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Prospects for a Special-Purpose Lattice Gas Computer

A. Despain
C. Max

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JASON
The MITRE Corporation
7525 Colshire Drive
McLean, Virginia 22102-3481
(703) 883-6997

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A two-day workshop was held in June of 1988, to discuss the feasibility of designing and building a large special-purpose computer dedicated to lattice-gas cellular automata. The primary emphasis was on applications of cellular automata for modeling Navier-Stokes hydrodynamics. The meeting had two goals: 1) To identify those theoretical issues which would have to be addressed before the hardware implementation of a lattice-gas machine would be possible; and 2) To begin to evaluate alternative architectures for a dedicated lattice-gas computer. This brief paper contains a summary of the main issues and conclusions discussed at the workshop. is presented (RM)					
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Abstract

A two-day workshop was held in June of 1988, to discuss the feasibility of designing and building a large special-purpose computer dedicated to lattice-gas cellular automata. The primary emphasis was on applications of cellular automata for modeling Navier-Stokes hydrodynamics. The meeting had two goals: 1) To identify those theoretical issues which would have to be addressed before the hardware implementation of a lattice-gas machine would be possible; and 2) To begin to evaluate alternative architectures for a dedicated lattice-gas computer. This brief paper contains a summary of the main issues and conclusions discussed at the workshop.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This note summarizes a two-day workshop held in La Jolla, California in June of 1988. The workshop was cosponsored by the Center for Non-linear Studies at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and by the JASON group, The MITRE Corporation as part of the 1988 JASON Summer Study. The purpose of the workshop was to identify, define, and begin to resolve substantive issues which must be addressed before a special purpose cellular automata computer can be implemented in hardware.

The workshop attendees were:

- George Adams, Purdue University
- Gary Doolen, Los Alamos National Laboratory
- Paul Frederickson, NASA Ames, RIAC project
- Castor Fu, Stanford University
- Brosl Hasslacher, Los Alamos National Laboratory
- Fung F. Lee, Stanford University
- Norman Margolus, MIT Laboratory for Computer Science
- Tsutomu Shimomura, Los Alamos National Laboratory
- Tom Toffoli, MIT Laboratory for Computer Science

and the following members of the JASON group:

- Kenneth Case, University of California at San Diego
- Alvin Despain, University of California at Berkeley
- Freeman Dyson, Institute for Advanced Study
- Michael Freedman, University of California at San Diego
- Claire Max, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory

- Oscar Rothaus, Cornell University.

Henry Abarbanel, a JASON from the University of California at San Diego, was not able to attend the two day workshop, but did participate in planning the workshop and in discussion of issues.

The primary emphasis of the workshop was on the use of cellular automata for simulations of three-dimensional incompressible Navier-Stokes hydrodynamics. Within this context, there are two types of applications for which a special purpose computer might offer important potential advantages over conventional numerical hydrodynamics techniques implemented on general purpose supercomputers:

1. Studies of flows with complex boundary conditions. For example, one might look at a boundary-layer and study various techniques that have been suggested for drag-reduction and boundary-layer modification.
2. Studies of three-dimensional incompressible flows at high Reynolds numbers. These could include studies of the onset of fluid turbulence, free-boundary problems (such as ship wakes and drag), or the combination of hydrodynamics and simple chemical reaction systems.

The issues discussed at the workshop fall into three general categories: theory, computer simulation, and hardware.

2 THEORETICAL ISSUES

The most prevalent use of cellular automata for modeling hydrodynamics has been the so-called lattice gas. In this approach, one follows the motions of many individual particles which interact via given collision laws at fixed lattice sites or nodes. The individual particles are allowed to have at most a few discrete speeds relative to the grid of lattice nodes. The hydrodynamic limit is regained by averaging over a large number of these discrete particles, to obtain the first few moments of their distribution function; namely, the fluid velocity, density, etc. In two spatial dimensions, the properties of possible sets of collision rules for the particles and lattice geometries for the nodes are now reasonably well understood. There are two practical ways to represent a given rule set: via a look-up table which enumerates all the possible incoming and outgoing configurations, or via an algorithm or computation which generates the rules anew at each timestep and each collision site.

