

THE JOURNAL OF NUCLEAR MEDICINE (ISSN 0161-5505) is published monthly by the Society of Nuclear Medicine, Inc., 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316. Periodicals postage paid at Herndon, VA, and additional mailing offices. *Postmaster*, send address changes to *The Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, 1850 Samuel Morse Drive, Reston, VA 20190-5316.

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Contrasting Events

A number of remarkable events occurred this past summer.

A team from NASA consisting of U.S. and German scientists successfully landed a small tractorlike vehicle on the surface of Mars. It quickly began sending color images and scientific data back to Earth. It was a remarkable demonstration of engineering, scientific data gathering and international collaboration.

This occurred several days after the Russian space station Mir, piloted by two Russians and an American, lost a good portion of its power when a supply vehicle crashed into key elements of the station while attempting to dock. The crew powered down for a few days while the ground control team prepared to send additional supplies and astronauts trained to repair the orbiting station. Another demonstration of international cooperation, outstanding engineering and scientific information gathering.

The same weekend as the landing of the Martian probe a group gathered in the American Southwest to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the reported landing of a "flying saucer" allegedly "manned" by alien beings who were killed in the crash and removed by U.S. government officials. Thousands of people attended the convention honoring this "event." Admittedly, some attended simply to exploit the commercial aspects of it, and others no doubt attended for the amusement of it all. Still, surveys of public opinion reported that a significant percentage of those queried (reportedly 45%) believe that aliens (intelligent life forms from another planet or galaxy) exist and that the government is suppressing information about them. This gathering was a demonstration of the power of myth, of fancy over fact. It is in stark contrast to the scientific progress taking place around us, much of which is made known to the media and the public as it happens. The contrast between these two extremes does not discourage those who are convinced that aliens have visited the Earth and that the government is withholding information. Fortunately, this contrast does not deter our scientists, engineers or policy makers from proceeding with their exciting work.

Another small news item appeared at the same time. The United Nations had commissioned a study about energy sources in the next century. The report concluded that although a number of renewable energy sources are available as alternatives to fossil fuel in the next quarter century, nuclear energy is the only method that is both environmentally and economically sound. The report also stated that governments are nonetheless unwilling to accept this recommendation because of negative public feelings about nuclear energy despite its overall good safety record (which has even improved since the Chernobyl incident).

The contrast between the real accomplishments of science and engineering and the ability of the public to discriminate between reality and myth and to make decisions based on their observations continues to be the most startling thing of all.

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November 1997