

## FOOLED AGAIN

**W**hat unites two Nobel laureates, two eminent Harvard biologists, the president of the National Council of Churches, Moral Majority's famous Jerry Falwell, Born-Again crusader Pat Robertson, and a former militant radical? Nothing more nor less than a resolution denouncing any person's right to "engineer specific traits into the germline of the human species."

The signatures on the resolution were gathered by Jeremy Rifkin and deliberately released just in time to launch his latest pop opus against genetic engineering, a polemic which I dare not name for fear of providing the free publicity which he so eagerly seeks. The resolution is important to note because it includes an impressive assortment of religious leaders and some well-respected scientists whose influence should not be underestimated.

Aside from boosting the sale of paperback rights and crowding Rifkin's schedule on the lucrative campus lecture circuit, the resolution is the first important expression of popular resentment against the possibility that humans can control their fate and the fate of their children through genetic technology.

Although the resolution only calls for prohibition of attempts to engineer human cells the media event is being used as part of a broadside attack by Rifkin against genetic manipulation. While promoting his book on a popular talk show in May and announcing the resolution, he equated the dangers of genetic technology with those of nuclear technology, warned that first generation products of recombinant DNA are signs on the road to eugenics, and indicated that gene therapy will lead to destruction of the species because of loss of genetic diversity. To quote from the document supporting his resolution, Rifkin claims that "eugenics is the inseparable ethical wing in the Age of Biotechnology."

On June 8 he gathered leaders of some of the most influential churches in the U.S. to publicize the resolution in slightly more sophisticated tones and called for congressional action. A week earlier, Rifkin's group sent out a statement to the press with the supporting document—an edited chapter of his latest book—and a press release which linked the resolution, the supporting document, and the press conference. This offered a first impression implying that the signers of the resolution backed the call for legislation and the supporting document. It should be noted, incidentally, that there is no mention on the statement of resolution that it is a call for Congress to legislate against use of genetic techniques.

It is one thing to fool millions of home-bound television viewers with rhetoric which defies elementary knowledge of the life sciences. It is quite another achievement to persuade respected scientists to sign a petition sponsored by the director of an organization with a scholarly name (Foundation on Economic Trends) whose actual purpose seems to be to promote Rifkin's books.

Interviews with several of the scientists and theologians who signed the petition revealed a few striking facts.

Some of the signers disagreed with the resolution but penned their names because they felt the subject required a public airing. These people apparently had no knowl-

edge of the organization sponsoring it or the fact that a supporting document was circulated with a press release which implied affiliation with the resolution, its signers, and the document; the document defies the logic of scientific thinking, proclaiming the likelihood of engineering the species into destruction as people are reduced to well-designed products. One of the signers asked to have his name deleted from the list when he learned of his co-signers; he had presumed that his name had been removed until he was informed by our offices that it appeared on copies of the resolution.

In short, the resolution played upon the good will of scientists who overlooked hidden motives and the potential for deception because they believed that human genetic engineering should be open to public debate. Instead of developing arguments that have a scientific basis and organizing colleagues who may have legitimate concerns about gene therapy, they unwittingly supported a simple declaration of concern that was apparently twisted into a call for congressional legislation by Rifkin at his news conference.

The call for legislation came only days before Congressmen Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) and Doug Walgren (D-Pa.) completed a new round of hearings on impacts of genetic engineering in the Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Technology in the House; their most recent session was a sober airing of testimony about environmental consequences of releasing genetically transformed organisms into the environment.

The contrast between Gore's approach and Rifkin's style is striking. Gore is evaluating the scientific evidence as well as the policy-related alternatives before forming conclusions regarding legislation or oversight. In his earlier hearings this year on implications of genetic engineering for humans, he concluded his study with a draft of legislation recommending an oversight body with only the power to gather information and suggest policy options. Rifkin appeals to populist sentiments by selecting facts to support his theories about the evils of technology and modern business and backing his arguments with names of scientific authorities. Unfortunately, he drags some supporters with him who have volunteered their names and prestigious affiliations because of legitimate concerns about the direction of biotechnology. They risk being identified with a group which paradoxically seeks legislation that would allow Congress to decide who can manipulate genes into human cells.

Rifkin has only practiced an old trick that some well-established scientists continue to fall for: a movement can be established when scientists who are not mindful of the subtleties of political manipulation are matched with religious leaders and citizens who know little about science. At a time when legitimate debate is taking place in Congress for determining the limits of biotechnology's development, scientists are risking their reputations for an unknown movement which ignores the evidence or style of thinking that characterizes their disciplines. Until researchers treat their political affiliations with the same care as they treat their experimentation, they will continue to be fooled, again and again. —Christopher G. Edwards