SCIENCESCOPE

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Friendly divorce. J. Craig Venter *(right)* and William Haseltine.

Commercial Gene Kingdom Splits Up

The breakup earlier this week of a partnership that pioneered commercial DNA research is expected to lead to public release of a stream of genetics data. William Haseltine and J. Craig Venter, who graced the cover of *Business Week* as the "Gene Kings" in 1995, are going their separate ways. Haseltine's medical product development firm, Human Genome Sciences Inc. (HGS) in Rockville, Maryland, and Venter's nonprofit DNA sequencing center, The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR) in Rockville, effectively ended business relations on 20 June. TIGR will relinquish more than $38 million which it was due to receive from HGS over the next 5 years. And HGS will release TIGR from patent requirements and publishing delays on future research. However, HGS retains rights to TIGR's earlier work.

The divorce was long in the making. HGS and TIGR were joined together in 1992 when the pharmaceutical company SmithKline Beecham invested $125 million in the two outfits to finance a hunt for human genes, the first big industrial leap into genomics. From the start, however, Venter chafed under commercial limits on data publication. HGS's attempts to delay the release of microbial sequencing data raised tensions to the boiling point. Last winter, HGS and TIGR began discussing a split-up (*Science*, 7 February, p. 778); formal talks began 2 months ago.

"This was an amicable decision," says Haseltine, one in "our mutual best interests." He says HGS was getting "diminishing returns" from its investment in TIGR, since Venter had steered his outfit into sequencing organisms of little medical importance, and into human genome sequencing, also of limited commercial value. Venter, on the other hand, says that even at a cost of $38 million, TIGR's new freedom is "worth every penny." Venter is celebrating by releasing raw DNA sequence data from 11 microorganisms, including chromosome 2 of the malaria parasite, *Plasmodium falciparum*.

NIH Budget Prospects

Advocates of biomedical research were alarmed when they glimpsed a table drawn up last month by the White House illustrating how Congress might carve up the 1998 budget: It allowed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) an increase of only 1.2%—less than half the boost promised in President Clinton's budget and far short of the 7.5% goal pledged by some legislators. This came about, Capitol Hill staffers say, because the 5-year budget deal between the President and Republican leaders put priority labels on several social programs, but not on health.

Now some lawmakers are caught between the budget deal and promises to help NIH. Rep. John Porter (R–IL), chair of the House subcommittee that drafts the NIH appropriation, is said to be considering a 6% increase for NIH. But a House staffer says this would be "doing well" for NIH, as it will require "unpalatable cuts" in other popular programs. Porter plans to unveil his plan for solving this funding dilemma at a markup on 8 July.

NRC Tries to Ease Customer Worries

These are tough times at the National Research Council (NRC), which is disputing court decisions that would force it to abide by government rules on openness in conducting studies for the National Academy of Sciences and its sister organizations. The council maintains that the rules would hurt its independence. Now it's proposing a new way of incorporating public input that may win back skittish customers fearful that their request for a study will wind up in court.

The new strategy would set up a temporary advisory board that would review final draft reports and largely follow the federal rules for public access. "The board would have final authority over a report," says William Colglazier, NRC executive officer. The process leading up to the board would remain the same, however, with the NRC maintaining control over committee membership and operations.

The advisory board plan is tailored for customers like the Department of Energy (DOE), which recently canceled an NRC study of the controversial International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor. DOE rejected the traditional committee approach, fearing foes of the project might sue, and turned down an NRC proposal for a principal investigator to conduct the study because it might lack credibility. Colglazier says some agencies have expressed interest in this third approach, and Eric Glitzenstein, a Washington, D.C., attorney involved in the litigation against the NRC, agrees that "it's a positive step."

In a 19 June memo to staff, NRC Chair Bruce Alberts said he's confident the NRC will win its legal battle, but that "a considerable degree of uncertainty is likely to continue for another 6 to 9 months." That prognosis is based on the estimated time until a possible decision by the Supreme Court, which may hear the NRC's appeal. The uncertainty already is having a concrete impact: Alberts also told staff to expect delayed, more modest raises.

LHC Plan Approved

After months of controversy, U.S. participation in Europe's Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at the CERN physics lab in Geneva is again on solid ground. The CERN council approved a revised agreement on 20 June that takes into account concerns raised by U.S. Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R–WI) (*Science*, 2 May, p. 671). The deal gives the United States—which will contribute $530 million toward the LHC—a more explicit management role and protection from cost overruns. That should smooth the way for the House to approve funding for the project.

House Bill Threatens Defense Labs

Although its potential impact is still unclear, a bill expected to pass in the House this week could result in deep cuts in scientific and engineering staff at the military's research labs.

The House's Defense Department authorization bill contains a provision that would save $7.5 billion over 4 years by slashing the DOD's "acquisitions workforce" by 42%. These are the 269,000 military and civilian employees who design, test, and order weapons, supplies, and support services. While Congress has "drastically reduced" defense forces in recent years, says a congressional aide, "we have not touched a lot of the bureaucracy. ... It's time to trim them out."

Not all acquisitions employees are paper pushers, however. In fact, 106,000 of them are scientists and engineers. Many work on projects such as satellite communications and optical physics that would seem remote from weapons research. But the lab staff—such as those at the Naval Research Lab in Washington, D.C., and the Air Force's Phillips Lab in Albuquerque—fall into the acquisitions category. And a Pentagon analyst predicts that scientists and engineers would not be spared cuts. "With a reduction of this magnitude, you have to cut meat," he says. The bill will be reconciled in late July with the Senate's version, which does not target acquisitions staff.