However in three spatial dimensions the possible rules sets are far more complicated, and there are many unsolved questions regarding appropriate collision rules and their efficient execution. For maximum efficiency, a special-purpose lattice-gas computer should probably contain a hard-wired implementation of a particular rule set. However the general consensus at the workshop was that there is not yet a sufficient understanding of rule sets that have been proposed for three spatial dimensions to settle upon an optimum one for hardware implementation.

Important issues that remain to be solved concerning collision rules for three-dimensional hydrodynamics are the following:

1. What is the "best" rule set to use for modeling three-dimensional hydrodynamics?
 - (a) How does the choice of this "best" rule set change with the type of application one wants to solve? For example, are some rule sets better for studies of boundary-layer effects of free-boundary problems, while others are optimum for studying the onset of turbulence at high Reynolds number?

- (b) How can rules be "tuned" to get optimum results for given problem parameters? For example, how can one optimize for high Reynolds number, or for specific types of boundary conditions?
2. Rules for lattice gases representing three-dimensional hydrodynamics tend to be very complicated. One way to implement them computationally is using a look-up table, but these become very large. If there are n bits at each lattice site, then there are 2^n table entries. For example, the 24 bit model requires 16 million entries. How can this large number of rules be reduced by "factoring" or "grouping" them, to reduce the size of the rule representation in the look-up table? What is the fundamental dimension of the rule set?
 3. In several proposed rule sets, one has to choose whether the same collision will always have the same outcome, or whether one will implement a randomization process within the rule set to "mix up" the collision outcomes. The addition of an explicit randomization procedure is expensive computationally. Under what circumstances can one rely on the inherently high frequency of particle collisions to achieve randomization, so that it does not have to be explicitly included in the rule engine?
 4. A related question concerns the desirability of adding a "collision bit" to the algorithm. This is an additional bit determining whether a particle will or will not undergo a collision at the next lattice node that it reaches, if all the other conditions for a collision at that node are satisfied. If all particles undergo collisions whenever they can (no collision bit), one obtains a more "collisional" rule set, leading to the potential for attaining higher Reynolds numbers. Are there circumstances in which a less collisional rule set would be desirable?
 5. What advantages are there to using non-periodic tiling or quasilattices for modeling three-dimensional hydrodynamics, as compared with the so-called four-dimensional schemes or other periodic tiling schemes?
 6. Is there a lattice-gas analog for adaptive-mesh hydrodynamic techniques, so that greater spatial resolution can be achieved in regions where it is needed? Can sub-grid scaling rules be derived to extend the spatial resolution of the lattice gas method?

7. What physical laws or partial differential equations do the various rule sets represent? Can the differences between the Navier-Stokes equations and the lattice gas implementations be systematically understood?

- (a) Under what conditions (limits on the Mach number, particle density, Reynolds number) does the lattice gas model with a given rule set reduce to three-dimensional Navier-Stokes hydrodynamics?
- (b) Given a set of physical constraints, can an algorithm be developed that will systematically generate a corresponding lattice gas rule set?
- (c) Each given rule set implies a particular functional form for the viscosity as a function of density. Given that the density is nearly constant in space for incompressible flows with Mach numbers small compared to unity, does it matter whether or not the density-dependence of the viscosity law is physical?
- (d) It has been suggested that the nonphysical function $g(\rho)$ appearing in front of the $u \cdot \nabla u$ term in the momentum equation can be eliminated by using rules which include two or more discrete (nonzero) velocities. Is this generally valid? Under what conditions would it be desirable to use more than one particle velocity? What is the gain in accessible Reynolds number when additional speeds are allowed? Are there advantages to these schemes that would allow lattice gases to satisfy statistics other than Fermi statistics? (The latter prevail for most currently used rules.)

In addition to the above questions concerning rules for lattice-gas representations of hydrodynamics, there are a set of issues involving extensions of the cellular automata methodology to other physical models:

- (a) Can hydrodynamics be modeled by using cellular automata particles to represent vorticity, in analogy with finite-difference vorticity-tracking algorithms? What range of Reynolds numbers could such a technique model?
- (b) How practical would it be to add some simple extensions to three-dimensional lattice-gas hydrodynamics? Some extensions that would be useful include gravity or other body-forces, two or more different fluid types, or simple chemistry. It was generally agreed

at the workshop that extensions which involve action-at-a-distance, such as Maxwell's equations, would require a very different algorithmic approach.

