

SPACE LAW

I'll begin with a flat statement: I don't know anything about space law.

But it might be fair to say that nobody else does either!

The problem is this: each country's man or woman in space gets there as a product of his own culture and country, including its laws. It is most probable that his knowledge of law is rudimentary, his principal interests being elsewhere, devoted as they must be to the challenges that traveling in space provide.

Even if there were only one country in space, problems emerge for space travelers. How many decisions are his own? Does mission control dictate every aspect of one's life? Is a space traveler obligated to obey every request from earth? Might each request actually be a command? What rights does he have? Who decides?

Let us now enter a space ship whose occupants are from two different countries. It may be that individuals have separate missions, though in a sense all have the same mission. Now, questions about governing laws can become quite critical.

Suppose that space ship lands in a "new world". What laws will be placed in force?

It has come to my ears that astronauts and cosmonauts have had a good many troubles about "law". Disputes have arisen between men in the space ship and ground control. Arguments within a space ship have occurred between travelers in the same space ship but from different countries. It must be so that difficulties have arisen between controllers on the ground.

Officially, no one wants to talk about these difficulties.

China now has an exceedingly important space program. They too will add to the mix of laws that only a few people will have sufficient experience to be able to make relevant remarks.

I would strongly recommend that there be an international effort to speak frankly about past experiences, and to prepare for experiences that are approaching. This is a good time for such efforts, for they should be relatively inexpensive to accomplish, and in the next few years our space missions are greatly reduced in number. Some smaller expenditure should be a bit easier to come by. Knowledge of space law problems is vitally important and must not be shunted aside.