

Some of the early criticism that greeted this proposal claimed that the science court would be just another elitist institution. Barry Commoner was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying the court was "a very serious attempt to reintroduce authoritarianism in science," and that he saw "no reason to change the present system" of judging the validity of scientific facts. Thus one reason for holding this week's meeting, at the Xerox Center at Leesburg, Va., was to smoke out potential opposition and correct specific weaknesses in the proposal before conducting an experiment. The colloquium was sponsored by the Department of Commerce, the National Science Foundation, and the AAAS.

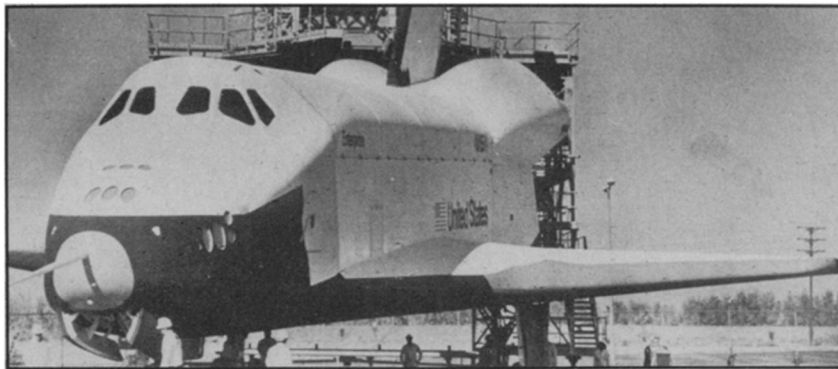
The most wide-ranging criticism came from anthropologist Margaret Mead, who nevertheless supports the idea of establishing a new institution to adjudicate technical disputes. The term "science court," she says, conjures up visions of yet another expensive Washington institution with an entrenched bureaucracy and bad architecture. Reaching a verdict of guilt, encouraging the confrontation of adversaries bent on winning, or allowing interest groups to finance their side's advocate "are all incompatible with scientific discourse and the methods of science."

The key to success, she says, is to maintain an attitude of seeking the truth—not "winning"—and that this will require a new kind of professional, trained in the skills of cross-examination, but devoted to the spirit of science.

As the colloquium progressed and other objections were raised to both the semantics and procedures of the original proposal, "science court" grew to "scientific and technical board of inquiry," and legalistic complications sprouted apace. Public interest lawyer James S. Turner talked of the difficulty in keeping the new institution from becoming "the supreme court of science," thus shutting off research funds for scientists with dissenting views. Still, he said, early face-to-face confrontation on technical issues might speed up the regulatory process, where debates on social policy "are being inhibited by the scientific community's inability to speak articulately."

In the end, of course, whether the science court (or board, or whatever) gets off the ground depends on whether a government agency wants it enough to pay for it. General murmurs of praise, though no money, were offered at the meeting by various high officials, including presidential science adviser H. Guyford Stever, Secretary of Commerce Elliott L. Richardson and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell E. Train. Kantrowitz told *SCIENCE NEWS* he is hopeful that some sort of pilot project can be started within a matter of months, probably at a university, with funds from the National Science Foundation. □

Space shuttle: An enterprising debut



The heart of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's "space transportation system" of the future made its formal debut on Sept. 17, when it rolled out of its assembly hangar at Rockwell International's Palmdale, Calif., facility. To be launched from a pad like a conventional rocket, the space shuttle will deliver and retrieve a variety of manned and unmanned payloads, returning to earth glider-style on a pair of stubby, swept-back wings. There is less than unanimous opinion about whether the shuttle's reusability will live up to its original economic justification. Even within NASA, sources cite predicted costs from \$20 million per launch to more than twice that. But it has the job, and it's spectacular. It is just possible, however, that one of the huge vehicle's more important contributions to the space program was reflected at the rollout by the name printed on its side in stern, sans-serif type: Enterprise.

It is already an oft-told story. The space agency was all set to name the first shuttle "Constitution," but more than 60,000 letters to NASA and the White House from fans of television's "Star Trek" prompted President Ford to overrule the agency and name it after the interstellar spacecraft of the series. Opinions within NASA run from "great!" (Trekkies are everywhere), to indifference, to (in the words of a high NASA official), "Here come the exploiters." The majority, at least, seems to feel that, good or bad, it doesn't make much difference. I disagree.

Like the letter-writing campaign that once saved the TV show from cancellation, the "Enterprise Incident" was, in part, a managed affair. Many avid Star Trek fans circulated petitions, urged friends to write and generally struggled to get out the vote. But what matters is that in the surprisingly isolated world of the space program (despite its occasionally spectacular press), it worked.

Star Trek is not the point. It would have been the same if all those letters had asked for the shuttle to be named "Pinocchio." The point is that a whole lot of people asked something of the space program—and got it. The operative difference here between Trekkies and others interested in space seems only to be that the Trekkies know that it can pay to stand up and be counted.

Except for Trekkies, space enthusiasts (and there are many of them) are an unaccountably reticent lot. Many attendees at meetings of the American Astronomical Society's Division of Planetary Sciences, often depending for their lives' work on data provided by NASA's interplanetary spacecraft, seem surprised anew, year after year, at pep talks warning that they'd better make themselves heard or risk running out of data to work on. Astronomers sat on their hands for nearly two years before the off-again-on-again status of the Large Space Telescope panicked some of them into a little serious, organized support.

A 1974 column I wrote in *SCIENCE NEWS* about the wonders and importance of the first manned lunar landing evoked a huge reader response in an almost unanimous agreement, but a large percentage of the respondents also indicated that they thought themselves to be virtually alone in their concern. Trekkies, however, have been referred to in some quarters as the "lost space constituency," the primary difference being only that they are aware of one another and of the strength of their numbers.

The space shuttle will leave the ground for the first time next February, when it will be tested, unmanned, while bracketed to the top of a 747 jet. In May, it will be carried aloft with a crew, with untethered landing tests scheduled for July, and its first orbital mission is targeted for March of 1979. Naming it "Enterprise" was no big deal; NASA itself had considered the name, though for reasons of the name's distinguished naval history. But perhaps by the time the shuttle reaches that first orbit, the country's space enthusiasts will have thought of something else they want badly enough to ask.

—Jonathan Eberhart