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Cover: Scientists transform plants into efficient chemical factories by culturing "hairy roots," immortal systems with fine hairs that sprout along the rootlets' edges. These systems serve as botanical sources of anticancer compounds and other drugs. (Photo: Mark Staebell/Pennsylvania State University)



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Letters

Marital reverberations

As a psychotherapist, I find that the false impressions reported by Bruce Bower ("False Impressions," SN: 3/28/92, p.200) are especially potent between marital partners.

In the business and social worlds, many interactions are nonrepetitive; a misjudgment may produce a negative result, but the effect is likely to die out. In the closed and emotionally charged system of a couple, misattributions tend to reverberate between the partners, gradually producing lasting negative views of the other's character. The greater the situational stress — for example, from divorce — the more likely people are to form deeply negative, seemingly permanent conclusions about each other, based on atypical behavior attributed to the partner's character rather than to the situation.

Johnston, Campbell and Tall, researchers in

this area, have appropriately labeled this the "negative reconstruction of spousal identity."

Robert E. Adler
Fremont, Calif.

Worlds apart

In "Side effects of U.S. 'peace dividend'" (SN: 3/21/92, p.191), the statement that "these [surplus military] engineers embody the skills needed to boost U.S. commercial competitiveness" (emphasis mine) seems to overlook an important aspect.

Competitiveness in the military area means faster airplanes, more armor-piercing ammunition, farther-reaching radars, etc. Cost is no object. Competitiveness in civilian areas means sportier-looking cars, low-cost tooling for appearance items that will be obsolete next year and gadgets to facilitate the tuning-in of cable TV channels.

To be sure, we all studied mathematics, physics, etc. in college. But some of us —

probably the more research-oriented men and women — went into the glamorous "frontier of knowledge" pursuits of the munitions makers; the others looked for the rough-and-tumble of the consumer world, where you could make an impression by taking 2 cents out of the manufacturing cost of a mass-produced widget.

Both of these areas are needed in our world, and I am not distinguishing between the two on a "human needs" scale. However, engineers who have spent the last umpteen years evaluating wind-tunnel results for fighter planes will not easily convert to more mundane pursuits.

I am afraid the 127,000 military engineering positions evaporating within four years will not be replaced by anywhere near an equal number of civilian engineering jobs. Instead, there may be many more taxi drivers with Ph.D. degrees on Route 128!

Walter H. Oettinger
Professional Engineer
South Royalton, Vt.

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