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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE:

BIO/TECHNOLOGY, 65 Bleeker St., New York, NY 10012. Telephone: (212) 477-9600. Telex: 668497UW.
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THE FIRST WORD

COMMON SENSE

Some writers have so confounded society with government as to leave little or no distinction between them, whereas they are not only different but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and governments by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

(Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*)

We went back to *Common Sense* recently after several items drifted across our desk, items that suggest different social responses—and responsibilities—to biotechnology.

The commission's mission? Sen. Albert Gore Jr. (D-TN) has reintroduced his bill to establish a National Commission on Bioethics which would examine—nothing more—all the troubling implications of environmental release, human gene therapy, trans-specific gene transfer, human experimentation, novel transplants and implants, and new reproductive technologies. The commission is to be an independent advisory group. It will not, Sen. Gore asserts most emphatically, regulate anything.

Public education with a message. Science for the People, a Cambridge, MA, public-interest group, has just published *Decoding Biotechnology*, a magazine *cum* political tract. It makes challenging reading, a mixture of first-rate scientific introduction, obvious absurdities, and ideological cant.

Most important, though, *Decoding Biotechnology* raises penetrating questions which, though familiar, are too often pushed aside by the more instant considerations of commerce. Biotechnologists will have to come to terms, and soon, with the problems of environmental impact, "medicalization" of social problems, the social implications of genetic screening. Throughout the volume, the commercial reader must constantly contend with the smug equation of private enterprise with rapacity, of social ends with governmental programs, and of biotechnology generally with the bogey man hiding in a midnight closet. At the same time, Ross Feldberg does an excellent job of summarizing the scientific and consequent social issues, and Seth Shulman does a creditable job of summarizing technological precedents that might give a reasonable person pause. But one hesitates to agree with Shulman's blanket demand for environmental and even social impact statements. These are delaying tactics; too often the formal statement is just a pile of legal boilerplate that serves only as a pathetic monument to futilely dead trees. Well-considered and well-intentioned analyses are vital; their purpose must be to predict accurately, not to exhaust industry by making it jump through ever narrower hoops. The notion of a formal social impact statement strikes us as bizarre...and unreadable. Microbiologists as a tribe are not notable for the clarity or vigor of their writing; sociologists are much, much worse. A shotgun wedding of the two would be a tragedy.

One wonders, though, why the industry hasn't gotten around to presenting its own, much stronger, case as thoroughly and thought-provokingly.

Coming soon to theaters near you? *Warning Sign* (originally *Biohazard*) from Twentieth Century-Fox, directed by Hal Barwood, produced by Matthew Robbins, written by Robbins and Barwood (*Sugarland Express*, *Dragonslayer*, *Corvette Summer*, *MacArthur*). Starring Sam Waterson, Yaphet Koto, and Kathleen Quinlan. A story about the new science of genetic engineering that deals with "the raw emotions of a group of scientists and technicians who suddenly find themselves quarantined in a fortress-like building with an experiment that has gotten out of control...and with the reactions of their friends and families outside, who want them freed at any cost." We can't wait.

For some time, critics of biotechnology have habitually apologized for the quiescence of the much-called-for public debate, saying that the technology had outrun the public's ability to comprehend it. But not public debates, government commissions, or Hollywood movies by themselves constitute a social reaction to the challenges of biotechnology. Taken together, however, these are the elements of an evolving social response. It is up to the industry not to oppose, but to understand and even absorb what is legitimate, while rejecting cant and easy rationalization...on both sides of the factory gate.

Common sense is the critical commodity.

—Douglas McCormick