Letters

Consultation on "Star Wars"

In his article about George (Jay) Keyworth II's resignation as science adviser to the President (News and Comment, 13 Dec., p. 1249), Eliot Marshall quotes from a statement I made regarding "Star Wars." Although the quotes are correct, some of the inferences that Marshall draws are incorrect. I was a member of the White House Science Council for about a year, resigning in April 1983. In the quote, "we were not consulted," the "we" refers to the Science Council, not to its panel on missile defense technology. I was not a member of the panel. The Council was not informed about the proposal for an "impenetrable shield," although a meeting was held only a few days before the President's speech of 23 March 1983. My concern was that we had no opportunity to discuss the proposal with Keyworth, not, as stated in Marshall's article, that I was unable to get my criticisms passed along to the President. I felt that such a far-reaching proposal, which would have a tremendous impact on the R&D community, should have been reviewed by the Science Council at least, if not by a much wider group of experts.

I did not resign because of "Star Wars," but mainly for personal reasons. I was concerned about Keyworth's failure to consult with the Council on important issues. At that time, I thought that the proposal for a strategic defense would be reduced by Congress to a reasonable long-range research program. I still think that this will be the case in the long run.

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Human DNA Repository

The use of DNA probes has revolutionized the conduct of genetics research, diagnosis, and therapy. In 1983, members of the human genetics community petitioned the National Institutes of Health to develop a reliable and efficient means for researchers to exchange cloned human DNA.

To fulfill this need, a repository of human cloned DNA segments is now being established by the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC) in Rockville, Maryland, under contract from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. The ATCC will collect well-characterized probes from investigators, expand and verify the probes, and store multiple samples that will be distributed to other interested investigators. Active solicitation of high-priority probes and acceptance of important probes have begun.

In addition, human chromosome–specific libraries, already developed at the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore national laboratories supported by the Department of Energy, will be transferred to the repository for storage and distribution through funding by the NIH Division of Research Resources. Distribution of these libraries by the repository is scheduled to begin in early 1986. The general availability of these libraries will greatly increase the rate at which important probes are produced.

Researchers will have ready access to both the probe and library collection through an on-line computerized database. The database will hold information relevant to the collection, and every effort will be made to provide current follow-up information about the results derived from use of the collection. The on-line system is expected to be available within a year.

Virtually every field of genetics and most related disciplines use DNA probes extensively. As our understanding increases, and as the methodologies become more widely used, the need for reliable, easily available probes becomes more urgent. This repository is expected to fulfill national and international needs for a reliable means to exchange cloned human DNA.

But the success of such a research resource will require a long-term commitment to the repository. Scientific confidence in using the repository will be determined by the willingness of investigators to share their probes, the quality of the material submitted to the repository, and the quality-control measures that are being applied by ATCC and NIH.

We are confident that a successful research resource for cloned DNA is being developed. Further information will be available as the project progresses. Inquiries regarding this project can be made through NIH or to William Nierman, who is head of the repository at ATCC (telephone: 301-231-5515).

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AIDS in Africa

The high incidence of AIDS among both men and women in Africa has led to the suggestion that a different mode of transmission may be at work there. Colin Norman echoes this view in his summary of the International Symposium on African AIDS (News and Comment, 6 Dec., p. 1140). In fact, the spread of the disease among heterosexuals in Africa and homosexuals in the West may point to a common factor in their sexual practices. Contact with blood during intercourse is thought to be largely responsible for the transmission of the virus among homosexuals in the United States (*1*). The same principle may apply to heterosexuals in central Africa, where female circumcision is still a widespread practice. In its most extreme form, referred to as "infibulation," the operation consists of the removal of some or all of the vulval tissue, after which the two sides of the wound are sewn together, leaving only a small opening for the passage of urine and menstrual blood (*2*). Subsequent vaginal intercourse is therefore difficult if not impossible and is chronically associated with tissue damage, tears, and bleeding (*3*). Anal intercourse is a common recourse for heterosexual partners (*4*). It is noteworthy that the recent outbreaks of AIDS in Africa, as reported at the Brussels meeting, correspond geographically to those regions in which female mutilation is still practiced (*5*). Understanding the pattern of AIDS in Africa will probably first require understanding the cross-cultural differences in sexual practices.

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4. L. P. Sanderson, *Against the Mutilation of Women* (Ithaca Press, London, 1981), p. 39.
5. R. Abdalla, *Sisters in Affliction* (Zed Press, London, 1982), pp. 11–17.

Erratum: In the article "Keyworth quits White House post" by Eliot Marshall (News and Comment, 13 Dec., p. 1249), the credit lines were inadvertently omitted for the two photographs of George Keyworth II that appeared on pages 1249 and 1250. The photographer is Leah Roberts.

Erratum: In the article "What makes nerves regenerate?" by Deborah M. Barnes (Research News, 29 Nov., p. 1024), Tin-Ho Chiu's name was misspelled. Chiu is with the Allied Corporation and developed the bioresorbable nerve guide tubes used by Richard L. Sidman's group at Harvard University.