Identification of HTLV-I *tax trans*-activator mutants exhibiting novel transcriptional phenotypes

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The type I human T-cell leukemia virus (HTLV-I) encodes a 40-kD nuclear *trans*-regulatory protein termed Tax that transcriptionally activates the HTLV-I long terminal repeat (LTR), as well as selecting cellular and heterologous viral promoters. Tax does not bind DNA specifically but, rather, acts in a more indirect manner. Tax activation of the HTLV-I LTR is mediated through constitutively expressed cellular factors that bind to cAMP response elements (CREs) present within the 21-bp enhancers of the LTR. In contrast, Tax *trans*-activation of the interleukin-2 receptor- α gene (IL-2R α) and LTR of the type 1 human immunodeficiency virus (HIV-1) involves the induced nuclear expression of NF- κ B. We now report the identification of missense mutations within the *tax* gene that functionally segregate these two pathways of *trans*-activation. Additionally, we demonstrate that the carboxyl terminus of the Tax protein, despite its acidic and predicted α -helical structure, is completely dispensable for *trans*-activation through either of these transcription factor pathways. Finally, we demonstrate that mutations within a putative zinc finger domain disrupt the nuclear localization of Tax and abolish *trans*-activation. These results demonstrate that Tax *trans*-activation of viral and cellular promoters involves at least two mechanisms of host transcription factor activation and suggest that this activation is likely mediated through distinct functional domains.

[Key Words: cAMP response element; NF- κ B; long terminal repeat; zinc finger; nuclear localization]

Received July 17, 1990; revised version accepted August 31, 1990.

Human T-cell leukemia virus (HTLV-I) is the causative agent of the aggressive and often fatal adult T-cell leukemia (Poiesz et al. 1980, 1981; Yoshida et al. 1982). More recently, HTLV-I has been linked with a progressive demyelinating syndrome termed HTLV-I-associated myelopathy or tropical spastic paraparesis (Gessain et al. 1985; Osame et al. 1986). Although the basis for cellular transformation by HTLV-I is not completely understood, recent studies employing transgenic mouse and rat fibroblast models have demonstrated the oncogenic potential of the 40-kD Tax protein encoded within the pX region of the HTLV-I genome (Hinrichs et al. 1987; Pozzati et al. 1990; Tanaka et al. 1990). Tax is a powerful transcriptional *trans*-activator of the HTLV-I long terminal repeat (LTR) (Sodroski et al. 1984; Chen et al. 1985; Felber et al. 1985; Fujisawa et al. 1985). Additionally, Tax induces the expression of select cellular genes involved in T-cell growth, including interleukin-2 (IL-2), the α -subunit of the IL-2 receptor (IL-2R α), and *c-fos* (Inoue et al. 1986; Cross et al. 1987; Maruyama et al. 1987; Siekevitz et al. 1987a; Fujii et al. 1988; Wano et al. 1988). Tax also activates the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV-1) LTR (Siekevitz et al. 1987b; Böhnlein et al. 1988a), which may contribute to the enhanced HIV-1 gene expression that occurs in T cells dually infected with HTLV-I and HIV-1. Apart from its positive tran-

scriptional effects, Tax negatively regulates the expression of at least one cellular gene, β -polymerase, an enzyme involved in DNA repair (Jeang et al. 1990).

The precise molecular mechanism by which Tax mediates these diverse transcriptional effects remains enigmatic. However, the function of this viral *trans*-activator does not appear to involve its direct binding to regulatory sequences within the various Tax-inducible genes. Rather, Tax functions by inducing or modifying the activity of select host transcription factors. Specifically, Tax induces the nuclear expression of NF- κ B (Ballard et al. 1988; Leung and Nabel 1988; Ruben et al. 1988), which activates the related κ B enhancer elements present in the IL-2 (Hoyos et al. 1989) and IL-2R α (Böhnlein et al. 1988b) promoters and the HIV-1 LTR (Nabel and Baltimore 1987) [for review, see Lenardo and Baltimore 1989]. In contrast, the Tax-responsive sequence within the HTLV-I LTR corresponds to three tandem 21-bp enhancer elements that are unrelated to the κ B enhancer (Paskalis et al. 1986; Shimotohno et al. 1986; Brady et al. 1987). Tax *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR appears to be mediated through constitutively expressed cellular factors that bind to an 8-nucleotide core element, TGACGTCT, present within the 21-bp repeats (Altman et al. 1988; Jeang et al. 1988; Giam et al. 1989; Poteat et al. 1989; Tan et al. 1989a). This octanucleotide

motif has been identified previously as a transcriptional regulatory element present in a wide variety of viral and cellular genes including *Ela*-activated early genes of adenovirus (Lee et al. 1987) and cAMP-inducible genes (Montminy et al. 1986). Tax *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR likely involves the indirect binding to or modification of a protein(s) that binds to this core element (Jeang et al. 1988; Nyborg et al. 1988). Several candidate proteins have been identified including CRE binding protein (CREB) (Yamamoto et al. 1988), activating transcription factor (ATF) (Hai et al. 1988), and Tax response element-binding protein (TREB) (Tan et al. 1989b). The Tax-responsive sequences in the *c-fos* promoter also contain this octanucleotide motif (Fujii et al. 1988), raising the possibility that Tax activation of both the HTLV-I LTR and the *c-fos* promoter may involve the same host transcription factor(s). However, sequences flanking the CREB/ATF-binding site are required for Tax *trans*-activation of both the HTLV-I LTR (Fujisawa et al. 1989; Montagne et al. 1990) and the *c-fos* promoter (Fujii et al. 1988), suggesting that other interactions may contribute to Tax *trans*-activation of these promoters. Furthermore, more complex interactions may be involved in Tax *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR because Tax appears to interact physically with a protein that binds to the LTR between the two proximal 21-bp enhancers (Marriot et al. 1989).

In this report we describe the identification of HTLV-I *tax* gene mutants that functionally distinguish *trans*-activation through the CREB/ATF and NF- κ B host transcription factor pathways. Specifically, five mutants affecting two different regions of the protein were shown to effectively *trans*-activate NF- κ B responsive promoters but not CREB/ATF responsive promoters. Conversely, a single Tax mutant was shown to effectively *trans*-activate CREB/ATF responsive promoters but lacked the ability to induce nuclear NF- κ B or *trans*-activate NF- κ B responsive promoters. Additionally, we demonstrate that the acidic carboxy-terminal domain of Tax is dispensable for *trans*-activation of both CREB/ATF and NF- κ B responsive promoters. In contrast, mutations affecting many other regions of the Tax protein were shown to abolish *trans*-activation through each of these transcription factor pathways. Included among this group of transcriptionally inactive *tax* mutants were seven mutations affecting residues within a putative zinc finger domain. Surprisingly, these nonfunctional Tax zinc finger mutants were excluded from the nuclei of expressing cells, suggesting that this structural motif may mediate nuclear localization. Together, these results demonstrate that Tax activation of CREB/ATF and NF- κ B responsive promoters proceeds via different intermediate signal transduction pathways and suggest that this activation is mediated by distinct Tax peptide domains.

Results

The *tax* gene of HTLV-I is comprised of two coding exons that, together, specify a protein of 353 amino

acids. Initial inspection of the Tax protein sequence revealed two potential structural motifs, a cysteine-rich zinc finger-like domain located between amino acids 23 and 52 and an acidic α -helix involving the carboxy-terminal 31 amino acids. This carboxy-terminal region was particularly interesting because acidic α -helices function as transcriptional activation domains in several well-characterized *trans*-activators, including the GAL4 protein of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* and the VP16 protein of herpesvirus (for review, see Ptashne 1988).

The mutational analysis of the HTLV-I *tax* gene described here was designed to test the function of these potential structural domains in *trans*-activation by Tax. Of the 52 missense mutations introduced into the *tax* gene, six mutants altered residues that are likely to be involved in the coordination of zinc, and four mutants targeted residues within the acidic carboxyl terminus. To investigate the potential function of additional regions of the Tax protein in *trans*-activation, other mutations were introduced throughout the *tax* gene. The locations of these mutations are represented schematically in Figure 1. Each mutation altered one or two adjacent codons and introduced a unique *Nhe*I or *Bgl*II restriction site into the *tax* gene sequence. The predicted amino acid substitutions introduced by each missense mutation are listed in Table 1. The expression vector, pcTax, which contains a full-length cDNA copy of the HTLV-I *tax* gene under the control of the human cytomegalovirus immediate early promoter, was modified by oligonucleotide-directed in vitro mutagenesis to express the various mutations of Tax.

Figure 1. Schematic summary of site-directed mutations introduced into the HTLV-I *tax* gene. The HTLV-I *tax* gene encodes a 353-amino-acid protein with the predicted sequence as shown. Missense mutations affecting either one or two adjacent codons were introduced by oligonucleotide-directed in vitro mutagenesis, as indicated by the boxed residues. These mutations were named according to their location within Tax, with M1 corresponding to the most amino-terminal and M52 the most carboxy-terminal mutation. Each mutation introduced a unique *Nhe*I or *Bgl*II restriction site into the *tax* gene sequence (see Materials and methods). The precise amino acid substitutions introduced by each missense mutation are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Phenotypic analysis of the HTLV-I *tax* gene mutants

