NASA's Stern Quits Over Mars Exploration Plans

The twin Mars rovers have spent more than 4 years trundling across the surface of the Red Planet. The decision “was not the emphasis. Tony [Fauci] said it. That’s a huge deal,” he said. Exactly what that means will become clear in coming months, others note. “It will require some bold and creative administration leadership,” says University of Pennsylvania professor emeritus and AIDS researcher Neal Nathanson, who signed the letter to Fauci but was unable to attend the summit.

The most urgent issue—one not addressed at this meeting—is whether to go ahead with the trial of NIH’s vaccine. Fauci thinks the study still has merit because the vaccine’s design is “not the exact same” one as Merck’s. He also points to a suggestion at the summit that the Merck vaccine might have protected a subgroup of patients—although he adds that such post hoc analysis of a small group is not statistically significant. Fauci expects to decide the fate of the NIH trial after the NIH AIDS vaccine advisory committee meets in late May.

—JOCELYN KAISER

Quick exit. S. Alan Stern is leaving NASA after 1 year as science chief.

rebuilt the entire Mars program in 1999 after the failure of two Mars missions. He promises to revisit the 2009 budget plan, given “all the criticism” from the science community. He says he will consult with scientists about whether to focus resources on a single Mars sample-return project—a highlight of the 2009 plan—or use the money to fund several missions. And he promises to find the resources to push for smaller and cheaper missions using modest launchers.

Weiler has also had an unfortunate encounter with a beloved program. His proposal to cancel a 2004 mission to service the Hubble Space Telescope created a public furor and eventually led NASA to reverse itself. “There are three things you don’t do at NASA,” he jokes. “That is cancel Spirit, Opportunity, or Hubble.”

—ANDREW LAWLER