January 16, 1968

Miss Constance Foshay
Legislative Assistant to
Senator Mondale
Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C.

Dear Miss Foshay:

Thank you very much for sending me the material on Senator Mondale's proposal for a national commission on health, science,research and development. I am afraid I put you to a great deal of trouble with my redundant request, but I was most anxious to see this material by not later than Sunday morning and when an opportunity arose to send a messenger from the NASA committee room, I did not hesitate to take advantage of it. I had not counted on your having already responded with the mailing, but in any case let me give you my sincere thanks.

The special delivery copy of the statement was waiting at my apartment when I arrived home Saturday evening.

These materials were useful to me in preparing the column that will be published in the Washington Post on Saturday, January 20. Unfortunately, I do not have a clean copy of it here, but it will be available to you soon enough in the newspaper.

Besides what I wrote in the column, I might add just a few statements of further comment in response to the Senator's request for these. In his statement there is an implied suggestion about "whose genes shall be altered, and for what purposes" that may help to lend credence to the vague horror that biochemists are going to change the bodies of existing people. These kinds of apprehensions have been rather widely kindled with the publicity given to Kornberg's most recent accomplishments, and they are, to say the least, most unfortunate. This phrase leaves the impression that the genes of existing people are vulnerable to attack or alteration by a biochemist, and this is not one of the technical prospects whose credibility is enough to warrant spending much time on it. In my recent columns in the Washington Post I have attempted to outline some of the actual possibilities of genetic intervention, and we might conceivably add to this the opportunity to by-pass

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the hazards of genetic recombination through the technique of nuclear transplantation. This could lead to the propagation of offspring who more closely resembled the chosen parent, rather than being a combination of the characters inherited from each of the two parents, as pertains to sexual reproduction. There is no doubt that these prospects deserve careful and thoughtful consideration, but I believe the issues are no more profound than those that are involved in the guidance of the child's mind through the process of education and the changing of people's minds through the use of mass media. I do believe, then, that the whole tone of the Senator's statement overdramatizes the biological situation when it deserves to be treated on a par with the existing aspects of child rearing and the socialization of individuals of the following generation. To carry this line of argument further, I would propose that if there were to be a national commission on ethical and social implications, it would not be painting a fair picture unless it also dealt with these matters of educational intervention in the emotional development and social attitudes of the developing citizen.

In sum, I think there might be an unfortunate misplaced emphasis on the more lurid speculations about the use of genetic biochemistry, when we in fact do have many very immediate problems on the scope of medicine and other interventions in the quality of human life. The simple question of the prolongation of life past productive middle age is one with so many ramifications that by itself it would fully warrant the exercise of the talents of the kind of commission that the Senator had in mind.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics