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NASA Plans Mars Touchdown July 4

From: RSchatte@aol.com
Date: Thu, 26 Jun 1997 23:53:25 -0400 (EDT)
Fwd Date: Fri, 27 Jun 1997 08:47:34 -0400
Subject: NASA Plans Mars Touchdown July 4

Forwarded message:
Subj: NASA Plans Mars Touchdown July 4
Date: 97-06-26 22:57:07 EDT
From: AOL News

<HTML><PRE><I>.c The Associated Press</I></PRE></HTML>

By JANE E. ALLEN
PASADENA, Calif. (AP) - This Independence Day, it's the United States that will play alien invader.

About the time Americans are watching holiday parades down Main Street, NASA's Mars Pathfinder will gently parachute to the rocky surface of the red planet to begin a search that one day could yield evidence of life.

If successful, Pathfinder would be the first earthly craft to touch Mars since NASA's twin Viking landers set down in 1976, scooping up sand yet finding no trace of living things.

If it fails, the \$267.5 million Pathfinder mission would join four U.S. and Russian Mars-bound flops in the last decade, including America's \$1 billion Mars Observer that was lost in space in 1993.

``It looks like there is a gremlin out there, slapping everything that's coming toward Mars,'' jokes Brian Muirhead, Pathfinder's deputy project manager at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

But given Pathfinder's excellent performance since it was launched last December, Muirhead foresees ``an outstanding chance of pulling this thing off.''

Pathfinder is headed for Ares Vallis - a vast, ancient flood plain formed by the equivalent of ``taking all the water in the Great Lakes and flushing it out to the Gulf of Mexico in a two-week period,'' said Pathfinder project scientist Matthew Golombek. The area is about 525 miles southeast of where Viking 1 landed.

After its airbag-cushioned touchdown, Pathfinder will release Sojourner, a 22-pound, solar-powered rover about the size of a microwave oven - the smallest planetary craft ever launched.

Named after black abolitionist Sojourner Truth, the six-wheel vehicle will move herky-jerky across the martian plain for at least a week. It will be the first time a rover has explored the surface of another planet.

Endowed with a hazard-avoidance system making it ``as smart as a bug,'' Sojourner will nose up to rocks and analyze their chemical composition, says Donna Shirley, who led JPL's rover development team and now manages its Mars exploration program.

While Sojourner cavorts and its cameras record, instruments aboard the 793-pound Pathfinder lander, which should operate for a month, will take color pictures and compile a Mars weather report.

Pathfinder heralds a n["aol://1722:aboutwork"](aol://1722:aboutwork)>About Work This area has useful tools and resources--a resume maker, a bank-ready business plan, and expert advisors. (<I>keyword:</I> About Work)

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,mrcsharp,mrhonig,mrichmo)NASA Plans Mars Touchdown July 4<HTML><PRE><I>.c
The Associated Press</I></PRE></HTML>

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Pathfinder heralds a new era of U.S. space exploration. In its wake, NASA will dispatch fleets of small, unmanned spaceships to scout places which better instruments - and intrepid astronauts -

might visit later.

``Initially, (Pathfinder) will just look at geochemistry of the surface ... at areas that look like they've been flooded with water, places we're most likely to (eventually) find ancient evidence of life," says Wesley Huntress Jr., NASA's space science chief in Washington, D.C.

At the very least, the rover is likely to find the iron compounds that make Mars look like ``a rust pit," Golombek said.

The fourth planet from the sun, Mars is considered the most Earthlike, with a thin atmosphere,

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