CORRESPONDENCE

Creation "copout"

SIR — In a critique of American Creationism (*Nature* 2 July, p.95), Darnbrough, Goddard and Stevely state "no plausible theoretical model exists which provides a mechanism for the spontaneous generation of nucleic acids as informational macromolecules specifying polypeptides which themselves mediate the replication and expression of that information". This statement is much like the definition of the same scientific chicken–egg problem by J. Monod (1971) and K. Popper (1974).

One can argue plausibility indefinitely because the assessment of that quality is highly subjective. However, there has appeared, through *experimental* demonstration, a laboratory model of a cell-like structure with many of the properties required. This structure is composed of lysine-rich and acidic thermal polyamino acids[1] that complex with each other to form cell-like structures. Both in solution and in suspensions of particles, these (*self-ordered*) polyamino acids catalyse simultaneously the formation of peptides and polynucleotides from ATP and free amino acids (see ref.2). This model so far leaves unanswered many of the questions about the origin of the genetic code, but it demonstrates that the question is not as scientifically imponderable as Popper and Darnbrough *et al.* have suggested. It does provide answers to some questions, such as how the two kinds of macromolecular synthesis could first have been closely coordinated. The sequence theoretically derived from those experiments is: amino acid sets → protocells → nucleic acid + protein

I would not criticize Darnbrough *et al.* for not being aware of advances as recent as these (further details in the press). However, to attack an area of science because it has *not yet* reached a given stage, and then to argue a need for resorting to supernatural explanations because specific scientific answers are not reported, consolidated or agreed upon, is what is referred to in an American idiom as a "copout".

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1. Fox, S. *Nature* **205**, 328-340 (1965).
2. Fox, S. & Nakashima *Bio Systems* **12**, 155-156 (1980).

Attack on Tamuz

SIR — The editorial entitled "Making Israel Atone for Tamuz" (*Nature* 18 June, p.523) has shocked and dismayed many of your faithful readers. It appears that *Nature*, a journal that has hitherto enjoyed an unparalleled reputation in the scientific community for publishing innovative and careful scientific observations, is now embarking on a new course as a "yellow sheet" of political comment. One can only fear that subjective, biased, political diatribe as represented by your editorial will sully and finally displace the elegant work that has heretofore been the mark of publications in *Nature*.

I must admit that the editorial was cleverly written. Under the guise of a great concern for the reputation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty the editorial proceeds to mount a political attack on Israel and depicts Iraq, a signatory of the treaty, as an innocent, wholesome and wronged party, even deserving financial redress through "international legal processes" for the destruction of its means for producing awesome weapons.

Scientists are wont to deal with observations and to derive probability statements for predicting future phenomena based on past observations. Let us apply some logic to the editorial at hand. Unfortunately, although Iraq is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, past actions have shown that in the case of Iraq "the sword is mightier than the pen". In the course of history the signatures of dictatorial governments have proved worthless. Iraq, by its own declaration, has maintained a continued state of war with Israel and has recently branched out in its military adventurism by an unprovoked attack against its neighbour, Iran. Iraq has been at the forefront of frenzied calls for the total destruction of Israel and has given both financial and military support to the terrorists who have revelled in the wanton murder of innocent civilians, especially women and children. Parenthetically, I did not note editorials in *Nature* either denouncing the bombing attack by Iran, albeit unsuccessful, against the nuclear reactor in Iraq, or decrying the slaughter of innocent women and children in Israel by terrorist attackers.

The editorial does not at all address the question as to why Iraq was stockpiling uranium suitable for the manufacture of atomic weapons. Much faith is placed in international commissions and the cursory inspections of the Iraqi reactor. It is ludicrous to believe that a government bent on production of nuclear weapons could not hide such facilities. Furthermore, what good is the knowledge that nuclear weapons are being produced once all the production capabilities, including the raw materials, are in place? Would a contrite editorial in *Nature* bring back to life the many thousands of casualties that would result from even one atom bomb dropped on Israel? Or might the response to such an unthinkable event be equivalent to the world response witnessed during the Nazi outrages? Even the United States government was quite concerned by Iraqi intentions as evidenced by the testimony of Mr Roger Richter before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

As a native-born American, and a former officer in one of the US uniformed services, I am offended by the ugly term "Zionist vote". Fortunately, the majority of American voters speak to reality, and feel an affinity for Israel as the bastion of an open and democratic society in an area where tyrants and dictators prevail.

Unfortunately, the threat of nuclear retaliation is perhaps the only deterrent that Israel has against total annihilation by its truculent neighbours. Indeed, it appears that not only does Israel require this deterrent against its threatening neighbours, but perhaps also against such editorials as that in *Nature*.

Finally, aside from the question as to whether one does or does not justify the Israeli destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, I believe that one can assert that editorials of political diatribe do not belong in a premier scientific journal such as *Nature*.

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Certain points raised in this letter have been discussed in a subsequent editorial (Nature *16 July, p.185*) — Editor, Nature.

Researchers insecure

SIR — "Poaching" of ideas and staff between competing institutions is not a new phenomenon (A.J.S. Davies, *Nature* 2 July, p.96), though I doubt if it has (yet) reached serious proportions. A more serious problem, exacerbated in recent years by economic constraints, is that research teams usually include several young postgraduate and postdoctoral workers financed by short-term grants of 1–3 years' duration. The present system by which these are made available does not permit, let alone encourage, such scientists to remain in the teams where they begin to develop their expertise. There are two powerful reasons in particular for this. One is the present dire shortage of permanent posts in the academic sphere. The second is that it now appears to be the general policy that a young scientist should not be the recipient of more than 2 three-year grants from such bodies as the Medical Research Council. Consequently, after 6 years, such people may be obliged to find other employment anyway.

In most cases, the prime motivating force for a young scientist is not so much the chance to earn a large salary as reasonable security in order to develop his or her own skills and ideas over the long term. To be in a constant state of anxiety for the future, no matter what one achieves, seriously undermines one's ability to do this. Sadly, neither the universities nor the major funding bodies (the government and research councils) in Britain seem to have grasped this simple concept.

A certain degree of flexibility for movement between institutions is highly desirable, but many young scientists would welcome a contract that bound not only them but also their employer in the long term. Present conditions in Britain promote academic paralysis by destroying flexibility — those with secure jobs stick to them — while denying encouragement and opportunity to the young, and with that the long-term success and well-being of research teams.

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Erratum

IN a letter published in *Nature* 14 May, p.104, the name of one of the members of the (US) Xeroderma Pigmentosum National Registry was omitted. The full list of members is: Alan D. Andrews, James L. German III, Kenneth H. Kraemer and W. Clark Lambert.