3 ISSUES CONCERNING NUMERICAL SIMULATIONS

The workshop participants felt that there was a need to develop "benchmark" simulation problems. These would consist of a few canonical two and three-dimensional hydrodynamics problems, for which the numerical results of various lattice-gas models could be compared with each other, with conventional hydrodynamics simulations, and with experimental results. This is particularly important because of the fact that different lattice-gas rule sets may represent different approximations to the Navier-Stokes equations (i.e., they may approach the Navier-Stokes equations in different asymptotic limits).

A parallel effort should be made to compare lattice-gas simulation results with standard analytic solutions to the Navier-Stokes equations, in cases where these are known. Possible examples are channel flow, pipe flow, Poiseuille flow, Couette flow, and so forth. This has been done to a limited extent for two-dimensional lattice-gas models, but three-dimensional applications have not yet been well studied.

A different type of test of lattice-gas algorithms was thought to be important as well. One should perform the standard numerical test of increasing the grid resolution, while holding fixed all of the "physical" parameters describing the problem. The goal would be to check that the higher-resolution result is identical to that obtained with lower numerical resolution.

A final numerical simulation issue thought to be important by the workshop participants concerns how to generate adequate graphical visualizations of the results of a three-dimensional lattice-gas simulation. It was pointed out that the amount of data storage needed for a three-dimensional simulation at high Reynolds number will be very high. Therefore, thought must be given to how to integrate input-output and graphical display within the process of the numerical computation itself. For the types of physical problems which one wants to address using lattice gases, it may not be adequate to obtain graphical displays of the results based entirely upon post-processing.

4 ISSUES CONCERNING THE HARDWARE PERFORMANCE OF A SPECIAL-PURPOSE LATTICE-GAS COMPUTER

In order to focus on the issue of hardware design for a lattice-gas machine, a set of performance measures was chosen. The idea was to outline hypothetical specifications for hardware components, so that when different candidate architectures were compared with each other, they would all be making the same assumptions about the capabilities of commonly used hardware components. The following table gives a rough overview of the capabilities of VLSI technology today and in 5 years.

Table 1: VLSI Technology (CMOS)

Today	In Five Years
1 cm ² active area	1 cm ²
200 pins	400 pins
1 Mbit DRAM	4 Mbit
50K "random" transistors	200K
10 nsec internal clock (on-chip communications)	1 nsec
80 nsec external drive (off-chip communications)	8 nsec

Using these characteristics, which are of course only approximate, one can outline the characteristics and performance of various architectures for a lattice gas supercomputer.

There appears to be a practical limit on the total number of chips it is plausible to include in a supercomputer. Today's Crays have about a third of a million chips. Workshop participants hypothesized that in the future one might build supercomputers with up to a million chips. Since the total number of lattice points required for a lattice-gas computation of high Reynolds number three-dimensional hydrodynamics is much larger than a

million, one is led to a design in which many cellular automata lattice points are placed on each chip.

The next hardware issue is how to implement the set of collision rules. Since only a few rule sets for three spatial dimensions have been studied to date, the workshop participants felt that it was premature to choose a specific rule set for implementation in hardware. It was suggested that even after more three-dimensional rules have been studied, it would be desirable to leave flexibility in the choice of rules for the lattice-gas supercomputer. There are two reasons for this choice. First, a new and better set of collision rules for hydrodynamics might be invented at any time; and second, one may at some later point want to use the lattice-gas computer to study other physical models such as the mixing of two different gases, or hydrodynamics with simple chemistry.

Flexibility in the choice of rule set would have the most straightforward implementation if collision rules were executed via look-up tables. In that case one could feed an alternative look-up table into the computer when one wanted to change rules. The difficulty with this approach is that the rules suggested to date for hydrodynamics in three spatial dimensions would require very large look-up tables, with the disadvantages that the tables would use up large amounts of memory and would be slow to compute collisions.

