THEY SAID IT

“Last year, scientists captured the first pictures of what they believe to be faraway planets circling stars outside of our solar system. … These discoveries … leave us with the feeling that there is much more out there to be found. … From a law enforcement and intelligence perspective, [too] there is always more to be found. The universe of crime and terrorism stretches out infinitely before us, and we, too, are working to find what we believe to be out there but cannot always see.”

—Robert Mueller, director of the FBI, drawing a parallel between scientific inquiry and the grim business of tackling global terrorist threats, in a speech last month at the Council on Foreign Relations.

AWARDS
An astronomer who in 1999 made the first observations of an exoplanet eclipsing its parent star has been awarded the National Science Foundation’s Alan T. Waterman Award.

David Charbonneau, 34, was also head of the team that directly detected light from an exoplanet using the Spitzer Space Telescope in 2005. An associate professor at Harvard University, Charbonneau currently heads the MEarth project, a ground-based observation effort to detect planets orbiting low-mass stars cooler than the sun. The Waterman award, given to researchers under 35, provides a 3-year, $500,000 research grant.

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PIONEERS
PRETEND JOURNEY. Two Europeans have been chosen to travel to Mars—sort of. Rather than go on a real mission, they will spend 105 days in a closed space capsule in Moscow. Oliver Knickel, an engineer in the German army, and Cyrille Fournier, a French airline pilot, will join four Russians for Mars500, a Mars mission simulation “launching” 31 March.

Competition for the berths was fierce, says Markus Bauer, a spokesperson for the European Space Agency (ESA), which is helping to fund the Russian-led project. A total of 5600 applicants from across Europe—most of them men—were screened using “the same process we use for selecting astronauts, including strict medical and psychological tests” as well as interviews to ensure willingness to be “taken out of normal life for so long,” Bauer says.

The simulation will take place in a windowless, soundproof capsule, and the crew will communicate with mission control via radio with a built-in 20-minute delay to account for the distance to Earth. The goal is to identify problems that could crop up during a real mission to Mars. Knickel and Fournier—along with Oleg Artemyev, Sergei Ryazansky, Alexei Baranov, and Alexei Shpakov—will record daily data on their moods, hormone levels, and sleep quality and live on dehydrated food and vitamins, a menu served on the international space station. ESA officials hope the data will help them develop a crewed mission to Mars, which has been on the drawing board for years.

IN MEMORIAM

The U.S. Postal Service plans to release a 78-cent stamp on 14 May to honor Mary Lasker, the philanthropist who advocated for increased investments in medical research by starting the Lasker Foundation in 1942. The foundation has given out more than 300 awards to life science researchers since 1945; 78 of the awardees have gone on to win the Nobel Prize. Lasker died in 1994.