

PERSPECTIVES

Going spacey

As people ponder the possibility of life on Mars, America gets space crazy



It's the year 2001, the start of the new millennium. NASA has launched a mission to Mars in search of alien life, the world has yet to experience the fiery Armageddon Nostradamus prophesied and *Titanic* is still number one at the box office. It's the stuff science fiction is made of, right?

Not anymore. Federal agencies currently are designing a laboratory to protect Earth from any alien microbes that might be contained in samples a planned expedition to Mars might bring back.

But what if these missions to Mars turn up nothing? What if the samples contain nothing but space dust minus any cuddly alien life forms? What happens to all the American industries who have profited so heavily from supposed extraterrestrial life?

After all, a substantial chunk of the entertainment industry is centered around the possibility of alien life.

Think *Independence Day*, *Alien Resurrection*, *E.T.* Think Spacehog and UFOFU. Think Marvin the Martian and Space Ghost.

Think "Mork and Mindy," "The X-files," "A.L.F." From Roswell to *Men in Black*, popular culture is obsessed with the possibility of aliens and government conspiracy. If aliens fail to be discovered, will all of America's fantasies about extraterrestrial life suddenly vanish?

It is highly unlikely. Simply because a mission to Mars yields absolutely no evidence of aliens does not mean there is not life out there somewhere, right? At least that is what Hollywood and the rest of the entertainment folks are banking on: American's ability to believe in something or someone even in the face of glaring evidence.

Think Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky.



JENNIFER JONES
columnist

But then again, what if this planned space expedition does turn up something? Think of the marketing possibilities.

Just as M&M's is the "official" candy of the new millennium, Mars Bars will no doubt become the official candy of alien microbes. And why stop there? When it comes to food, we will all be snacking on Microbe Munchies while watching the final episode of "The X-files" where Mulder prances through FBI headquarters chanting "I told you so" to all of the non-believers.

In an age of remakes and sequel-happy producers, old favorites like "My Favorite Martian" and "Out of This World" will likely make reappearances on our television sets.

Movies will of course get a huge boost from the discovery of life on another planet. *Titanic*, the movie that grossed over a zillion dollars, finally will be pushed out of the number-one slot by *Mars Attacks II*, this time featuring a dismal portrayal of a scary, alien virus attacking Earth's people and destroying the world. Nothing like the fear of annihilation to get people pouring into the box office.

Much like the Barney craze a few years ago, there is no question that children's merchandisers will run with the newest fad. From clothing to videos, no market will be left untapped.

Martians will be everywhere, from velcro sneakers to plastic lunch boxes. Fake alien antennas made out of headbands, pipe cleaners and glitter-covered foam balls will experience a resurgence in popularity and make snazzy party favors at children's birthday parties.

Remember, just because a microbe is not as warm and fuzzy as, say, an Ewok does not mean merchandisers can't turn a buck.

Regardless of what NASA finds in its expeditions to Mars, one thing is certain: America will find a way to profit. And that's OK. Capitalism lives on. Bring on the little green men. Or not. Either way, we're ready for them.

Jennifer Jones is a senior psychology major.

ONE STAR LOWDOWN

Controversy over how to disperse Texas tobacco money divides

The Texas tobacco settlement is the largest court judgment in the history of the United States. The nicotine-nicotine-nicotine agreement to settle the \$15 billion of hard-earned money to the great state.



DAVE JOHNSTON
columnist

When politicians see dollar signs, they get excited. When they get excited, they get careless. The past few months have given us a glimpse into the state's public servants. Almost immediately, a great public debate began over distribution of the money. Texas Attorney General Dan Morales, who was responsible for the suit against the tobacco industry, felt it was his to distribute the cash (minus the legal fees) as he saw fit. The state attorney general ended his spending spree, but decisions still have to be made. Since this suit was brought on behalf of the taxpayers of the state, perhaps they could all benefit from the proceeds. If I took the entire settlement and subtracted the lawyers' chunk of the money (a whopping \$2.3 billion which deserves a lawyer inspection later), that leaves \$12.7 billion dollars.

