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## Letters

### What if he's right?

I am fascinated by the ongoing debate between Jeremy Rifkin and those biotechnologists who wish to field test their products ("Industry gene-splice field tests approved," SN: 6/9/84, p. 356). As I understand it, Rifkin's main argument seems to be that while new man-made compounds are introduced into the environment almost daily, genetically engineered bacteria are unique in that they can reproduce themselves, and the long-term effects of their release are thus beyond the pale of prediction. Though some of his opponents seem to regard him as quixotic do-gooder or professional rabble-rouser, what if he's right? I think he has a valid point. Wouldn't prudence now be much preferable to hand-wringing hindsight later?

T. J. Tweed  
Casstown, Ohio

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Cover: Artist's depiction of neutral-particle-beam space platforms targeting intercontinental ballistic missiles. Today the technology to make this Star Wars specter possible is still relatively undeveloped. However, research into directed-energy weaponry is active and is expected to grow substantially over the next five years. (Illustration: Los Alamos National Laboratory)



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## Rubbing elbows

Michael Hughes and Walter R. Gove conclude ("Life in a maddening crowd," SN: 6/16/84, p. 377) that crowding does, in fact, create mental health problems. I would suggest that their study (and similar studies) fail to separate the problems of crowding from the problem of confinement.

People can tolerate very crowded conditions if they have a chance for occasional escape. So if a single parent is cooped up all day, every day, the mental strain will be enormous. If another adult is present who can say "I'll watch the kids for awhile while you go out," the strain will be dramatically lessened, even though the crowding has actually increased. The strain will be just as great on a parent in a large house as in a small one, if there is no chance to escape.

The confusion over crowding versus confinement has greatly affected the way we view cities. Low-density housing is not necessarily

better than high-density, as studies like this would have us believe. In fact, the opposite may be true, since higher densities can support bus and subway lines that will permit escape for the very high percentage of people in our society who do not have access to a car (the young, the poor, the elderly, the infirm). Sociologists and psychologists would do well to study the effect of confinement on mental health.

John Linsenmeier  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

## Don't rain on our parade

About the Department of Defense's missile umbrella ("DOD's umbrella for a missile shower," SN: 6/23/84, p. 391)—would such an umbrella shield us from fallout or the electromagnetic pulse? After all, a nuclear missile need not strike a target to affect it.

Ken Gale  
New York, N.Y.