Thus there is a lot to be gained by understanding the symmetries underlying each proposed rule set, so that the look-up table can be collapsed into a considerably smaller amount of memory space.

The second method of implementing a rule set is to design a computation engine in hardware that would recalculate the rules "on the fly" for each collision. The advantage of this technique relative to a look-up table approach is that it is preferable from the point of view of speed and feasibility. The hardware rule-engine is less flexible than a table look-up approach, unless a software layer can be added to customize the rule engine for a choice of several different rule sets.

Since many lattice points reside on each chip, and since off-chip communications are slower than those that remain on-chip, it seems desirable to locate on each chip the look-up tables or hardware rule-engines which calculate the collision outcomes. This avoids the time delays which would occur if one had to go off-chip to calculate collision outcomes. If there are many

lattice points on a chip, one may want to have many "computational nodes" on each chip. (Here a "computational node" is defined to be a look-up table or a rule-engine for calculating collision outcomes.) This would avoid the time delays inherent in updating all of the lattice points on a given chip sequentially.

Thus one must choose how to trade off the number of lattice points which can be stored on a chip with the number of "computational nodes" that will fit on a chip. The results of this trade-off will probably vary with the specific type of rule set chose, since the size and complexity of the "computational node" and the number of bits required for a lattice point will in general vary. In the example shown in the following table, it was decided to allocate half of the chip space to lattice points and half to "computational nodes."

With the above discussion as background, the workshop arrived at the following the target performance characteristics of a hypothetical lattice-gas computer:

Table 2: Target Performance Parameters

Problem definition:
Three-dimensional incompressible hydrodynamics
Flexible boundary conditions
Some flexibility in the rule set
If possible, high input-output rate
Hardware aspects:
512 lattice points per "computational node"
64 "computational nodes" per chip
32,000 lattice points per chip
About a million chips total
3×10^{10} lattice points total ($> 10^{11}$ within 5 years)
10 nsec update rate (on-chip)
About 64×10^8 site updates per chip per second
About 6×10^{15} site updates/sec total
($> 6 \times 10^{16}$ site updates/sec within 5 years)

5 CONCLUSIONS

The workshop in La Jolla produced a considerable amount of enthusiasm about the potential of a dedicated special-purpose lattice-gas computer. Preliminary estimates based on the above performance numbers suggest that such a machine could surpass the present performance of a general-purpose supercomputer such as the Cray II (3×10^7 site updates/sec) by a factor of about 10^8 and possibly considerably more. Of course the target machine could be expensive; first-of-a-kind supercomputers can cost from tens to a hundred million dollars. The cost of this machine is proportional to the number of chips, so a reduction in chip count by a factor of 10 would result in a factor of 10 reduction in cost.

In view of the combination of large cost and high scientific potential for such a machine, it will be imperative to proceed along two parallel paths: 1) refinement of the theoretical understanding of cellular automata rules and lattices in three spatial dimensions, and 2) building of intermediate-scale hardware implementations of dedicated cellular automata computational engines, so as to gain expertise in the practical areas of architecture tradeoffs and implementations. A very good example of such an intermediate engine is the CAM-8 machine recently proposed by Margolus and Toffoli, which would deliver 2×10^{10} site updates per second with 16 bits per site. Progress along both of these paths will be necessary in order to learn how to best exploit the potential of a dedicated lattice-gas supercomputer.

DISTRIBUTION LIST

Dr. George Adams
School of Electrical Engineering
Purdue University
W. Lafayette, IN 47907

Bruce J. Bayly
Applied and Computational Mathematics
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

The Honorable John A. Betti
Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition
The Pentagon, Room 3E933
Washington, DC 20301-3000

P.-M Binder
Center for Nonlinear Studies
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Los Alamos, NM 87545

Dr. Arthur E. Bisson
Technical Director of Submarine
and SSBN Security Program
Department of the Navy, OP-02T
The Pentagon, Room 4D534
Washington, DC 20350-2000

B.M. Boghosian
Thinking Machines Corporation
245 First Street
Cambridge, MA 02142-1214

