

# SCIENCE NEWS®

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**COVER:** *Amanita muscaria*, also known as fly agaric, is a mushroom that has long been used for exotic drug trips. Scientists have now confirmed its mind-expanding abilities and determined precisely which chemicals in the mushroom are responsible for which physiological effects. See p. 77. (Photo: Joy Spurr, Seattle, Wash.)

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# LETTERS

## After nuclear war

Amitai Etzioni's concerns with the potential destruction of America in a nuclear war (SN: 12/20 & 27/75, p. 393) are logical and right—with one minor exception.

Military strategies have changed considerably since the 1959 study he cited was completed. In consequence, most of the cities he fears will be destroyed would more likely go untouched in a nuclear exchange.

Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union aim their missiles in accord with the military, not the cultural, significance of targets, and few big cities in the United States have military significance. Moreover, computer gamings of modern nuclear war assume that the greatest damage to the United States could be done by leaving a maximum number of city dwellers alive—but deprived of food, fuel, communications, transportation, leadership, and hence civil order. The Soviets have done similar analyses and can be expected to give American cities a low target priority.

Of course the environmental side-effects of a global nuclear war are uncertain but might well be catastrophic to regions thousands of miles from ground zero. But the madness of nuclear war must be curbed by cold logic and honest analysis, not by emotional appeals. Those who make policy will ignore the Etzioni's of the world so long as they argue with obsolete data.

Lowell Ponte  
Santa Monica, Calif.

(Mr. Ponte, a writer and editor of *SKEPTIC MAGAZINE*, is a former arms control analyst and author of many Pentagon nuclear weapons studies.)

## Acronymia

Regarding Jonathan Eberhart's "Man From MUMBLE" (SN: 12/13/75, p. 381), may I present to J. Eberhart the ultimate acronym:

ACRONYM: Abbreviated, Coded Rendition of Name, Yielding Meaning. I have always thought that the truly greats were those that were also palindromes (radar, CIC, COC, etc.).

Unfortunately, these delightful recreations only succeed in the obfuscation of our language.

Thanks to Jonathan, SN, and all others who can find fun in this dreadfully serious world we live in.

John R. Lowdeslager  
Stamford, Conn.

## Metric mailbag

It is discouraging to find Ernest Ambler of the National Bureau of Standards advocating the metric system in terms of U.S. trade and balance of payments (SN: 1/10/76, p. 23). Why put it at the lowest common denominator, as though the inspiration for going to the moon or building Chartres Cathedral was "it'll bring in the money"?

Surely the main impulse for a worldwide measuring system is that hallmark of civilization, order. The great thing with the metric system, as with the simplicity of good health, is that the user is hardly aware of its presence. He can get on with the job, instead of interrupting to convert feet to miles.

So the officers in charge of the U.S. ship of state have decided to drift with the tide, fearing dissension amongst the passengers if a firm decision is made.

The sad thing is that the metric world needs the leadership of the United States. We've recently been seeing the confusion coming from the pedantic application of the SI units. In metricating Britain, architects are being told to measure in SI millimeters instead of the practical meters (with 3 decimal places), and book sizes are to be expressed in SI millimeters instead of the easily comprehended centimeters (with 1 decimal place). If the U.S. were committed to metric, it could blow a great breath of common sense through the SI debate. But it is only committed to its British heritage, and can have nothing to say to the world until the issue is decided.

P. Mohr  
Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory  
Cambridge, Mass.

Herbert L. Gross has written (SN: 1/10/76, p. 19) questioning how, in a given instance, one would know whether the word "micrometer" meant "MicroMEter," a unit of length, or "miCROmeter," a measuring instrument. He further raises the issue of the contrast between the pronunciations of "MicroMEter," the unit of length, and "kiLOmeter," a larger one.

The answer to the first, of course, has to be in the context, but the answer to the second is that the common pronunciation he quotes for the larger unit is wrong! Nearly every dictionary I have been able to find (including the Oxford and Webster's unabridged) simply lists the pronunciation as "KILoMEter," in complete analogy with "MicroMEter," in a very few cases "kiLO-meter" is listed as an alternate, but always the less favored pronunciation.

John W. MacArthur  
Marlboro, Vt.

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