CLONE TESTED	MUTATION	% WT ACTIVITY ^a		SUBCELLULAR LOCALIZATION ^b
		HTLV-I LTR CAT	HIV-1 LTR CAT	
cTax	-	100	100	N
M1	3His → Ser	<5	55	N
M2	9Gln → Ala	>120	>120	N
M3	13PheGly → AlaSer	21	33	N
M4	17ValTyr → AlaSer	<5	11	C>N
M5	22AspCys → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M6	27AspTrp → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M7	29CysPro → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M8	39ArgLeu → AlaSer	<5	7	C>N
M9	41HisArg → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M10	43HisAla → AlaSer	61	49	N
M11	48ThrCys → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M12	51GluHis → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M13	62ArgVal → AlaSer	10	<5	C>N
M14	73ProArg → AlaSer	15	<5	C>N
M15	82ArgThr → AlaSer	<5	12	C>N
M16	92ProPro → AlaSer	50	95	N
M17	102ProPro → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M18	123ThrLeu → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M19	126GlnHis → AlaSer	>120	>120	N
M20	130ThrLeu → AlaSer	<5	<5	C>N
M21	134ProAsp → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M22	137GlyLeu → AlaSer	56	<5	N
M23	139ArgPro → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M24	145ThrLeu → AlaSer	54	45	N
M25	148GlyGly → AlaSer	111	115	N
M26	161ProPro → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M27	169ProHis → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M28	176ProGly → AlaSer	32	58	N
M29	189LysArg → AlaSer	<5	<5	C=N
M30	192GluGlu → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M31	194LeuLeu → AlaSer	<5	<5	C=N
M32	196TyrLys → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M33	199SerLeu → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M34	203GlyAla → AlaSer	14	29	N
M35	206MetIle → AlaSer	<5	<5	C=N
M36	210GluAsp → AlaSer	6	<5	N
M37	237PheHis → AlaSer	48	62	N
M38	251ThrAsp → AlaSer	65	77	N
M39	263LysAsp → AlaSer	90	49	N
M40	279HisLys → AlaSer	55	36	N
M41	287HisPro → AlaSer	<5	8	N
M42	293SerHis → AlaSer	55	85	N
M43	303HisAsn → AlaSer	60	97	N
M44	310GluGlu → AlaSer	<5	<5	N
M45	315IlePro → ArgSer	22	76	N
M46	317Ile → Arg	16	83	N
M47	319LeuLeu → ArgSer	<5	>120	N
M48	321PheAsn → ArgSer	22	76	N
M49	323GluLys → AlaSer	111	>120	N
M50	337ProGly → AlaSer	103	>120	N
M51	341GluPro → AlaSer	104	>120	N
M52	352GluVal → AlaSer	84	105	N

The position and nature of the amino acid substitutions introduced by each *tax* missense mutation are summarized in the second column.

^aFunctional properties of the Tax mutants were analyzed by co-transfecting Jurkat T cells with the wild-type or a mutant *tax* expression vector and a reporter plasmid containing either the CREB/ATF responsive HTLV-I or NF- κ B responsive HIV-1 LTR linked to the CAT reporter gene. CAT activity was measured ~48 hr after transfection and is presented as a percentage of the activity observed in cells transfected with the wild-type pcTax expression vector. The values shown represent the average of two independent transfections. The six boxed mutants (M1, M22, and M45–M48) selectively *trans*-activated one, but not both, retroviral LTR.

^bThe subcellular localization of each mutant Tax protein was analyzed by indirect immunofluorescence. Phase contrast and corresponding immunofluorescence photomicrographs of selected mutants are shown in Fig. 6. Mutants were categorized as displaying either the wild-type nuclear predominant (N), a cytoplasmic, almost nuclear excluded (C > N), or a whole cell (C = N) pattern of expression.

The relative level of expression of each *tax* mutant was determined by Western analysis, using rabbit anti-Tax antisera and lysates prepared from transiently transfected COS cells (Fig. 2). As predicted, the wild-type Tax

protein migrated with a relative molecular mass of 40 kD and was readily detected by this analysis (Fig. 2, lane 2). In contrast, COS cell cultures transfected with the parental expression vector containing a cDNA copy of the interleukin-2 gene (pCMV IL-2) yielded no specific signal (Fig. 2, lane 1). Each of the mutant *tax* expression vectors encoded an immunoreactive protein with a mobility comparable to that of the wild-type Tax protein (lanes 3–54). Of note, however, the M27 mutant was expressed at a markedly lower level than the wild-type Tax protein, likely reflecting reduced stability of this mutant polypeptide (Fig. 2, lane 29).

Figure 2. Western blot analysis of the various mutant Tax proteins. Subconfluent COS cell cultures (35 mm) were transfected with 2.5 μ g/ml of either the negative control plasmid pCMV IL-2 (lane 1), the wild-type pcTax expression vector (lane 2), or each mutant *tax* expression vector (lanes 3–54). Approximately 48 hr after transfection, cell lysates were prepared and subjected to electrophoresis on 10% discontinuous SDS–polyacrylamide gels. Proteins were then transferred to Immobilon-P membranes and probed sequentially with rabbit anti-peptide antisera directed against amino acid residues 321–353 of the Tax protein (α Tax-C), and 125 I-labeled protein A. Immunoreactive proteins were visualized by autoradiography (arrows). The migration of known molecular weight standards is indicated at left. No other immunoreactive proteins were detected on regions of the Immobilon-P membrane not shown here.

