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Father of the global weather satellite, spaceship photographer of atmospheres on distant planets, this whole Earth meteorologist puts escalating fears of warming in the right perspective

INTERVIEW

VERNER SUOMI

He talks about the *Voyager* spacecraft, the planets, winds, and clouds the way a child would about a science project at school. Rummaging through a locker in his disheveled office, he finds a round metal box. "Look at this! It's part of the radiometer we used in an early satellite to measure Earth's heat budget." Verner Suomi stares in wonder at the device in his hands. "That was in essence the first sample of solar-energy gain and heat loss over the whole planet. If I built one exactly like it and we flew it again in exactly the same orbit, I could see if there were any detectable changes to indicate warming." He thinks aloud, lamenting that an idea so simple would get buried "in a zillion reviews" at NASA.

Since the early days of exploring space—in the Fifties, when rockets blew up with his experiments onboard—University of Wisconsin meteorologist Suomi has studied the atmospheres of the planets Venus, Uranus, and Jupiter. His photographs and observations, gadgets and insights have changed the way we think about weather and climate. And he is as intrigued by the winds of Jupiter or Venus as by the storms of Earth. "I can hardly wait to see what's happening on Neptune," he says of the *Voyager* probe that carries sensors and experiments he designed. But as a member of NASA's panel on space station science, he has lobbied for hardware to explore the home planet. "The astronomers want to look out, but there's some urgency to looking down," he remarks.

Over the years atmospheric scientists have refined their theories and tested their equations in relative obscurity. For about 80 years one idea kept reappearing in their journals and papers: something about greenhouse effects. But no one seemed to care much about it—until recently.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN D. LEVENSON