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THE FIRST WORD

LETTERS FROM HOME

It is the month of seashore vacations and pastoral meditations. (It is also the month for urban rioting and celebrating 18th Century uprisings, but let us stick to the month's placid side.) It is the month for writing ruminative letters and reading thick books in the sand. Take this passage:

Five years ago all felt safe; five years ago we were all looking forward to peace, to a period in which mankind would rejoice in the treasures which science can spread to all classes if conditions of peace and justice prevail... Look at the difference in our position now! We find ourselves compelled once again to face the hateful problems and ordeals which those of us who worked and toiled in the last struggle hoped were gone forever.

Thus Winston Churchill spoke to Parliament in the wake of Hitler's March 1936 re-occupation of the Rhineland—in the wake, too, of craven indecision by practical statesmen of France and England—men who tried to second-guess history and anticipate public opinion. Men who declined to act on their solemnest promises. Men who turned their backs on what they understood to be true and knew to be right. It was the nadir of Realpolitik gone awry.

By that time Churchill had, in the face of derision and disgrace, spent more than a decade warning against the tide of unreason building on the Continent. Even on the eve of World War II, he was dismissed—as the Trojan Cassandra had been dismissed—as a monomaniacal crank, gifted with poetry but deficient in judgment.

That got us thinking. The principal issues that plague us today are those that chivied us when we began in this space, six years ago this month—public acceptance, pettifogging bureaucrats, slow product development, tight money. The measured pace of scientific development seems like lightning compared to the glacial creep of social, economic, and political acceptance.

Back then, for example, it seemed that the hibernation of Asilomar was over. It seemed that many more products would soon follow human insulin onto the market. It seemed that the first field trials of genetically engineered microbes would inevitably start that summer, to be followed by widespread product introductions. It seemed that approvals for the first human gene therapy protocols were no more than a year away.

It seemed, in short, that a very small dose of patience would see us through to the promised land. And so, with peace just around the corner, we counseled appeasement—trying to meet the too-often captious critics half way, keeping in countenance with fumbling rule-makers as they groped towards codes that would encompass even the most daft conjecture.

Yet in today's mail we see a pledge from the State of Virginia, assuring the public that state plant protection officials will be on hand to monitor U.S. Department of Agriculture-approved field tests of Monsanto's herbicide-resistant soybean...just to be sure the tests are safe.

We see (as John Hodgson writes in this issue) European agbiotech companies banding together to protect themselves from bureaucratic abuse as Continent-wide regulations move towards 1992. (And we see in the current Business Week an article on EEC regulation headlined "Cutting the heart out of European biotech.")

We see the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection still under fire—still trying to come up with even a draft, for goodness' sake, for regulating altered microbes in the environment. Meanwhile, of course, tons of toxic wastes already in the environment go untreated.

We see, in the current Nature, a note that prospects seem to be improving for approval of the first U.S. human gene therapy protocols.

The list goes on and on: Every month sees more biotech items in Dialog's Newssearch (a one-month compendium of coverage in U.S. newspapers and magazines). The science alone seems fresh. We have waited patiently. The years have gone by. And the same roadblocks remain. Is it becoming time to lay aside the language and habit of cooperation and begin to point out—more forcefully and more politically—how wasteful this endless dumbshow is getting to be.

—Douglas McCormick