

Remarks at the Inaugural Press Conference for the Lyman Spitzer Space Telescope

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Today we open our eyes for the first time on a new Universe, the Universe of the Spitzer Space Telescope. With the help of the Spitzer, we can see things that human beings could not see before. We can watch stars being born. We can see planets forming. We can observe galaxies shrouded in dust. We can look to the edge of the visible universe. All of these marvelous things, whose nature Lyman Spitzer explored in pioneering research, we can now observe with infrared vision. For me, and I believe for all astronomers, today seems like a dream come true.

The Spitzer Observatory is performing beyond expectations. This remarkable achievement is the result of a close collaboration between astronomers, NASA scientists and engineers, and the public that supported the Spitzer through elected representatives. In 1991, I chaired the Astronomy Decade Survey Committee for the National Academy of Sciences. Our committee recommended the Spitzer Telescope as the highest priority for all of astronomy and astrophysics. Based on what we heard today, we are getting more science than anticipated for fewer public dollars.

NASA really got this one right!

I want to say a few words about what the Spitzer will mean for astronomers and what it will mean for the average citizen.

The Spitzer Space Telescope will change the way astronomers do astronomy. Many secrets are hidden in the infrared. But, we have seen how observations with the Spitzer can unveil a beautiful spiral galaxy and show where the mass and the stars are concentrated. Beginning today, it will no longer be sufficient to characterize a star or a galaxy or any other astronomical system by only its optical, ultra-violet, or X-ray light. To understand how things happen in the Heavens we have to be sensitive to all the colors of light. The Spitzer, together with other telescopes, will make that possible.

All of us, average citizens and professional astronomers, are interested in the origin of life. All of us are interested in how the Universe we inhabit got to be the way it is. We don't yet have the detailed answers. But, today, thanks to the Spitzer telescope, we are a lot closer than we were before. I am thrilled by the discovery of organic molecules in a distant galaxy at a time when the Earth was in its infancy. I am thrilled by detailed pictures of the debris from which planets form.

I would like to close with a few personal words that are addressed to print and television journalists. Lyman Spitzer was an exceptional human being: playful in spirit but respectful and courteous to everyone, generous in his support of all of his colleagues, indifferent to personal credit. He was a gentleman. I know that you journalists will continue to inform us, and to inform our children, about the future scientific revelations of the Spitzer Space Telescope. As you do so, I hope you will stress that great science can be done by a great human being. The human inspiration and values of Lyman Spitzer are as important for us to appreciate as the technical discoveries.