

to the editor

A sensible readjustment

Mr. Comunale's letter about the benefits of space research (SN: 2/20/71, p. 124) completely ignored the huge gap between promise and performance. Certainly, space research has helped to put better color TV's into the hands of a tiny minority of the earth's population, but the improvements in environment, health care and living standards which Mr. Comunale mentions are negligible and will remain so until the will exists to commit to these things amounts of money and effort comparable to what is now spent on the space program and exaggerated military activities.

To flaunt before poorly nourished populations in Africa or Asia (or Appalachia for that matter) the benefits of space research while making no significant effort to distribute these benefits is not only amoral but politically ill-advised. Nobody is asking for a complete abandonment of the space program, merely for a sensible readjustment of priorities. The Indochina involvement is a prodigally expensive taking of sides between antagonists of equally dubious character. Its immediate abandonment, together with a decision to stop pursuing the development of nuclear weapons ludicrously far beyond the point of credible necessity, would allow the achievement of a reasonable balance between the demands of space research and more pressing social needs. Until such a readjustment is carried out, Federal taxes will remain by far the worst value for money of all the taxes levied on residents of this country.

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Gondwana reconstructions

In your article, "The other extreme" (SN: 1/16/71, p. 49), which refers to a recent paper by Dr. D. H. Tarling (NATURE, 229, 1970), Antarctica has been rotated nearly 180 degrees counterclockwise from the position depicted in the reconstruction by Smith and Hallam. I find the South America-Antarctica reassembly of Tarling difficult to accept when one considers the geologic and geochronologic data from southern South America and West Antarctica. For example, in the Tarling model, the predominantly late Paleozoic through Mesozoic (circa. 275 million to 100 million years ago) rock units of southern Argentina and Chile are joined to older Precambrian rocks and cratonic East Antarctica which is untenable. However, the large-scale

geologic and geochronologic provinces of southern South American can be traced into West Antarctica.

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Rationale in doubt

According to your short article "Efficacy of cough remedies," (SN: 2/13/71, p. 116), MEDICAL LETTER has attacked cough remedies more or less in general. The rationale of its arguments is in doubt from the outset, however, because of the astonishing assertion that "coughs are usually self-limited or of brief duration." This is simply not true, as any of millions of sufferers from common cold, bronchitis, etc., can attest from experience. Without some relief from the well-known itchy irritation of the air passages, a victim can hack away uncontrollably for minutes on end. Evidently the editors of MEDICAL LETTER ignore such trivial inconveniences.

As to the proposal to add still another item of over-the-counter medication to the prescription list, we need only ask once more that ancient and revealing question *cui bono?* Would not the same old grasping hands be discovered behind the moralistic rhetoric?

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For an upgraded OST

The article "A time of torment for science" (SN: 1/2/71, p. 5) contained the statement, "They [scientists] had ignored the important problems of society to chase off to the moon, promote an unpopular war and develop a gadget-ridden economy that threatened to make the world uninhabitable in the years to come." Here, again, is the implication or accusation, so often seen in the public communication media the last few years, that scientists are responsible for the mess we are now in. We hear cries that science must be "controlled" or it must be "directed."

Well, the truth of the matter is that science in this country has always been directed. Up until the end of World War II, there was very little basic or free research; it was almost all applied research, directed toward a preconceived goal. During and since the war our military through industry has directed the applied research and development of the weapons and auxiliary equipment for "defense." But by far, the greater part of directed research has been that by corporations and

manufacturers who demanded and got from scientists products that the public would buy.

It is true that since the war the government, industry and some universities have sponsored considerable basic research, but on the whole, the scientist has always done what he was told to do. If he developed a process or product that in its manufacture used an element that was treated as waste and the manufacturer, instead of reclaiming it, dumped into a sewer system which thereby polluted a lake or stream, he had no control over it. Yet today he is being blamed for much of the pollution and other side-effects of science.

This is no quarrel with directed science and technology; it is a plea for the right people to be empowered to do the directing. Since this is a national problem with vast social overtures, it should be done by a Federal agency. This agency should be staffed mainly by scientists and technologists. It is a lot easier for these persons to grasp the social implications of research and development than for the "humanists" to grasp the basic scientific and technological elements. (In fact, the best philosophy today is being written by scientists.)

The present Office of Science and Technology (OST) should have all the present advisory science agencies consolidated under it and its authority elevated to cabinet rank and extended beyond that of advising the President and evaluating research programs of agencies of the Federal Government to supervising and directing all research (except basic) and development throughout the nation. Before a manufacturer could place a product on the market, he would have to satisfy the OST that there were no harmful effects in its making or its usage.

Byron M. Taylor
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Paging the soapmaker

Attention "Fifty, female and forgettable" of Windsor, Conn.:

Hurry, please, and let us all know your formula for making soap from tallow (SN: 2/6/71, p. 92) and we will stop wasting fat and clogging our drains.

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