

OFF THE BEAT

Apollo-Soyuz as news

Despite the tired journalistic adage that "names make news," it is often difficult to understand why so many reporters, some with considerable experience, often seem so ready to sacrifice useful information for a "quotable quote." Yet during the Apollo-Soyuz rendezvous mission, where thousands of reporters at Kennedy Space Center in Florida and hundreds more outside of Houston created a mood reminiscent of the coverage of Apollo 11's lunar journey, it repeatedly seemed that the real news—what it's like working with a Soviet half and what it will mean in the future—was being ignored in favor of attempts to get the two sides to score points against each other. Hardly an insightful approach, since few were pretending that the mission represented love, kisses and open skies all around.

For five years, officials of both countries had been working their tortuous way toward a wary hand-holding, dealing with countless technical and diplomatic issues so that each side would be able to present an equally cooperative image. All manner of minutiae—who can go where, how many individuals will take part in such-and-such an exchange—were carefully balanced, sometimes only after considerable haggling, and no involved NASA flight director or program manager was even about to imperil such a touchy arrangement in a public briefing. Yet time after time, transparently loaded questions (predictably met with predictable, and journalistically useless, platitudes) were tossed into the fray, rather than less-baited queries that might have produced some information leading to insight. Even though many reporters were interested in the reality and practicality of the convoluted, bilingual communications system used during the flight, for example, a simplistic question about whether air traffic control interference from the ground was a "foul-up" substantially reduced hopes of finding out during that briefing how the laboriously earned cooperation was turning out in practice. In the middle of a precarious cease-fire on a battlefield, is it worth throwing firecrackers just to see if one tense protagonist will shoot at the other?

The result was that some members of the press felt themselves to be working in a vacuum. The significance of the flight lay not in nuts and bolts but in intangibles: How much has the Soviet Union opened up, will there be more space cooperation in the future, etc. Yet it was often the nuts and bolts issues that were pursued in dogged detail, while the political concerns were repeatedly subjugated by the thirst for blame.

None of this means, obviously, that such subjects are verboten. Far from it. They are the express business of the press and warrant continued and diligent pursuit. But in a public relations-conscious atmosphere such as that of "astro-detente," loaded questions in public simply are not going to get the job done.

Of course, some of the goals of the mission cannot be evaluated immediately. It will be a matter of weeks or months until scientific results are in, and any political gains may not show up for years, if ever. There was also a substantial portion of the press contingent who apparently felt that the whole mission was little more than a boondoggle (the U.S. investment could have paid a substantial part of another Skylab flight, for example). Perhaps it follows that clichéd comments from a few officials were all that was warranted.

There were positive approaches, of course, notably the historical overview offered by Harry Walsh, associate professor of Russian at the University of Houston, who was enlisted as a commentator by Houston's KTRH radio. A veteran of several trips to the Soviet Union, Walsh provided some of the most interesting and informative analysis of ASTP-related Soviet history and motivations to be found during the mission.

—Jonathan Eberhart

BIOMEDICINE

Perils of hang gliding

Some 10,000 Americans are now participating in the sport of hang gliding. It consists of harnessing oneself under a sail, then running off a cliff or mountain, carried by the pleasure of the wind to turf far below. But under unfavorable conditions, this brazen adventure can bring death or serious injury. William B. Krissoff and Ben Eiseman, surgeons at the University of Colorado Medical School, report case histories to illustrate the dangers in the July 14 *JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*.

On Nov. 24, 1973, a hang glider instructor and holder of world gliding records was gliding off Green Mountain west of Denver. He knew his craft had poor dive recovery, but according to his friends was "the kind of guy who explored the outer limits of whatever he did." His sail went into a stall configuration, then a steep dive. He suffered brain damage and death.

Several other divers experienced nonfatal but serious fractures, one because of unpredicted wind change, another because the knot slipped on his harness, and still a third because he hang glided after taking LSD. One diver, who flew into high-tension wires hidden by trees, suffered such severe burns on his hands and forearms that they had to be amputated.

Hypnosis and pain relief

There exist certain similarities between the relief of pain and distress by hypnosis and the relief of pain and distress by heroin and other opiate drugs. So pharmacologist Avram Goldstein and psychologist Ernest R. Hilgard, both of Stanford University, decided to test whether hypnotic relief of pain and distress works through the same nerve pathways as opiate relief of pain and distress.

They had three subjects submit to a tourniquet exercise to determine their pain and distress threshold levels. Then they hypnotized the subjects. None of the subjects expressed pain, and only one expressed some mild distress toward the end of the session. In a subsequent experiment, the subjects were injected with naloxone, a specific opiate antagonist known to act precisely in the area of the brain where opiate receptors are located. Once again the subjects were hypnotized and asked to do the tourniquet exercise; once again hypnosis spared them pain and distress.

Because the opiate antagonist failed to interfere with hypnotic pain relief, Goldstein and Hilgard conclude in the June *PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES* that hypnotic analgesia and opiate analgesia do not act through the same nerve pathways.

Cancer and chromosomal quirks

What makes cancer cells grow wild? Scientists still aren't certain, but some think it might be abnormal chromosomes. Patients with Burkitt's lymphoma have been found to have a bizarre chromosome 14, patients with meningiomas a strange chromosome 22, and leukemia patients irregular chromosomes 7, 8 and 9 (SN: 2/22/75, p. 123).

Now further evidence that cancer growth may be triggered by chromosomal quirks is reported in the June *PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES* by Barbara Kaiser McCaw and her team at the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center. They have found that patients with the genetic disorder ataxia-telangiectasia have an abnormal chromosome 14. These patients also are susceptible to lymphoid cancers.

How might chromosomal abnormalities lead to unchecked cell growth? Possibly by altering genes on the chromosomes, because genes are known to be the first step in cell growth.