LETTERS
Nuclear Waste Management: M. Resnikoff; R. O. Pohl; Solar Eclipses and Ancient Artistic Motifs: R. M. Sinclair ........................................ 714

EDITORIAL
International Conferences and Tax Reform: L. M. Branscomb ................................. 719

ARTICLES
Laser Enrichment of Uranium: The Proliferation Connection: A. S. Krass .................. 721
Cardiac Pacemaking: An Obligatory Role of Catecholamines?: G. H. Pollack .............. 731

NEWS AND COMMENT
National Academy of Sciences: How the Elite Choose Their Peers ......................... 738
Califano Takes Richmond .................................................................................. 739
NAS Elects 60 New Members. ........................................................................... 740
Academy to Campaign Publicly for Oppressed Scientists. .................................... 741
Briefings: Will Science Adviser Suffer in Shuffle?; Congress Rescues Military Med School ................................................................. 742
ERDA Laboratories: Los Alamos Attracts Some Special Attention ...................... 743
Critics Seek “Conversion” of Labs. .................................................................. 744

RESEARCH NEWS
Elusive Quarks: Hints of Two from a Stanford Experiment.................................. 746
Hormone Receptors: How Are They Regulated? ................................................. 747

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ANNUAL MEETING

Call for Contributed Papers: A. Herschman; Instructions for Contributors......... 749

BOOK REVIEWS

The NSF: Past and Present Issues: S. A. Lakoff; other reviews by J. Guthrie, J. L. Heilbron ................................................. 750

Unfoldings of Mental Life: N. K. Humphrey; other review by J. H. Kaas .......... 755

The Play by Nature: W. D. Hamilton ............................................. 757

A Setting for Cultural Evolution: K. V. Flannery; other review by B. J. Williams .. 759

Measuring the Effects of Education: B. Heyns ..................................... 763

Cognition and Social Behavior: M. R. Lepper; other reviews by S. H. White, C. Trevarthen .................................................... 765

Personal Recollections: J. T. Edsall; other reviews by S. J. Counce, R. E. Kane ... 769

Jodrell Bank and Cambridge: D. J. Kevels; other reviews by R. D. Richtmyer, E. J. Wampler, J. R. Heirtzler, P. Colinvaux, R. N. Ginsburg ....................... 774

On the Uses of Rigorous Proof: P. Kitcher; other reviews by T. L. Hankins, M. T. Ghiselin ......................................................... 782


Books Received and Book Order Service ............................................. 792

PRODUCTS AND MATERIALS

Oscilloscope Recording System; Rodent Skinner Box; Sample Processor for Tissue Culturing; Automatic Particle or Cell Electrophoresis; Automated Electrophoresis and Sedimentation Separations; High-Speed Motion Picture Camera; Reversed-Phase Thin-Layer Chromatography; Digital Compass; Literature .......................................................... 798

COVER

An example of "growth under difficulties," from a communication by Charles Darwin published in the Gardener's Chronicle, 29 December 1877. Darwin wrote, "The enclosed branch of Cotyledon (Echeveria stolonifera) was cut from a plant growing in my greenhouse, and was suspended on August 10 in my study... It has sent out two fine flowering stems which... have bent upwards... They have now (December 6) begun to flower... [T]he specimen weighed on September 1 45.46 grammes, on December 6 36.94 grammes, so that its growth has continued in spite of a considerable loss of water." [From The Collected Papers of Charles Darwin, reviewed on page 784]
International Conferences and Tax Reform

A provision of the Tax Reform Act of 1976 inflicts an unfair penalty on self-employed inventors, consulting engineers, and scholars without government grants or travel support from tax-exempt organizations. It may also severely limit the willingness of some industrial employers of scientists and engineers to sponsor their attendance at international scientific conferences.

The new provision seeks to close a "loophole"; it prevents deducting as a business expense the costs of travel to more than two foreign "conventions" per year. When a purely U.S. organization holds a convention in one of the spas of Europe or the Caribbean, and serious business is restricted to an hour or two of frivolous programming each day, there is no reason why the taxpayers of America should share the conventioneer's expense. But the language of the new law, and the interpretation of it provided by the congressional staff report, fails to distinguish such a tax-subsidized vacation from an international conference on arid zone agriculture, a general assembly of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry, a seminar at Trieste on many-body theory, or a conference on tropical medicine sponsored by the World Health Organization. The rules apply equally to foreign "conventions or seminars" attended by people from many nations and to those attended exclusively by Americans. Sales conventions, trade association conventions, professional society meetings, and internationally sponsored scientific meetings are caught in the same act.

Even for the two conferences per year that can be treated as a business expense, only deductions for tourist class travel and daily total costs not exceeding the allowances of U.S. government civil servants are permitted. Paper documents must be obtained to verify that the conference met at least six hours per day and that the individual was in his seat at least four of these hours. Even so, industrial employers' tax departments may have reason to worry about how narrow a test of relevance to business success the Internal Revenue Service may demand, when a scientist or engineer from the company's research laboratory has been authorized to attend an international conference.

Well-managed companies will continue to send their scientists to the meetings they need to attend, even if it means paying a tax premium for the privilege. But we all know how inexorable are the pressures of a congressional determination that more than a minimum of trafficking in international science is not a legitimate activity for businesses. Some business people may respond to the government's new rules by turning off conference participation by their people altogether.

Who will be the loser? The U.S. economy may be affected, as American companies find it harder to keep up with the scientific base on which their overseas competitors are building. (Can you imagine the Japanese government discouraging companies from learning about foreign technical advances?) Industries will be just a little less sensitive to nature's warnings about environmental, health, and resource implications as corporate awareness of world science contracts. For the poor nations of the world, international scientific activity represents a thin thread of access to the industrial world's technical knowledge. They are unlikely to look on new governmental restraints in sharing that knowledge as compatible with the high ideals of global development often espoused in this country.

The damage could easily be repaired; for example, by excluding from the restrictive provision foreign conferences where the location is reasonable in light of the number of foreign participants and their geographical dispersion. Some kind of change is needed, as Congress examines repair of technical defects in the new law this spring. We should make every effort to see that Congress acts. A good start would be to notify our congressmen, and I urge those of us who have a stake in this to do so.—LEWIS M. BRANSCOMB, Vice President, Office of the Chief Scientist, IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York 10504