Trans-activation phenotypes of the HTLV-I Tax mutants

To assess the functional properties of each mutant Tax protein, Jurkat T cells were cotransfected with each of the mutant *tax* expression vectors and reporter plasmids containing either the CREB/ATF responsive HTLV-I LTR or NF- κ B responsive HIV-1 LTR linked to the bacterial chloramphenicol acetyltransferase (CAT) reporter gene. As summarized in Table 1, mutants representative of each of the four possible *trans*-activation phenotypes were identified, including (1) mutants that *trans*-activated both the HTLV-I and HIV-1 LTR; (2) mutants that failed to *trans*-activate either the HTLV-I or HIV-1 LTR; (3) mutants that activated the HIV-1 LTR but not the HTLV-I LTR; and (4) a mutant that activated the HTLV-I LTR but not the HIV-1 LTR. Strikingly, most of the 52 missense mutants tested fell within the second category, failing to *trans*-activate either retroviral LTR. These nonfunctional mutants involved residues located throughout most of the linear sequence of the *tax* gene, suggesting that subtle changes in the overall protein structure may have dramatic functional effects on this *trans*-activator. Included within this group of transcriptionally inactive Tax proteins were the clustered series of mutants affecting residues within the putative zinc finger domain of Tax (M5–M12). The only exception to the nonfunctional phenotype of these zinc finger mutants was M10, which exhibited approximately one-half of the biological activity of wild-type Tax on both retroviral LTRs.

The carboxyl terminus of Tax is dispensable for trans-activation

None of the four missense mutants affecting residues within the acidic carboxyl terminus of Tax significantly diminished *trans*-activation with either the HTLV-I or HIV-1 LTR (Table 1; M49–M52). Rather, the carboxyl terminus of Tax represented one of the few areas within the protein where mutations appeared well tolerated. Because acidic α -helices function as transcriptional activation domains in several well-characterized *trans*-activators, the apparent dispensability of a structurally similar domain within the Tax protein was unexpected initially. However, sequence alignment of the Tax proteins of HTLV-I and the closely related type II human T-cell leukemia virus (HTLV-II) revealed that although these two proteins are ~74% homologous, the functional 331-amino-acid HTLV-II Tax protein lacks the 22 amino acids corresponding the carboxyl terminus of the HTLV-I Tax protein (Haseltine et al. 1984; Shimotohno et al. 1984). To test formally whether the carboxy-terminal 22 amino acids of the HTLV-I Tax protein were dispensable for *trans*-activation, we introduced a premature stop codon into the wild-type pcTax expression vector. As shown in Figure 3A, this mutant expression vector, designated pcTax³³⁰DH $\rightarrow$ GDStop, encodes a truncated but stable form of Tax recognized by rabbit anti-peptide antisera directed against amino acid residues 106–132 of

Tax (α Tax-N) but not by antisera specific for the carboxy-terminal 32 amino acids of HTLV-I Tax (α Tax-C).

To assess the biological activity of this truncated Tax protein, the pcTax³³⁰DH $\rightarrow$ GDStop expression vector was cotransfected into Jurkat T cells with four different Tax-inducible promoter–CAT constructs. As shown in Figure 3B, this truncated form of Tax *trans*-activated the HTLV-I and HIV-1 LTRs, as well as the *c-fos* and IL-2 α promoters at levels comparable to that obtained with the wild-type Tax protein. Notably, this phenotype was observed over a 10-fold concentration range of expression vector DNA. These results demonstrate that the carboxy-terminal 22 amino acids of the HTLV-I Tax protein are dispensable for *trans*-activation of CREB/ATF responsive and NF- κ B responsive promoters.

Identification of Tax mutants with differential phenotypes of trans-activation

The ability of Tax to *trans*-activate viral and cellular promoters through at least two cellular transcription factor pathways raised the possibility that these transcriptional effects may involve distinct mechanisms of activation, perhaps mediated by different peptide domains. The identification of mutants that selectively activated one, but not both, of the retroviral LTR–CAT reporter constructs provides strong support for this hypothesis. Specifically, two Tax mutants, M1 and M47 and, to a lesser extent, the M45, M46, and M48 mutants, displayed nearly wild-type activity on the NF- κ B responsive HIV-1 LTR but significantly impaired activity on the CREB/ATF responsive HTLV-I LTR (Table 1). The region of Tax defined by the M45–M48 mutations corresponds to a hydrophobic portion of the protein. Notably, the M1 mutation affects the only charged residue within the otherwise hydrophobic amino terminus of Tax. The inability of the M1 mutant to *trans*-activate the HTLV-I LTR is also consistent with previous functional analyses of HTLV-I and HTLV-II *tax* gene mutants, suggesting an important role for the amino terminus in *trans*-activation of the HTLV LTRs (Wachsman et al. 1987).

A single mutant with the converse phenotype of *trans*-activation was also identified. This mutant, M22, displayed nearly wild-type *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR but failed to significantly activate the HIV-1 LTR (Table 1). The M22 mutant altered the third of four regularly spaced leucine residues in the linear sequence of Tax (see Fig. 1). However, neither of the Tax mutants affecting residues immediately flanking this site (M21, M23) nor mutants affecting the other leucine residues (M18, M20, M24) exhibited the selective phenotype of the M22 mutant.

