

DEMISE OF THE SUPERCONDUCTING SUPER COLLIDER

The Department of Energy's basic research program took a much greater and direct hit when Congress in fall 1993 terminated funding for the superconducting super collider. In 1992, congressional supporters had averted a super collider funding cut-off in conference committee after the House voted down appropriations for the project. Fearing further assault on the super collider during the 1993 congressional session, high energy physicists and other super collider supporters lobbied heavily on the Hill. Supporters were critical, however, of what they perceived as lack of full administration support for the project. The administration's proposed "stretch out" of super collider construction raised doubts, and Secretary O'Leary's statement that she was not "passionate" about the project did little to calm uneasiness. Nonetheless, prior to the June 25 vote in the House, the administration attempted to make clear that the super collider was a high priority. O'Leary invited forty-nine mostly undecided lawmakers to visit the site. The secretary and Vice President Gore made telephone calls to uncommitted House members. President Clinton appealed to the House to approve super collider funding, noting that "abandoning SSC at this point would signal that the United States is compromising its position of leadership in basic science—a position unquestioned for generations." Despite these lobbying efforts, the House voted 280 to 150 to end funding for the super collider. The margin of defeat was significantly greater than that in the previous year's vote of 232 to 181.²⁷⁴

Efforts by O'Leary and the Department to reverse the decision in the Senate were hindered by several factors projecting the super collider in a negative light. Ongoing reports of mismanagement of the super collider dogged the project throughout spring and summer. In February, the General Accounting Office asserted that the project did not have a fully functioning cost tracking system and that some project areas were running 50 percent over budget. Following the vote



Secretary O'Leary autographs a display magnet during her tour of the Superconducting Super Collider construction site near Waxahachie, TX. Source: U.S. Department of Energy

in the House, O'Leary admitted that the Department had provided little oversight of a contractor who demonstrated poor business practices. The project, she informed the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, "has been managed very gently. By that, I mean inappropriately." A month later, O'Leary announced that the super collider's prime contractor, the Universities Research Association, would be stripped of construction responsibilities.²⁷⁵

Ever-increasing funding estimates also contributed to the negative image burdening the super collider. In January 1991, the Department informed Congress that the estimated cost for the project was \$8.25 billion, a considerably higher amount than the 1989 estimate of \$5.9 billion. In early August 1993, O'Leary pledged that the super collider's cost would be held to the \$8.25 billion figure plus \$2 billion in stretch-out funding. Only a month later, however, a seventy-five-member committee headed by the Department's procurement officer reported that without management actions to curb cost growth the total price tag for the super collider would be \$9.94 billion plus stretch-out costs. In October, in a last ditch effort to rescue the