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INTERNAL COMPETITION

Here are two lines," our judo coach once said. "This is my line, this is yours. They are equal, parallel. If you compete, if you want to win, your line must be longer than my line. There are two ways to do this: You can make my line shorter, like this, with an eraser or an envious tongue. Or you can make your line longer, with hard work. Which do you think is the more honorable course?"

As we write this (longhand, in a San Francisco hotel room), several thousand people are attending this year's Biotech USA's seminars and touring its exhibits 10 floors below.

This year's hot topic is international competition. That's what Senator Lawton Chiles (D-FL) talked about during the opening press conference. And that's what the television, radio, and newspaper reporters seem most interested in.

But the emphases are different. San Francisco has stared across the Pacific until the Pacific stared back. The reporters here ask eagerly about "fighting" or "combatting" Japanese competition. Shortening lines.

Senator Chiles, on the other hand, spoke of lengthening America's line: He talked not of fighting the foreigners, but of "getting our own act together."

Chiles, you may recall, sponsored the Biotechnology Competitiveness Act of 1988, aimed at stretching the U.S. lead in biotech. Among other provisions, the bill would have established a technical database, instated a coordinator for the human genome sequencing project, and set up a board to set U.S. policy goals.

As the Industrial Biotechnology Association reports, Chiles' bill got stalled in a House of Representatives committee—after passing in the Senate and surviving two other House panels.

Though the bill died, perhaps to rise again in another form in the next Congress (but without Chiles, who retires in January), its main provisions have become law: As Jeffrey Fox has reported over the last few months, other measures have established a policy board, a genome project, and a biotech data base.

This is constructive competition—the only kind worthwhile in today's world. Biotech research is getting too expensive to recoup through sales to a single national market. Foreign markets are getting too big for companies to sell off rights in exchange for expansion capital. Japan is growing fast, and sometime after 1992, Europe may become a single market as big as the U.S. Any one of these could be a core market, or a birthright sold for a mess of pottage.

Any nation's task, then, is to secure for its citizens the fruits—financial and technical—of this massive interlocking market.

And you do that by drawing long lines of communication.

In Tokyo, in October, during BioFair, we shared time, drink, and conversation with a small group of Japanese and Americans. As midnight approached, someone mentioned the U.S. human genome sequencing program. Someone else asked whether the U.S. would keep all those hard-won and very valuable data to itself.

The question shocked us. The logistical problems of hoarding all those data are staggering. How could anyone balance the wide distribution needed to make the information useful with the restrictions needed to keep it confidential?

But beyond that, we had always assumed that the information would be in the public domain.

It shows, though, that too many of us confuse competition and protectionism, husbanding resources with hoarding them. We confuse making our own line longer with making another's line shorter.

—Douglas McCormick