The functional analysis of the Tax mutants presented in Table 1 involved cotransfection of each of the Tax-inducible retroviral LTR–CAT constructs with a fixed amount of expression vector DNA. To test more rigorously the function of each of the mutants displaying differential phenotypes of *trans*-activation, transfection experiments were performed using four different Tax-in-

Figure 3. Phenotypic analysis of the carboxy-terminal Tax deletion mutant encoded by the Tax^{330DH}→GDStop expression vector. (A) Immunoprecipitation analysis of the Tax^{330DH}→GDStop mutant protein. Subconfluent COS cell cultures were transfected with either pCMV IL-2 (lanes 1 and 4), the wild-type pcTax (lanes 2 and 5), or pcTax^{330DH}→GDStop (lanes 3 and 6). Approximately 48 hr after transfection, cells were metabolically labeled with [³⁵S]cysteine for 4 hr and lysed in RIPA buffer. Cell lysates were immunoprecipitated with either αTax-N (lanes 1–3) or αTax-C corresponding to rabbit anti-peptide antisera directed against amino acid residues 106–132 or 321–353 of the Tax protein, respectively. Immunoprecipitates were analyzed on 10–20% SDS–polyacrylamide gradient gels. (B) Functional analysis of the Tax^{330DH}→GDStop mutant trans-activator. Jurkat T cells were cotransfected with either pCMV IL-2, the wild-type pcTax, or pcTax^{330DH}→GDStop and the HTLV-I LTR–CAT, c-fos–CAT, HIV-1 LTR–CAT, or IL-2Rα–CAT reporter plasmid. Trans-activating function of the truncated Tax protein was analyzed over a 10-fold range of expression vector concentration (0.5–5.0 μg/ml), as indicated, and the total DNA concentration was maintained at 7.5 μg/5 × 10⁶ cells for each point by the addition of varying amounts of pCMV IL-2. CAT activity was measured 48 hr after transfection and is represented as the fold induction relative to activity measured in cells transfected with the negative control plasmid pCMV IL-2 and the relevant reporter plasmid. Values shown represent the average of two transfections. (□) pcTax; (■) pcTax^{330DH}→GDStop.

ducible promoters and variable amounts of each of the mutant *tax* expression vectors. Results of experiments involving the representative mutants M47 and M22 are shown in Figure 4. Over a 10-fold range of expression vector concentration, the M47 Tax mutant displayed <5% of wild-type *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR and *c-fos* promoter while *trans*-activating the NF-κB responsive HIV-1 LTR and IL-2Rα promoter at levels nearly equivalent to the wild-type Tax protein (Fig. 4A). In contrast, the M22 Tax mutant *trans*-activated the HTLV-I LTR and the *c-fos* promoter at levels >50% of wild-type Tax but failed to *trans*-activate significantly either the HIV-1 LTR or the IL-2Rα promoter at all input expression vector concentrations (Fig. 4B). These results confirm the observation that the M22 and M47 Tax mutants functionally segregate *trans*-activation of the CREB/ATF and NF-κB responsive promoters and extend these differential phenotypes of *trans*-activation to two different cellular promoters. Furthermore, these results provide additional indirect evidence that Tax *trans*-activates the *c-fos* promoter and the HTLV-I LTR by a common mechanism.

The M22 Tax mutant fails to induce NF-κB expression in human T cells

To investigate whether the failure of the M22 Tax mutant to activate the NF-κB responsive HIV-1 LTR and IL-2Rα promoter was due to its inability to induce NF-κB, nuclear extracts were prepared from transiently transfected Jurkat T cells and assayed for NF-κB-binding activity. In electrophoretic mobility-shift assays employing the κB enhancer from the IL-2Rα gene, nuclear extracts prepared from cells transiently transfected with the wild-type pcTax expression vector mediated the formation of a single predominant DNA–protein complex (Fig. 5, lane 5). This Tax-inducible complex reflected specific protein binding to the radiolabeled κB probe because the inclusion of a 200-fold molar excess of unlabeled wild-type, but not mutant, IL-2Rα competitor completely blocked its formation (Fig. 5, cf. lanes 5–7). Under identical conditions, nuclear extracts prepared from cells transfected with the negative control plasmid pCMV IL-2 resulted in only trace NF-κB-binding activity (Fig. 5, lanes 2–4). In contrast to the wild-type *tax* expression vector, transfection of Jurkat cells with the M22 mutant *tax* expression vector induced little detectable NF-κB activity (Fig. 5, lanes 8–10). These results suggest that the failure of the M22 Tax mutant to *trans*-activate the HIV-1 LTR and IL-2Rα promoter is likely due to its inability to induce the nuclear expression of NF-κB. As predicted from their functional activities, the M1 and M47 *tax* mutants effectively induced NF-κB activity when transfected into Jurkat T cells (data not shown).

The zinc finger domain of Tax is required for nuclear localization

The Tax protein is localized predominantly in the nuclei of expressing cells (Goh et al. 1985; Kiyokawa et al.

Figure 4. Functional analyses of the *trans*-activation properties of the M47 and M22 Tax mutants. Jurkat T cells were co-transfected with either pCMV IL-2, pcTax, pM47 (A) or pM22 (B) and the HTLV-I LTR-CAT, *c-fos*-CAT, HIV-1 LTR-CAT, or IL-2Rα-CAT reporter plasmid. Transfections and CAT activity measurements were performed over a 10-fold concentration range of expression vector as described in Fig. 3B. CAT activity is represented as fold induction relative to the activity measured in cells transfected with the indicated reporter plasmid and the control pCMV IL-2 vector. The values shown represent the average of two transfections. (A) (□) pcTax; (■) pM47; (B) (□) pcTax; (■) pM22.