If this money was evenly distributed among all Texas citizens, each Texan would receive a check for \$678 and change. If Texans generously let the state keep the change, the public coffers would still gain over a million dollars.

Some might argue this plan gives money to an undeserving segment of the population. It is the cigarette smokers that earned this cash for the state. This money is intended to offset the huge medical expenses incurred by long-term tobacco users under state care.

So an alternate plan could involve offering cigarette smokers their portion of the pot — with a few strings. Each tobacco smoker in the state could get a letter offering a check for \$2,700 if they agree never again set foot in a hospital or doctor's office anywhere in the state. If people are willing to play the lottery, they might accept such a generous offer from the folks in Austin.

The state seems to have no problem

spending money, but more a violent discussion has centered around the legal fees related to the ruling.

The attorneys responsible for this settlement were promised 15 percent of the proceeds, but no one expected to dish out \$2.3 billion to the lawyers (as though the remaining \$12.7 billion is suddenly too small an amount).

A similar debate is going on in Florida where lawyers are owed \$2.8 billion of that state's tobacco money. Fortunately, our lawyers selflessly limited their cut to 15 percent instead of the 25 percent demanded by the greedy jurists in the Sunshine State.

In Texas, Morales hired lawyers whose political leanings were similar to his own. In fact, many of the lawyers had contributed to Morales' campaigns (of course, he's not going to hire his arch-rivals).

This leave state Republicans in a serious position. They must make sure good, conservative tobacco money doesn't line the pockets of evil, Democratic lawyers.

The lawyers' portion is definitely hefty. If the money were divided evenly, each lawyer attached to the case will get about \$35 million. This sum is intimidating on its own, but imagine what these legal beagles could do if they pooled their resources.

Assuming it costs \$60 million to run for president, if the entire \$2.3 billion were hidden in a bank, the money would provide enough cash to finance 10 presidential candidates every four years. The country has yet to recover from a single Ross Perot. If Perot bought large chunks of media air time, these guys could rent prime time for the whole month of November.

Texas officials will be locked in arbitration for some time over the final distribution of the tobacco settlement money, and the issue is complicated. Yet the original lawsuit is terribly disturbing. The state has legalized tobacco and taxed its sale for years, but suddenly the elite are seeking more money and blaming big tobacco for all sorts of griefs. Responsibility for widespread tobacco use and illness does not end with the growers and marketers.

Dave Johnston is a senior mathematics major.

STUDENT LIFE

Aggie ring valued more than degrees

Each year new students come to A&M and are indoctrinated as Aggies.

Freshmen and transfers alike are allowed to call themselves Aggies, participate in yells, wear Texas A&M T-shirts and a whole host of other traditions associated with being a student at A&M.

The Aggie ring policy for undergraduates requires one to have a minimum of 95 hours of credit, 60 of which must be earned "in residency" at A&M before one can be permitted to order their class ring. However, one is permitted by the powers at Heaton Hall to transfer into A&M with as few as 36 hours remaining towards their degree.

All 36 hours must then be taken at A&M, however, three years at Po Dunk Junior College and two 18-hour semesters in Aggieland will net one an Aggie degree and subsequently an Aggie ring.

Does this seem odd to anyone else? Our administration has once again gone in so many different directions at once that no one really knows what is going on around here. One of our entities is jaded against the very people it will soon represent and one is biased towards those that have never attended school here.

The policies of Heaton Hall and the Association of Former Students stand in di-



LEN CALLAWAY
columnist

rect conflict with one another and both policies are in need of reevaluation.

The old Aggie adage says "once an Aggie, always an Aggie" not "once one has their ring one is always an Aggie, until such time as one no longer has their ring then they will cease being an Aggie until the ring is replaced." Nor does the yell say "Farmers with rings fight, Farmers with rings fight, Farmers with rings, Farmers with rings, yeah, we're alright."

As one traverses our campus it appears that no one shares the ring office's open hostility toward A&M's transfer students. Nary a T-shirt can be seen with a slogan such as "Highway 6 runs both ways, transfers go back from whence ye came."

However, the ring office seems to feel Aggies are not trustworthy enough to be issued a ring until certain criteria are met. Due to the tradition and honor associated with the Aggie ring, the policy is understandable, but, none the less inappropriate.

A quick phone call to the ring office will reveal that some Aggies used to quit school upon the receipt of their rings and then use the rings for the purpose of jobs. No sensible Aggie would ever invest the time necessary to earn 95 hours of credit toward their Aggie degree, get their ring and say adios.

However, this is exactly what some of our compatriots have done and now reasonable, dedicated and ethical Aggies are paying the price.

Associate Executive Director for Alumni Programs at the Association of Former Students, Porter Garner, has

gone on record recently by saying the policy is meant to "preserve the integrity of the Aggie ring." Mr. Garner is right, the integrity of the Aggie ring does need to be protected and preserved but so does the Aggie degree.

Just in case someone has missed the point, the administration has allowed Heaton Hall and the admissions office to de-value the Aggie degree to the point that it now only takes a minimum of 36 hours to earn the right to graduate from Texas A&M.

There is an obvious and more appropriate alternative available to both entities to remedy this paradox while preserving both sets of interests.

Switch the mandates, that's right, 60 residency hours to earn a degree and 36 for the ring. This way everyone has the ability to earn the privilege of wearing their Aggie ring while still a currently-enrolled student.

Plus, students are required to spend more time in residency at A&M to earn their degree, thereby increasing the likelihood that each student graduating from A&M has had adequate exposure to the A&M curriculum.

Whatever the solution might be, it's a bit ridiculous to protect one's symbol more than one's self. After all, what will an entities symbol be worth if the integrity of the entity is continually at risk for compromise.

Len Callaway is a junior journalism major.



MAIL CALL

Truth should be basis for opinions, not parties

In response to Donny Ferguson's Feb. 26 column:

Is there any sort of requirement that writers in *The Battalion* research their topics before spouting uneducated propaganda on the pages of our newspaper? The most recent edition of Ferguson's ultra-right-wing drivel leads me to believe that there is no such regulation.

First of all, I want to declare I am a conservative, and I am not a supporter of the Clinton administration. But my very own conservative ideals are made to look foolish by Ferguson's uneducated ramblings. The major point Ferguson seems to ignore is Clinton was not involved with the talks in which U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan "forged another 'diplomatic solution.'"

I am, quite possibly, the strongest supporter of military strikes against Iraq, however, I also understand the facts: military strikes do not represent "the will of the global community," as much as I would like that to be the case. Sixty percent of the U.N. Security Council is opposed to this course of action, albeit for selfish reasons involving trade agreements. I have come to the conclusion military action

is the only effective solution. Ferguson may agree with this, but he should not attempt to delude his readers into believing this is the international consensus.

As for the comments about what a "real president" would do ... last time I checked, the Grenada operation and the Persian Gulf War were both undertaken for reasons somewhat less romantic than improving "the prospects for peace ... in the region."

I wouldn't expect Ferguson to understand this, though; if "a high-ranking Republican official" was quoted as saying the goal of the United States was to make the world a better place, then (in the poli-maj-congressional-aide-start-up-kit mentality) that's the way it really must be.

For a long time, I have been annoyed by the liberal lean-

ings of *The Battalion*. But now — liberal or conservative — I am tired of seeing partisan politics espoused in the filth which often occupies the space beneath Ferguson's picture. So please — learn enough about the issues to form an opinion independent of your political ideology, and ... tell the truth. Christopher Mewitt Class of '01

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