Mr. Edward C. Brady
Sr. Vice President and General Manager
The MITRE Corporation
Mail Stop Z605
7525 Colshire Drive
McLean, VA 22102

The Honorable D. Allan Bromley
Asst to the President for Science and
Technology
Office of Science and Technology Policy
Old Executive Office Building, Room 360
17th & Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20506

Mr. Edward Brown
DARPA/PM
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22209-2308

Dr. Herbert L. Buchanan, III
Director
DARPA/DSO
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22209-2308

Dr. Curtis G. Callan, Jr.
Physics Department
P.O. Box 708
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

Dr. Kenneth M. Case
Institute for Nonlinear Science
Mail Code R-002
University of California/San Diego
San Diego, CA 92093-0402

DISTRIBUTION LIST

Dr. Shiyi Chen
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Center for Nonlinear Studies
and Theoretical Division
P.O. Box 1663
Los Alamos, NM 87545

Hudong Chen
Center for Nonlinear Studies
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Los Alamos, NM 87545

Dr. Ferdinand N. Cirillo, Jr.
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

P. Clavin
Combustion Research Laboratory
St. Jerome Center
University of Provence
13397 Marseille
Cedex 13, France,

Andre Clouqueur
Laboratoire de Physique
de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure
24 rue Lhomond
75231 Paris Cedex 05
France,

Ambassador Henry F. Cooper
Director/SDIO-D
Strategic Defense Initiative Organization
Room 1E1081
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-7100

Dominique d'Humieres
Laboratoire de Physique
de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure
24 rue Lhomond
75231 Paris Cedex 05
France,

Mr. John Darrah
Senior Scientist and Technical Advisor
HQA/SPACOM/CN
Peterson AFB, CO 80914-5001

Dr. Russ E. Davis
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
A-030
University of California/San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093

Dr. Alvin M. Despaigne
Electrical Engineering Systems
SAL-318
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0781

Dr. K. Diemer
Physics Department
University of California/Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA 95064

Dr. Gary D. Doolen
Center for Nonlinear Studies
LANL
M/S B-258
Los Alamos, NM 87545

DISTRIBUTION LIST

DTIC [2]
Defense Technical Information Center
Cameron Station
Alexandria, VA 22314

Professor Freeman J. Dyson
Institute for Advanced Study
Olden Lane
Princeton, NJ 08540

Maj Gen Robert D. Eaglet
Assistant Deputy SAF/AQ
The Pentagon, Room 4E969
Washington, DC 20330-1000

Mr. John N. Entzminger
Director
DARPA/TTO
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22209-2308

Dr. Robert Foord [2]
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Dr. Paul Frederickson
RIACS
M/S G045-1
NASA Ames Research Center
Moffett Field, CA 94035

Dr. Michael H. Freedman
Department of Mathematics
C-012
University of California/San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093-0112

Uriel Frisch
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
Observatoire de Nice
06003 Nice Cedex
France

Mr. Castor Fu
Physics Department
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

Dr. Larry Gershwin
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Dr. S. William Gouse
Sr. Vice President and General Manager
The MITRE Corporation
Mail Stop Z605
7525 Colshire Drive
McLean, VA 22102

LTGEN Robert D. Hammond
Commander and Program Executive Officer
U.S. Army / CSSD-ZA
Strategic Defense Command
P.O. Box 15280
Arlington, VA 22215-0150

DISTRIBUTION LIST

Mr. Thomas H. Handel
Office of Naval Intelligence
The Pentagon
Room 5D662
Washington, DC 20350-2000

Mr. Joe Harrison
Central Intelligence Agency
P.O. Box 1925
Room GV 1710 NHB
Washington, DC 20505

Mr. Brosl Hasslacher
Los Alamos National Laboratory
M/S B-285
Los Alamos, NM 87545

Tudatsugu Hatori
Department of Physics and Astronomy
Dartmouth College
Hanover, NH 03755

Victor Hayot
Department of Physics
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210

Dr. Robert G. Henderson
Director
JASON Program Office
The MITRE Corporation
7525 Colshire Drive, Z561
McLean, VA 22102

