

Scientists unsure of craft's fate

PASADENA, Calif. (AP)—NASA scientists waited anxiously for the call that never came. Now they must contemplate the unthinkable: The Mars Observer flew right past the planet into oblivion.

"It's terrible, terrible, terrible," said Arden Albee, the project's chief scientist.

The wayward spacecraft hasn't been heard from since Saturday and failed to radio Earth as scheduled on Tuesday, when it was to fire its thrusters and drop into orbit around Mars.

Nothing was heard from Mars Observer. The spacecraft remained silent Wednesday, NASA spokesman Jim Doyle said. Engineers believed their next chance to hear from Mars Observer would be on Thursday.

With no word from the Observer, scientists simply didn't know if it started circling Mars, flew past it, or was destroyed or disabled after it was last heard from.

NASA scientists bravely insisted they hadn't given up on the Observer, launched in September on a \$1 billion mission to study Martian terrain, climate and weather using sophisticated instruments, including a camera that can spot an object the size of a Volkswagen Beetle from a 234-mile-high orbit.

Project manager Glenn Cunningham said during a news conference late Wednesday that he was skeptical of ever finding the capsule.

"Unfortunately, we still have no two-way communication or one-way communication or data of any kind from the spacecraft," Cunningham

said. He said NASA wouldn't give up trying to reach Mars Observer, but "every day without communications clearly lessens any probability of success."

"I think it blew up," space historian James Oberg said by phone from

Houston. "I think the propellant tanks blew up. That would explain a lot."

NASA engineers have said they doubted Mars Observer exploded because the tanks had backup pressure regulators, and the pressure shouldn't have been strong enough to rupture the tanks.

Lost in space?

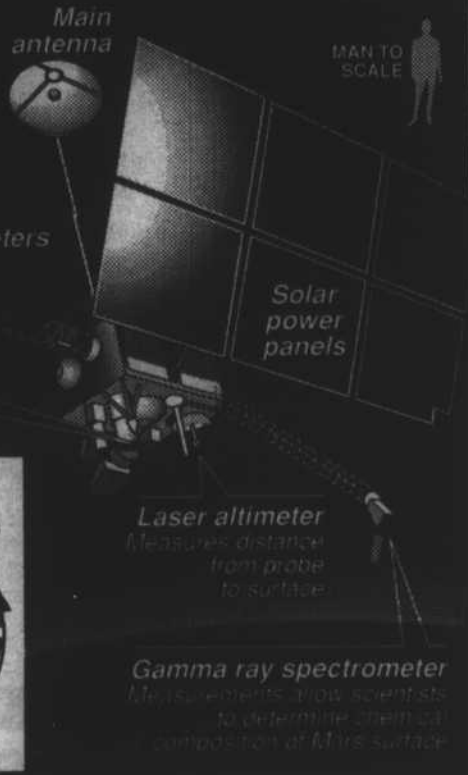
Mars Observer's mission was to orbit 234 miles above the surface of the Red Planet, taking measurements of the Martian surface and atmosphere.

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Source: NASA, Jet Propulsion Laboratory



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State Wire

State gas tax higher than national average

OMAHA (AP)—The federal gasoline tax hike to take effect Oct. 1 will cost an average Nebraska family of four an extra \$82 a year at the gas pumps, the Tax Foundation said.

The 4.3-cent-per-gallon tax increase hits Nebraska harder than the national average increase of \$76 per family of four, the foundation said.

The gasoline-tax increase approved by Congress in its deficit-reduction package will be most burdensome in thinly populated states, said Chris R.

Edwards, foundation economist in Washington, D.C.

When the increase takes effect Oct. 1, a Nebraska family of four will pay \$349 a year in federal gas taxes, compared with a national average of \$325, the foundation said.

Nebraska families will pay slightly more than average because they live in a rural state where many people drive longer distances, the foundation said.

Meeting will discuss aid for flood victims

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP)—The nation's top disaster official, heading for a meeting with officials from nine flooded states, including Nebraska, hopes to recommend this week whether to waive a requirement that states pay part of the cleanup bill.

"I hope we'll have everything in place to make a recommendation on Friday," said James Witt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "I've got about everything

put together."

Witt's recommendation will go to the White House, where Clinton will make a decision, probably after he returns from his vacation.

In Nebraska, powerful wind storms and flooding caused an estimated \$50 million in property damage and \$292 million in agricultural damage. More than 2,000 homes were damaged or destroyed and two storm-related deaths were reported.

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