Figure 5. The M22 Tax mutant fails to induce nuclear expression of NF-κB. Nuclear extracts were prepared from Jurkat T cells transiently transfected with either pCMV IL-2 (lanes 2–4), pcTax (lanes 5–7), or pM22 (lanes 8–10), as described in Materials and methods. These extracts were incubated with a 27-bp ³²P-labeled oligonucleotide probe spanning the IL-2Rα κB site. The resultant DNA–protein complexes were resolved on native 6% polyacrylamide gels. To confirm the sequence specificity of DNA–protein interactions, extracts were preincubated with either no specific competitor (lanes 2, 5, and 8) or a 200-fold molar excess of unlabeled oligonucleotide competitor corresponding to either wild-type κB (WT, lanes 3, 6, and 9) or mutant κB (M, lanes 4, 7, and 10) IL-2Rα sequence. This mutant competitor contained a 4-nucleotide substitution (GGGA → ATCT) within the IL-2Rα κB sequence shown previously to disrupt the binding of NF-κB (Leung and Nabel 1988). No extract or specific competitor was present in the binding reaction shown in lane 1. Position of the prominent Tax-inducible κB-specific complex is indicated with an arrow.

1985). This subcellular localization of wild-type Tax was confirmed by indirect immunofluorescence (Fig. 6A,B). Similarly, the subcellular localization of each missense mutant was determined and categorized (Table 1). The majority of Tax mutants, including M1, M22, and M45–M48, displayed nuclear predominant patterns of expression (N) indistinguishable from that of the wild-type protein. Phase-contrast and corresponding immunofluorescence photomicrographs of the M22 and M47 Tax mutants are presented in Figure 6, C–F. These results indicate that the contrasting functional phenotypes of these mutants are not explained by an altered pattern of subcellular expression. Strikingly, each of the nonfunctional zinc finger mutants displayed a cytoplasmic predominant, almost nuclear-excluded, (C > N) pattern of expression (Table 1; M5–M12). The subcellular localization of two representative zinc finger mu-

Figure 6. Subcellular localization of Tax mutants by indirect immunofluorescence. Phase-contrast (*top*) and corresponding immunofluorescence (*bottom*) photomicrographs of fixed transfected COS cells are presented. Cells were treated with rabbit α Tax-C antisera followed by goat anti-rabbit IgG conjugated to rhodamine isothiocyanate. Three patterns of subcellular localization were observed: (N) nuclear predominant, with some cytoplasmic expression; (C > N) cytoplasmic predominant with little detectable nuclear expression; and (C = N) random distribution throughout the entire cell. Representative examples of nuclear predominant and cytoplasmic predominant patterns of subcellular localization are shown. The subcellular pattern of expression for each missense *tax* mutant is summarized in Table 1.

tants, M7 and M12, is shown in Figure 6, G–J. In contrast, M10, the single biologically active zinc finger mutant, exhibited a wild-type nuclear predominant pattern of expression (Fig. 6K and L). These results suggest that the zinc finger domain of Tax is required for its nuclear expression. Additionally, several mutants affecting residues outside the proposed zinc finger were also excluded from the nucleus (Table 1; M4, M13–M15, M17, M18, M20), indicating that additional regions of Tax may also contribute to its nuclear targeting. Notably, each of the Tax mutants excluded from the nucleus uniformly failed to *trans*-activate either the HTLV-I LTR or the HIV-1 LTR. These findings argue further that nuclear expression of Tax may be required for its transcriptional activities.

Discussion

We used transient gene expression analysis to assess the phenotype of a series of missense mutants of the HTLV-I *tax* gene. Using this approach, we identified mutants affecting residues within three distinct regions of the Tax protein that differentially *trans*-activate CREB/ATF and NF- κ B responsive promoters. These findings demonstrate that Tax activation of these two cellular transcription factor pathways proceeds via distinct mechanisms and suggest that activation is mediated by different Tax domains. Specifically, the M1 and M47 *tax* mutants displayed markedly attenuated abilities to

trans-activate the CREB/ATF-dependent HTLV-I LTR while retaining essentially wild-type activation of the NF- κ B-dependent HIV-1 LTR and IL-2R α promoter. Interestingly, these mutations are located within two widely separated hydrophobic domains of the Tax protein. However, it remains unknown how these hydrophobic domains participate in the activation of CREB/ATF host transcription factors.