Michel Henon
C.N.R.S.
Observatoire de Nice
B. P. 139, 06003 Nice Cedex
France

Mr. James V. Hirsch
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Dr. K. Hunt
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Center for Nonlinear Studies & Theoretical
Div
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Jeffrey M. Keller
Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and
Planetary Sciences
MIT
Cambridge, MA 02139

Pierre Lallemand
Laboratoire de Physique
de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure
24 rue Lhomond
75231 Paris Cedex 05
France,

Mr. Fung F. Lee
Electrical Engineering Department
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

Y.C. Lee
Center for Nonlinear Studies
Los Alamos National Laboratory
Los Alamos, NM 87545

C. David Levermore
Lawrence Livermore Laboratory
University of California
Livermore, CA 94550

Mr. Robert Madden [2]
Department of Defense
National Security Agency
ATTN: R-9 (Mr. Madden)
Ft. George G. Meade, MD 20755-6000

Mr. Charles R. Mandelbaum
U.S. Department of Energy
Code ER-32
Mail Stop: G-236
Washington, DC 20545

Mr. Arthur F. Manfredi, Jr. [10]
OSWR
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Dr. Norman Margolus
MIT LCS
Room NE 43-350
5450 Technology Sq
Cambridge, MA 02139

Mr. Joe Martin
Director
Naval Warfare and Mobility
Office of Tactical Warfare Programs
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

William H. Matthaeus
Bartol Research Institute
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716

Dr. Claire E. Max
Inst. of Geophysics & Planetary Physics
Lawrence Livermore Natl Lab
L-413
P.O. Box 808
Livermore, CA 94550

DISTRIBUTION LIST

Guy R. McNamara
The Research Institutes
The University of Chicago
5640 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

David Montgomery
Department of Physics and Astronomy
Dartmouth College
Hanover, NH 03755

MGEN Thomas S. Moorman, Jr.
Director of Space and SDI Programs
Code SAF/AQS
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1000

Dr. Julian C. Nall
Institute for Defense Analyses
1801 North Beauregard Street
Alexandria, VA 22311

Dr. Robert L. Norwood [2]
Director for Space
and Strategic Systems
Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army
The Pentagon, Room 3E474
Washington, DC 20310-0103

Mr. Gordon Oehler
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Steven A. Orszag
Applied and Computational Mathematics
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

Dr. Peter G. Pappas
Chief Scientist
U.S. Army Strategic Defense Command
P.O. Box 15280
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Mr. Jay Parness
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

Yves Pomeau
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
Ecole Normale Supérieure
75231 Paris Cedex
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MAJ Donald R. Ponikvar
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ODDR&E/DS
The Pentagon
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45 rue d'Ulm
75230 Paris Cedex 05
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Dr. Oscar S. Rothaus
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Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853

Daniel H. Rothman
Department of Earth, Atmospheric, &
Planetary Sciences
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dr. Fred E. Saalfeld
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Office of Naval Research
800 North Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

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Strategic Defense Initiative Organization
1E1081
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Geoffrey Searby
Laboratoire de recherche sur la combustion
Centre de St Jerome
13397 Marsaieille Cedex 13
France

Dr. Philip A. Selwyn [2]
Director
Office of Naval Technology
Room 907
800 North Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22217-5000

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Center for Nonlinear Science
MS B-258
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Alexandria, VA 22310

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Assistant Director for National Security
Affairs
Office of Science and Technology Policy
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Washington, DC 20506

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U.S. Army Laboratory Command
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Adelphi, MD 20783-1145

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DARPA/DIRO
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Arlington, VA 22209

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Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command
Code: PD-80
Department of the Navy
Washington, DC 20363-5100

Stephen Wolfram
Departments of Physics, Mathematics
and Computer Science
University of Illinois
508 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820

ADM Daniel J. Wolkenstorfer
Director
DASWD (OASN/RD&A)
The Pentagon
Room 5C676
Washington, DC 20350-1000

Victor Yakhot
Applied and Computational Mathematics
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

Gianluigi Zanetti
Program in Applied & Computational
Mathematics
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

Mr. Charles A. Zraket
President and Chief Executive Officer
The MITRE Corporation
Mail Stop A265
Burlington Road
Bedford, MA 01730