

the Manhattan Project, the World War II program that produced the first atomic bombs, and concern about how radiation caused genetic damage.

In the fall of 1985, DeLisi was reading a draft government report on technologies to detect inherited mutations, a nagging problem in the study of children to those exposed to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, when he came up with the idea of a concerted program to sequence the human genome¹³. DeLisi was positioned to translate his idea into money and staff. While his was the third public airing of the idea, it was DeLisi's conception and his station in government science administration that launched the genome project.

Redefining the Technical Goals

Molecular biologists did not welcome the idea with open arms. While many, especially those who studied medical genetics and the inheritance of genetic diseases, were enthusiastic, the broader community of protein biochemists and even molecular geneticists were far more skeptical. The year 1986 was a time of setback and redefinition for the genome project. The nadir of the project's trajectory came at a meeting at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in June 1986. A rump session was called to discuss Dulbecco's editorial. Walter Gilbert, who had been infected with the Santa Cruz bug, laid out a rationale for the project and then began to describe its technical goals and price tag. The discussion quickly veered into the politics of biomedical research — the dangers that large projects posed for budgets to support small investigator-initiated research (the space shuttle used as the negative icon) and the questionable competence of DOE to run such a project. David Smith, as the DOE representative, faced a largely hostile audience, although he also got many private expressions of support.

The controversy provoked a number of events on the policy front, and the debate moved to Washington, DC. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which had begun to get interested in the genome project, held a well-attended international forum in July 1986. In October, NIH hosted a discussion in conjunction with a meeting of the NIH Director's Advisory Committee.

Origins of the Human Genome Project

by Robert Cook-Deegan for a Franklin Pierce Law Center Conference, July 1993