381 Crest Road
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March 15, 1983

Dr. Joshua Lederberg, President
Rockefeller University
1230 York Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

I found your comments in Sunday's New York Times to be very stimulating, and am especially interested in your observation that until 1946 bacteria were assumed to have "no genetics." I am writing a book about the Army's bacteriological warfare tests conducted after 1949 in which populated areas were exposed to large numbers of supposedly harmless bacteria. In a recent trial against the Army, plaintiffs contended that an outbreak of Serratia marcescens infections in 1950 at a hospital in San Francisco was caused by the Serratia marcescens that had been sprayed over the city three days earlier. The government denied the relationship. It held that the Army's strain of Serratia was harmless, and that even allowing for subsequent genetic changes in the Serratia marcescens, three days would have been too brief a period for the bacteria to have become suffciently pathogenic and numerous to cause disease.

I have two questions that were prompted by your comments. First, by 1950 was there general agreement among experts that supposedly harmless bacteria could undergo genetic changes that would render them pathogenic? If so, would a three-day period have been considered sufficiently long to cause disease?

Although my questions might seem mundane, it has not been easy to get a real sense of the state of the art around 1950. I would be most grateful for any help you can offer.

Yours sincerely,

Leonard A. Cole

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any such book in print?

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