

# CORRESPONDENCE

## Terrorism and Vietnam

SIR,—Your comments in reply to Lester Goldstein (*Nature*, 238, 57; 1972) concerning terrorism and Vietnam raise some very important issues. For you a qualitative difference exists between the terrorist act at Tel Aviv airport and what the US government is doing in Vietnam. The former was such that you felt it warranted to raise a hue-and-cry about individual acts of terrorism in various parts of the world (*Nature*, 237, 302; 1972). (In this also you were selective: you mentioned the IRA while omitting the UDA and the British army.) However, you claim that what is happening in Vietnam, being the "consequence of a declared military policy of a government", is not in "Nature's parish".

Why is this so? What is *Nature's* parish? Would Hitler's gas chambers—a Nazi government policy—and their horrendous use have been outside "Nature's parish"?

Without taking up the question of why the United States government is waging this war (that is, the politics involved), the evidence is overwhelming that what the US is doing is harnessing the most modern concepts in science and technology, on a vast scale, to overcome if not to totally destroy the people and the human environment of a large portion of Indochina. For almost a decade at least, Indochina has been the point of sharpest conflict between advanced technology and the welfare of man and his environment. Never in history has so economically weak and backward a people been subjected to such widespread terror, such destructive energy by so powerful an opponent for so long.

I submit that what the US government is doing in Indochina does fall into "Nature's parish". To hide behind real or imaginary parish boundaries on the issue is no different than to condone the Nazi's genocidal gas chambers. Time is long since past for thinking human beings—including especially scientists and technologists—to view the facts and call for the only possible solution—the immediate and total withdrawal of the US presence from Indochina.

Yours faithfully,

MATTHEW HUSSEY

Glasgow Dental Hospital and School,  
378 Sauchiehall Street,  
Glasgow G2 3JZ

## Doomwatching

SIR,—Recent *Nature* editorials have suggested, in no uncertain terms, that the present spate of warnings about imminent or future "ecocatastrophe" is alarmist and irresponsible. Of course the excesses of the doomwatchers need to be pinpointed, but by the same token of scientific caution it is appropriate to criticize with equal rigour the optimistic view that science can solve everything; and here *Nature* has been silent.

It should also be remembered that forecasts of disaster, such as the Club of Rome's *The Limits of Growth*, are not wholly negative: they simply point out what are the probable consequences if certain present trends are continued. I do not accept that it is scientifically reprehensible to do this. Indeed, the environmental lobby surely deserves credit for alerting influential individuals and the general public to the full social and ecological consequences of a purely laissez faire attitude to population, resources, and environment. If, and it is a big "if", concerted steps are now being taken to reduce some of the more dangerous trends, then surely this hopeful development owes something to the efforts of the doomwatchers?

The great human disasters have almost invariably arisen from what has not been predicted, and thus has not been susceptible to corrective control. Science must always tend to be conservative, since facts are retrospective; and so necessarily all our activities will have consequences which we cannot confidently predict. Yet the "civilized" world is constantly engaging in enterprises which must have profound future consequences. Their scale is ever-increasing, so that, once begun, they can slowly and painfully, if at all, be reversed. Typically we have only the most fragmentary firm data from which to predict their socio-ecological effects, so there is usually an uncertain but substantial margin of error. One of the few clear lessons of history is that the increasing scale of our activities and decisions yields a concomitant increase in our mistakes and the magnitude of our disasters. Therefore, if we must err (and that we shall do is a very safe prediction), we should surely err on the side of caution, and be excessively sceptical of optimistic rather than pessimistic assumptions. The effects of taking too much heed of the doomwatchers are unlikely to be as harmful as those of taking too little heed.

Since we are already aware of numerous ecological danger-signals, should not *Nature* be pressing hard for more and more research on environmental problems, rather than knocking existing "world models" too hard for their imperfections? Science and technology may be able to overcome many of our difficulties (although no doubt many others will require more fundamental political changes), but only if we recognize what the problems are. More and more, especially if we are to be placed in a "public contractor" role, we shall depend on the publicists who can create the political demand for the relevant research funding. Perhaps then, despite their over-zealous excesses, the doomwatchers deserve a little more of *Nature's* respect.

Yours faithfully,

IAN VINE

Department of Psychology,  
8-10 Berkeley Square,  
Bristol BS8 1HH

## Abbreviations

SIR,—In the August issue of the *British Journal of Haematology* (23, 167; 1972) is a paper entitled: "Detection of Splenic Anti-Platelet Antibody Synthesis in Idiopathic Autoimmune Thrombocytopenic Purpura (ATP)" by S. Karpatkin, N. Strick and G. W. Siskind. I wish to point out that the abbreviation ATP is already in universal use throughout the biological sciences for adenosine triphosphate. As such the abbreviation is, of course, also used in publications on platelets. The introduction of the same abbreviation for something else, even for a not too common clinical condition, is likely to cause at best irritation and at worst confusion. I should like to urge, therefore, that ATP should not be introduced as an abbreviation for autoimmune thrombocytopenic purpura. (Incidentally the abbreviation ITP, unfortunately already in common use for idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, is also the standard abbreviation for inosine triphosphate. There the disease is already established; what one has to do now is to prevent its spread.)

To substantiate the possibility of confusion I should like to tell the following true story. Several years ago, Dr Malcolm Dixon gave a series of lunchtime lectures at University College on ATP and other "high-energy" phosphate compounds. The lectures had a rather popular title which I have now forgotten,