless in desperate straits, such an enthusiastic effort at communication might well be an act that the tribe would live to regret. Human understanding has supposedly advanced from these primitive beginnings, not only in the realm of science but in political affairs as well. But lapses into utter thoughtlessness give one reason for pause. Scientists now often complain — and with some justice — about the insidious uses to which politicians sometimes put their discoveries. Yet this should not obscure the fact that politicians may have equal cause for concern over the scientists' neglect of the most elementary political considerations. The scientist lives in a world and perhaps a universe of non-scientists. The ideal community of scientists bears little resemblance to the so-called community of nations, nor, perhaps, to what President Carter referred to in his Voyager message as the "community of galactic civilizations."

All this talk about intra-galactic politics might seem to lie within the province of science fiction, not public policy. So perhaps it is to science fiction that we should look for instruction in these matters — and specifically to the two sci-fi movie blockbusters that captured Americans' attention in 1977, *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Part of the success of *Star Wars* was attributed to its being pure entertainment and an escape from reality. But this opinion is open to question. Viewers may have sensed in the movie what some of our policymakers have forgotten: that the nature of intra-galactic politics, like that of international relations, is likely to resemble a Thucydidean universe of strife and conflict where force rules. The film portrays a despotic power bent on subjugating the entire galaxy and establishing a universal order under the dominance of a tyrannic regime. But the scheme is foiled by the courageous exploits of a remnant monarchic order fighting to preserve traditional principles of human rights. The monarchy prevails over the new scientific despotism by the old-fashioned method of military force. The movie's only deviation from a traditional understanding of conflict is found in the monarchy's reliance on the "Force" — a power that resembles Rollo May's thought in action. This flight to fantasy may have been a necessary concession to assuage the subconscious fears of Americans at a time when the United States is falling dangerously behind the Soviet Union in the international arms race.

The other movie, *Close Encounters*, is on the surface more realistic and serious — and thus at times unavoidably more pretentious. It points to a very different kind of intra-galactic order, one based on the principles of Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. Of course, from the plot of the movie itself, one cannot be certain that the visiting aliens are public emissaries carrying out official intra-galactic policy; it may be that they are only the extraterrestrial equivalent of American anthropologists studying natives in New Guinea on a Ford Foundation grant. Yet the emphasis placed on the kindness and "humanism" of the

aliens — with the sole exception of some temporary kidnappings — is no doubt designed to suggest a benevolent universe. Science and reason evolve to the point where force is no longer necessary; all are citizens of the universe. This noble and uplifting vision is supported by the central theme of the movie: languages, by which people are divided into distinct and particular entities, are overcome through communication by a single universal “language” based on musical tonality. Of course the acceptance of this vision — which is the vision of science — runs directly counter to the Biblical teaching. According to Genesis, God created a Babel of different languages precisely because science in a universal state was being employed for a mischievous end to discover what man should not know. The suggestion is surely that Divine wisdom includes knowledge of the practical precept of divide and conquer.

What assumptions underlie our own view of intra-galactic affairs? Popular opinion — as registered at the movie box offices — apparently is disposed to accept the “hard” view of *Star Wars* more than the “soft” one of *Close Encounters*. But policy is not made by public opinion, and just as in the conduct of international relations, the decisions on galactic affairs lie in the hands of those with more “enlightened” views than the citizenry at large. In any event, the operative vision behind American policy is the one implicitly contained in *Close Encounters*. It is a testimony to the essential trustfulness of one segment of enlightened opinion that we ignore all earthly experience and place our faith in the existence of a universal empire of perfect wisdom and virtue. Otherwise, we might be hesitant to offer — free of charge and without precondition — some very valuable information, such as where we are and what we are made of. If the aliens are not as peaceful as some suppose — and if the usual conditions of scarcity apply to the universe no less than to the earth — it is a good bet that at this very moment there are alien intelligence agents scouring the galaxy for just this kind of scoop. (Indeed, science fiction buffs need hardly be reminded that in last year’s movie *Star Trek* unknown aliens transform our long-lost Voyager probe into an earth-threatening monster.)

Fortunately, if we have erred by our imprudence, our sins will not be visited upon our children, our children’s children, nor even their children, unless, of course, science has by then managed to create a race of Methuselahs. According to NASA, the probes will not reach another solar system for at least 40,000 years — time enough, perhaps, for us to re-examine our position.