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THE FIRST WORD

HELLO, MY NAME IS...

So fair and foul a month we have not seen. Ever since scholars of venerary first presented techniques for optimizing intake of animal protein and fats in the seminar caves at Lascaux, the meeting has been the essential form of scientific communication. Organizing a good meeting remains deeply satisfying, like hosting a successful dinner party. A meeting gone sour is profoundly depressing.

Within the space of a month, we will have seen both.

The Thrill of Victory...

We would like to welcome, and thank, the attendees at this month's Miami Bio/Technology Winter Symposium, "Advances in Gene Technology: Protein Engineering and Protein Production." Our new collaboration with the two-decade-old symposium has been deeply gratifying from the start—and has become more gratifying as we realized that our first joint meeting will draw more researchers than any in the Symposium's venerable history: More than a thousand scientists will attend this year's five-day conclave. They will be able to hear talks by more than 40 prominent researchers and look over new equipment shown by more than 75 exhibitors. And they will be able to attend their choice of nine hands-on workshops.

More satisfying still is the ability to bring all of this talent to a single (figurative) table, to trade ideas about what should be a central pursuit of the next 20 years.

...And the Agony of Defeat

On the other side of the coin is the disappointing postponement of a smaller meeting we had scheduled for mid-January.

The meeting was to consider "Possible Mechanisms of HIV Pathogenesis and their Implications for Therapy and Vaccine Intervention in AIDS." We had been spending a lot of time on the phone, talking about exactly how HIV might cause acquired immunodeficiency syndrome: no one seems to know for certain. For each provocative argument there was a counterargument; and for each counterargument, a counter-counterargument.

It seemed best to gather all these points of view in a single room, add a couple of moderators, and see if we could distill consensus from contention. We invited a dozen respectable researchers and research managers who agreed on but a single point: that there were unanswered questions it would be interesting, and worthwhile, to discuss.

A staffer of the White House Domestic Policy Council got wind of our plans and asked if we would meet at the White House. Coldly calculating and inured to the lure of worldly fame, we said, "Yippee," and moved our schedule up a couple of weeks...and then a couple of our participants got into a shouting match in the newspapers. Most of what found its way into print, on both sides, was unhelpful and unworthy. We won't rehash it here. The published reports did leave two incorrect impressions, however, and we would like to set the record straight.

First and least important, the newspaper accounts made it sound as though the White House had planned the conference. It didn't; we did. In view of the resulting publicity, though, we can be grateful for the confusion.

Second, the published statements made it sound like the Shootout at the O.K. Corral, with several prominent National Institutes of Health researchers cast as the Clanton Gang and a lone Berkeley iconoclast as Wyatt Earp. Well, that wasn't the way it's s'posed to be. Those were, as it happened the two extreme views on the panel: one side arguing that HIV cytopathicity is well-established and no further inquiry is really necessary; and the other arguing that we haven't any solid proof that HIV is involved in AIDS at all. The whole panel was designed to bring together as broad a spectrum of informed opinion as possible for some give and take.

The upshot of all this was an intestine war within the U.S. executive behemoth. One felt a little like Pinocchio inside the whale, listening to the distant ruminative rumblings of government. The meeting was repeatedly cancelled and rescheduled—or perhaps it was just consigned to the limbo of "possibility," never really on and never really off.

Eventually, fed up, we called the participants and said, "Let's do it someplace else, some other time."

And we will. Sadder, wiser, and a little grayer. —Douglas McCormick