

edited by RICHARD STONE

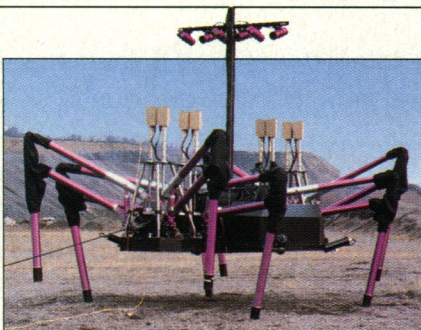
Dante's Second Infernal Descent

A robot designed to go where no human can safely go—into the cone of an active volcano—is tooling up for a live test, following a disappointing first trial in January.

Built at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), the eight-legged robot, Dante, got just 27 feet into the smoldering crater of Antarctica's Mount Erebus last New Year's Day before its fiber-optic cable kinked, severing communications with its controllers. Dante then had to be hauled out.

However, volcanologists at the U.S. Geological Survey in Anchorage, Alaska, were impressed enough with Dante to ask the

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National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to fund another descent—this time into Mount Spurr, an 11,000-foot volcano 90 miles west of Anchorage that has been off limits to researchers ever since it erupted in October 1992. NASA agreed, so the CMU team is now giving Dante an overhaul for a run at

Firewalker. Dante the robot will make second run at a volcano in June.

Spurr, set for June 1994.

If Dante reaches the floor of Spurr's crater, the spidery robot will suck in vapor samples, collect minerals, and film the scene. To help prevent a second mishap, the new and improved Dante's communications will probably go wireless, says the robot's designer, CMU civil engineer William "Red" Whittaker, who's eager to return to Antarctica. He says his team "wanted another shot at Mount Erebus" but is happy Dante will at least get "a second chance" in Alaska.

Congress Seeks Files On gp160 Vaccine

Scientific watchdogs in Congress have, for the first time, bared their teeth at the Department of Defense (DOD) over its handling of a proposed clinical trial of a therapeutic vaccine for HIV patients made by Connecticut's MicroGeneSys Inc.

In a 14 October letter that may presage a congressional hearing, Reps. John Dingell (D-MI)

and Henry Waxman (D-CA) put Secretary of Defense Les Aspin on notice that they were concerned that "in the face of serious, legitimate scientific concerns and objections," DOD was moving ahead with the large-scale testing of the so-called gp160 vaccine. The congressmen asked Aspin to supply the Committee on Energy and Commerce, which Dingell chairs, with a wide range of documents,

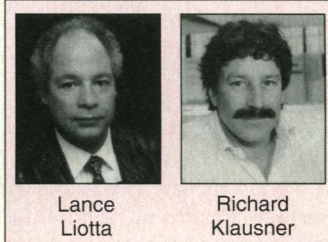
including research articles, internal memoranda, and external correspondence. The congressmen also requested materials relating to a contentious DOD investigation of AIDS researcher Robert Redfield, who in June was cleared of allegations that he misrepresented data regarding gp160 (*Science*, 13 August, p. 824). They gave Aspin a 29 October deadline.

The gp160 controversy began last year when Congress, following a lobbying blitz by MicroGeneSys, bypassed the peer-review process and appropriated \$20 million for a large-scale trial of the vaccine. A blue-ribbon panel put together by the National Institutes of Health concluded that the money would be better spent testing several therapeutic AIDS vaccines. DOD, however, said \$20 million would not cover the costs of such a comparative trial and has moved forward with plans for testing the MicroGeneSys vaccine alone. Waxman earlier this month introduced legislation to undo the original appropriation (*Science*, 8 October, p. 167), and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) was expected to introduce a similar bill in the Senate as *Science* went to press. Even so, no one is predicting this will end the gp160 saga.

Liotta to Return to Lab In NIH Shakeup

Incoming National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Harold Varmus is still waiting for Senate confirmation (a hearing is now set for 3 November), but he has already begun to lay the groundwork for what NIH insiders say will be a major house cleaning.

One of Varmus' first moves, say top NIH officials, will be to replace Lance Liotta, whom former director Bernadine Healy appointed to head the NIH intramural research program just over a year ago. Liotta is expected to return to the bench at the Na-



Lance Liotta

Richard Klausner

tional Cancer Institute, where he maintains a lab. He'll follow Jay Moskowitz, another top Healy deputy, who left last month for a position at NIH's National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

Rumored as the top candidate to succeed Liotta is Richard Klausner, director of the Cell Biology and Metabolism branch at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Working to Klausner's advantage, sources say, is his intimate knowledge of NIH's intramural research: He chaired a panel that released a critique of the program in 1992 recommending numerous changes (*Science*, 27 August, p. 1120). Klausner says he's heard the rumors but insists that "no one's asked me to take the job."

An NIH spokeswoman acknowledged only that changes may be in the offing once Varmus is confirmed. Other NIH officials, meanwhile, privately predict that Liotta's expected departure heralds an organizational shakeup in the coming months.

Congress to Tackle Clinton Wetlands Plan

The battle over wetlands protection is about to heat up. House environmental committee staffers expect a bill that incorporates the Clinton Administration's proposed reforms to wetlands conservation laws to be introduced this week—and they anticipate stiff opposition to it.

The protection of wetlands—roughly defined as land with water crucial to the survival of an ecosystem—has topped many environmentalists' agendas for at least a decade. In the past 300 years, the United States has lost half its wetlands and now has about 170 million acres in Alaska and 100 million acres in the continental United States.

In August, President Clinton proposed a compromise plan to appease all parties in the debate. For farmers, it would free up some 53 million acres of wetlands in the Midwest that were converted to croplands before 1985, exempting them from regulations under the Clean Water Act, which governs wetlands. And for green activists, the plan would impose new controls on Alaskan wetlands opened to developers by the Bush Administration.

House staffers say the Clinton compromise will be part of a bill to be introduced by Representative Gerry Studds (D-MA). Leading the opposition is Representative Don Young (R-AK), who sits on Studds' committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. Young, who calls the Clinton plan "fundamentally unfair" to landowners, is hoping to force a showdown between lawmakers who support Studds' bill and those in favor of a pro-development bill from Representative James Hayes (D-LA).