

There are still other indications that are troubling. Why else insist that the FBI's product-rule calculation yields the "best estimate" instead of calling it what it is — an estimate more nearly at the nonconservative end of the spectrum that can be used in conjunction with the ceiling principle to bracket the true value? Why else attempt repeatedly to marginalize the issue of population substructure by labeling it as "purely academic"? Why else brush aside many other important issues, such as proficiency testing, accessibility of databases, and technical considerations relating to polymarkers and use of the polymerase chain reaction?

**Daniel L. Hartl**

*Department of Organismic  
and Evolutionary Biology,  
Harvard University,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02178, USA*

## Fighting fire with fire

SIR — Colin Macilwain<sup>1</sup> recorded the following memorable remark of a US politician: "we pay agencies to fight fires, not light them". In Western Australia, forest managers<sup>2</sup> have for three decades been using prescribed fires to minimize the possibility of destructive forest fires similar to those that recently affected the western United States.

The bushfire hazard in the southwest of Western Australia is arguably potentially more severe than in any other region of the world. This is because of its unique tall forests, which shed tonnes of highly flammable material each year, and a Mediterranean climate, that is, a climate that produces each year a 3–6 month drought with periods of high temperature and low humidity.

Fire is a naturally occurring element of southwest ecosystems, as natural as rain and sunlight. To the vegetation and native animals, it is simply a powerful disturbance factor from which, in time, the natural systems recover, or in the presence of which they evolve. Fire can also be an agent of death and destruction to human assets and values, and large wild fires are extremely costly.

In the southwest forests alone there have been more than 200 lightning-caused fires since 1988, any of which, without the benefit of prior planning burning, might have erupted into wildfires of the scale that devastated forests in Idaho. Fuel (fallen leaves, twigs, bark and sticks) is the only factor that can be managed, and this is Western Australia's first method of defeating wildfire. The other is a fast response by well-trained firefighters. The first method, reducing the fire's energy source, makes the second effective.

Prescribed, low-to-moderate intensity fires are not ecologically harmful<sup>3</sup> — such fires were lit every year by aboriginal

Western Australians until shortly after settlement by Europeans in 1829. Indeed, millennia of frequent firing of Western Australian forests by aborigines resulted in one of the most productive and valuable hardwood forests in the world.

**Syd Shea**

*Department of Conservation  
and Land Management,  
Australia II Drive, Crawley, 6009,  
Western Australia*

1. *Nature* **370**, 585 (1994).
2. Shea, S. R. *et al.* in *Fire and the Australian Biota* (eds Gill, A. M., Groves, R. H. & Noble, I. R.) 443–470 (Aust. Academy of Science, 1981).
3. Christensen, P. & Abbott, I. *Aust. For.* **52**, 103–121 (1989).

## Russian bomb

SIR — I wish to clarify your report (*Nature* **370**, 85; 1994) about the open letter by ten Russian scientists, of whom I was one.

Your report says that those responsible for building the atomic bomb in the Soviet Union were motivated by the fear that, if they failed, they would be dismissed as idealists and suffer the same fate as biologists had done under Josef Stalin. The more explicit text of our letter says that "under the conditions that existed during the totalitarian regime of Stalin, a failure of the first test of the Soviet atomic bomb would certainly have led to harsh punishment of all of Kurchatov's team and to the total devastation of Soviet physics (as happened shortly before in 1948 to Soviet biology)". We went on to say that the devastation would have begun with the prohibition of relativity theory and quantum mechanics on the grounds that they were the "poisoned tools of ideological saboteurs" and the atomic test in August 1949 "in fact saved Soviet physics".

Moreover, the main spirit of our letter was dictated not by history but by the present situation in our country: we consider Sudoplatov's book and its wide coverage as typical examples of activities of "reactionary, antidemocratic, anti-intellectual forces" that use the attacks on science "not only to discredit our intelligentsia but also to create political tensions internally and internationally, to produce an atmosphere of xenophobia and to generate hostility and mistrust within the world scientific community".

**Vitaly Goldansky**

*Institute of Chemical Physics RAS,  
4 ul. Kosygina,  
Moscow 117977, Russia*

## News and reality

SIR — Your leading article "How to deal with dreadfulness" (*Nature* **370**, 313–314; 1994) suggests that what concerns you is what appears "dreadful" to those who follow the news media, rather than the

experience of those of us who live every day with the events that interest the reporters. You mention the "wishes of the television-watching world" as if they interest you more than the wishes of those of us who live the events.

I have lived through many of these events for 14 years and notice a great disparity between the world in which I live and the world that is reported. The small subset of the actual events that is reported is selected by the reporters and by those skilful at guiding them. There are many distortions. Photographs get miscaptioned. Lenses can make a rifleman look as if he is aiming at someone at whom he is not aiming. Interviews, including voice recordings, are edited selectively. And even if one is quoted directly, one's success or failure at conveying one's experiences accurately is limited by one's ability to choose words quickly and appropriately, and by the ability of the audience to imagine a world they have never experienced. An expert at communications will sway the "television-watching world" better than a simple honest person who does not know how to express himself.

Governments, and the United Nations, make decisions aimed at pleasing the television watchers, and based largely on the data that appear in the news media. (Reports from "observers" may be discounted. When I soldiered in Lebanon I noticed that the United Nations (UN) troops never dared leave their base. And UN observers in Hebron see what they are shown.)

So I oppose your conclusion that the UN ought to intervene in the affairs of member states, undermining "to some degree" their sovereignty. Rather than intervening militarily in far-off events about which we can know little with any degree of scientific accuracy, we should each of us try to solve problems closer to home.

**Frank J. Leavitt**

*Kiriat Arba 303/2,  
Hebron, Israel*

## Help wanted

SIR — The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy of the Department of Health has set up a working group to prepare guidelines on the nutritional assessment of infant formulas. The group will be chaired by Dr Peter Aggett, head of nutrition, diet and health at the Institute of Food Research in Norwich. The working group invites concise written submissions based on reasoned argument and scientific data from interested parties. Submissions should be sent to me.

**P. Clarke**

*Department of Health,  
Room 593D Skipton House,  
80 London Road, London SE1 6LW, UK*