

An "Intellectual Summit"

Paris

Seventy-five Nobel prizewinners—almost three quarters of them coming from the disciplines of chemistry, physics, and medicine—last week issued an appeal for greater cooperation among rival research teams and pharmaceutical companies engaged in the search for a vaccine against acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). They called for the provision of this vaccine to be "guaranteed" by public authorities once it becomes available.

In a series of conclusions issued at the end of a 4-day meeting in Paris, the Nobel laureates also gave their implicit support to the medical applications of genetic knowledge. Recent progress in molecular biology, they said, "allows one to hope for medical progress and to isolate the genetic dimension of certain diseases," a development that "will help to predict, and perhaps to cure, these diseases."

And they gave their approval to a suggestion that small groups of their members should be called to the scene of major disasters or to places where human rights were claimed to have been violated. "One might imagine five Nobel prizewinners at Bhopal or at Chernobyl," said meeting co-organizer Elie Wiesel, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, and a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Sixteen separate conclusions emerged from the meeting, which was organized by Wiesel in cooperation with French President François Mitterrand. The meeting had come under fire in France as having been conceived primarily as a platform for Mitterrand to launch his bid for a second 7-year term of office in the presidential elections that take place in May. Indeed, the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm is said to have firmly rejected an invitation to endorse the meeting when approached by members of Mitterrand's staff last fall.

According to presidential adviser Jacques Attali, however, none of the Nobel prizewinners who had declined invitations to attend the meeting cited concerns over the way it might be (and in fact was) used as a media event. And few of those attending the meeting, described as "an intellectual summit," intended to consider "threats and promises at the dawn of the 21st century," were prepared to voice any serious complaints about the way it had been organized.

Mitterrand himself, in addressing the opening session, argued that "politics should be modest in front of intellectuals." But he added that society should also guard against the risk that science was allowed to tell citizens what their priorities should be. "I am apprehensive about anything which might resemble the image of a government which would be created by a government of sages," Mitterrand said. "Sovereignty, I do not need to remind you, resides in the nation, and not in a committee of experts."

The problems of tackling AIDS was one of the principal topics addressed by a working group set up to consider the dilemmas facing science and technology in the modern world. The Nobel laureates, prompted by Pakistani physicist Abdus Salam, director of the International Center for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, Italy, also urged that Third World countries should be given greater access to science and technology in general "to allow them to control their own futures and to define for themselves the knowledge which is necessary to achieve it." Education, they added, should become an "absolute priority" in the budgets of all countries, as a way of making effective use of "all the aspects of human creativity"

Several of those attending the meeting admitted informally that there was a somewhat platitudinous dimension to the sixteen conclusions announced by Wiesel and the end of the 4 days of closed discussions. These included a commitment to the idea that every individual has a right to "liberté, l'égalité et la fraternité," a reminder that disarmament was needed to divert funds currently absorbed by the arms industry into economic and social development, and a call for an international conference to discuss the problem of Third World debt.

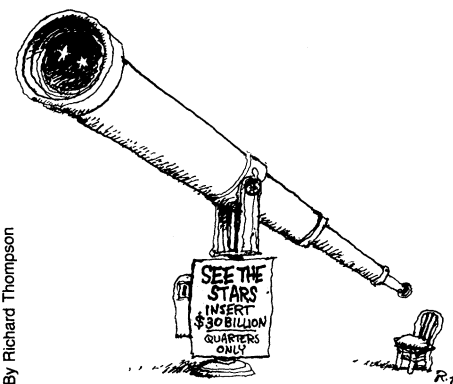
However, after 2 days of generous hospitality from the French government that included dinners in both the Elysée Palace and Paris' new science museum at la Villette, there was little opposition to Wiesel's proposal that a second meeting should be held in 2 years' time to discuss whether any progress had been achieved on the problems that had been under discussion. ■ **DAVID DICKSON**

Briefing:

A NASA "Fiasco"

On the surface it seemed like an official letter from Charles J. Pellerin, Jr., director of the astrophysics division at NASA:

"The purpose of this letter is to focus your attention on the continuing opportunity to waste enormous amounts of effort by preparing and submitting proposals for NASA programs which will subsequently be either



By Richard Thompson

underfunded or canceled. . . . We realize that most space scientists are more than willing to grasp at straws. As a result, we are soliciting proposals for our latest program, The Fiscally Irresponsible Astrophysical Super-Colossal Observatory (FIASCO) (not to be confused with currently funded projects)."

Pellerin did not really write the letter, of course. Some of his colleagues were having a little fun at his expense. He is not sure how he feels about it.

"Maybe," said Pellerin after a long pause, "it's close enough to the truth that it's irritating."

Presidential Space Politics

Space policy should be a Presidential campaign issue, according to Representative Bill Nelson (D-FL). Thus he has used his powers as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications and arranged to move the subcommittee to Iowa and New Hampshire where he wants all the Presidential candidates to testify on the issue.

He has asked all the Republican contenders to testify in New Hampshire on 1 February and all the Democratic Presidential candidates to testify at hearings in Iowa on 5 February.

The only taker so far is Alexander Haig. ■

DIANE HENRY