Conversely, the M22 *tax* mutant fails to activate the NF- κ B-dependent HIV-1 LTR and IL-2R α promoter while displaying nearly wild-type *trans*-activation of the HTLV-I LTR and *c-fos* promoter. Interestingly, the M22 mutation alters the third of four regularly spaced leucine residues in the linear sequence of Tax. This region of the protein, however, contains four proline residues and does not likely form a leucine zipper because these structural motifs are distinguished by their α -helical properties (Landschulz et al. 1988; O'Shea et al. 1989). Furthermore, mutants altering the other regularly spaced leucine residues did not recapitulate the functional phenotype of the M22 mutant. The M22 Tax mutant was also shown to lack the ability to induce nuclear expression of NF- κ B, thus explaining its inability to *trans*-activate either the HIV-1 LTR or IL-2R α promoter. Recent studies have shown that the induction of NF- κ B in many cells involves its dissociation from a cytoplasmic inhibitor, termed I κ B (Baeuerle and Baltimore 1988), initiated by protein kinase-mediated phosphorylation of I κ B (Ghosh and Baltimore 1990). The mecha-

nism by which the wild-type nuclear Tax protein induces NF- κ B dissociation from I κ B in the cytoplasm remains unknown. Preliminary experiments using either in vitro-translated Tax or recombinant Tax partially purified from *Escherichia coli* would appear to exclude a simple direct interaction of Tax and I κ B (M.R. Smith and W.C. Greene, unpubl.).

Our mutation analysis of Tax also demonstrates that the carboxyl terminus, although acidic in nature and predicted to fold as an α -helix, is not required for Tax activation through either the CREB/ATF or the NF- κ B pathways. Furthermore, this subregion of Tax does not function as a transcriptional activation domain when fused to the DNA-binding domain of GAL4 (M.R. Smith and W.C. Greene, unpubl.). The apparent dispensability of the carboxyl terminus is consistent with the absence of 22 of these amino acids in the homologous HTLV-II Tax protein, which is a potent *trans*-activator of both the HTLV-I and HTLV-II LTRs (Pavlakis et al. 1988; Cann et al. 1989), as well as the HIV-1 LTR and the IL-2R α promoter (M.R. Smith and W.C. Greene, unpubl.). In addition, several laboratories have reported that hybrid proteins consisting of the truncated HTLV-II carboxyl terminus fused to the HTLV-I amino terminus are functional *trans*-activators (Pavlakis et al. 1988; Cann et al. 1989). Our results, however, differ with a previous study suggesting that the carboxyl terminus of the HTLV-I Tax protein may be required for *trans*-activation of the L-2R α promoter (Ruben et al. 1989).

These studies have revealed that mutations within a putative zinc finger domain of Tax abolish *trans*-activation of both CREB/ATF and NF- κ B responsive promoters. Currently, formal proof of metal binding by this potential structural domain is lacking. Recombinant Tax partially purified from *E. coli* has been reported to bind zinc chelating columns (Marriot et al. 1990). However, recombinant Tax immobilized on nitrocellulose does not bind zinc specifically under conditions where known metal-binding proteins bind divalent metals (M.R. Smith and W.C. Greene, unpubl.). Furthermore, the precise functional role of this structural domain in *trans*-activation is difficult to assess, because each of the transcriptionally inactive zinc finger mutants is excluded from the nuclei of expressing cells.

Nuclear proteins typically contain short highly basic peptide domains responsible for their nuclear targeting (for review, see Dingwall and Laskey 1986). In contrast, the Tax protein does not contain a canonical basic nuclear localization signal. Our mutational analyses, however, revealed that the zinc finger domain is required for nuclear expression of this viral *trans*-activator. These results raise the possibility that this structural motif may represent a new class of nuclear localization signal. Consistent with this interpretation, we identified a minimal sequence encompassing this structural motif (residues 17–48) that is sufficient to retarget β -galactosidase, a large cytoplasmic protein, to the nuclei of expressing cells (M.R. Smith and W.C. Greene, unpubl.). Notably, several biologically inactive Tax mutants affecting residues outside this nuclear localization signal

also failed to localize to the nucleus (Table 1). We suspect that anomalous folding of these mutant proteins may preclude their entry into the nucleus, either by disrupting the conformation of the nuclear localization signal or by a more indirect mechanism. Notably, each of the nuclear-excluded Tax mutants lacked detectable *trans*-activator function, suggesting that nuclear localization of Tax may be required for its biological function.

In summary, these studies highlight several structural and functional properties of the HTLV-I Tax protein that underlie its diverse transcriptional activities. The identification of Tax mutants with differential transcriptional phenotypes demonstrates that Tax activation of the CREB/ATF and NF- κ B transcription factors involves different biochemical pathways and suggests further that these processes may be mediated through distinct Tax peptide domains. These mutants should prove valuable in future studies of the molecular mechanisms of Tax *trans*-activation and cellular transformation.

Materials and methods

Construction of expression vectors

An M13 bacteriophage system (Amersham) for oligonucleotide-directed in vitro mutagenesis (Nakamaye and Eckstein 1987) was used to introduce targeted nucleotide substitutions into a cDNA copy of the *tax* gene encoded by the pcTax expression vector (Böhnlein et al. 1988a). The majority of mutations involved the introduction of a unique *NheI* site into the *tax* gene, resulting in the substitution of the dipeptide alanine–serine for the original amino acid residues. Mutants M45–M48 targeted specifically a hydrophobic region of the protein. To create mutations more likely to disrupt hydrophobic interactions within this region, mutants M45–M48 contain arginine–serine dipeptide substitutions that created a unique *BglII* site within the *tax* gene. The pcTax³³⁰DH $\rightarrow$ GDStop mutant expression vector, encoding a truncated form of Tax, was constructed by mutating the nucleotide sequence of codons 330–332 to insert the dipeptide glycine–aspartic acid followed by a translational termination codon. A unique *BglII* site was also introduced downstream of this stop codon to facilitate the identification of this mutant. The presence of each mutation within the *tax* gene was determined by diagnostic restriction mapping. The DNA sequence of the majority of introduced mutations, including M1, M10, M22, M47, pcTax³³⁰DH $\rightarrow$ GDStop, was confirmed by dideoxynucleotide sequencing. The Tax-inducible HTLV-I LTR–CAT and HIV-1 LTR–CAT (pU3R-I and pU3R-III; Sordroski et al. 1985), *c-fos* CAT (–356 *fos*–CAT; Gilman et al. 1986), and IL-2R α –CAT (–317 WT; Ballard et al. 1988) reporter plasmids have been described previously.

Cell transfections and CAT assays

The Jurkat human T-cell line was cultured in RPMI 1640 media supplemented with 7.5% fetal calf serum, 50 μ g/ml gentamicin, and 250 ng/ml amphotericin B. Jurkat cells were transfected with 2.5 μ g of reporter plasmid DNA and 5.0 μ g of expression vector DNA per 5×10^6 cells using DEAE dextran and chloroquine as described previously (Holbrook et al. 1987). Cell extracts were assayed for CAT activity (Neumann et al. 1987) ~48 hr after transfection. COS cells were cultured in Iscove's media supplemented as described above and transfected with

5.0 µg of plasmid DNA/ml using DEAE dextran and chloroquine (Cullen 1987). In transfections performed for subsequent immunofluorescence analysis, the amount of plasmid DNA was reduced to 2.0 µg/ml.

Analysis of mutant proteins

Western blot analysis of lysates prepared from COS cells transiently transfected with the wild-type and mutant *tax* expression vectors was performed as described (Winston et al. 1989). Briefly, these lysates were subjected to electrophoresis on discontinuous 10% polyacrylamide gels, followed by transfer of proteins to Immobilon-P (Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA) polyvinylidene difluoride membranes. Membranes were then probed using rabbit anti-peptide antisera directed against amino acid residues 321–353 (αTax-C; 1 : 2000 dilution) and ¹²⁵I-labeled protein A (10⁴ cpm/cm² Immobilon-P membrane). The carboxy-terminal deletion mutant Tax³³⁰DH → GDStop was analyzed by immunoprecipitation. Transfected COS cell cultures (~10⁶ cells) were metabolically labeled for 4 hr with [³⁵S]cysteine (200 µCi/ml) and lysed in RIPA buffer (Malim et al. 1989). Metabolically labeled proteins were then immunoprecipitated with either αTax-C or rabbit anti-peptide antisera directed against amino acid residues 106–132 (αTax-N) (1 : 200 dilution). Immunoprecipitates were analyzed on 10–20% SDS–polyacrylamide gradient gels under reducing conditions.

Indirect immunofluorescence

Indirect immunofluorescent staining (Cullen 1987; Cullen et al. 1988) was used to assess the subcellular patterns of expression of the various mutant Tax proteins within transfected COS-7 cells. After paraformaldehyde fixation, cells were treated with rabbit αTax-C antisera (1 : 200 dilution) and stained with goat anti-rabbit IgG antibody conjugated to rhodamine isothiocyanate (Boehringer Mannheim) (1 : 100 dilution).

Electrophoretic mobility-shift assays

Jurkat T cells (10⁸) were transfected with 100 µg of plasmid DNA using DEAE dextran and chloroquine and nuclear extracts were prepared (Dynan 1987) ~48 hr later. Electrophoretic mobility-shift assays (EMSAs) were performed as described previously (Ballard et al. 1989) by use of 5 µg of extracted proteins and a radiolabeled 27-bp probe containing the IL-2Rα NF-κB-binding site. This probe was prepared at high specific radioactivity (~5 × 10⁷ cpm/pmol) by primer extension. To determine the κB-specific nature of binding, a 200-fold molar excess of oligonucleotide competitor, containing either the wild-type or mutant (GGGA→ATCT; Leung and Nabel 1988) IL-2Rα κB element, was added to some reactions. Binding reactions were analyzed on native 6% polyacrylamide gels.

Acknowledgments

We thank Drs. Steve Gilman, William Haseltine, and Mark Ptashne for providing plasmid DNAs, Dr. Richard Randall and Mary R. Jones for oligonucleotide synthesis, Dr. Dean Ballard for assistance with EMSAs, Dr. Sarah Hanly for assistance in performing the immunofluorescence analyses, and Dr. Michael Malim for many useful scientific discussions. M.R.S. is supported by the Medical Scientist Training Program.

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Identification of HTLV-I tax trans-activator mutants exhibiting novel transcriptional phenotypes.

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Genes Dev. 1990, **4**:

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