

## LETTERS

### A place to be heard

The Schwartz amendment and the debate thereon were unfortunate because member attention was diverted from the important issue, member alienation. We should not debate or vote on political or public issues that possess little or no scientific implication.

But there are public questions, I submit, that could be the proper province of American Physical Society discussion because they heavily involve science and the scientific community. The real issue is that there is not only no mechanism within the APS to discuss these questions, there is even no mechanism to decide whether to discuss them. There is the Committee on Physics and Society (COMPAS) within the American Institute of Physics, but my impression so far is that it has had little interaction with most of the APS membership and indeed has so far remained invisible. I don't want to "vote" on the Weston location, for example, but I certainly want some place to express my opinion within APS, where I know that I will be heard and can judge the results.

As Robert Cairns noted in his letter here in the March issue of *PHYSICS TODAY*, the American Chemical Society has formed a continuing committee especially to examine questions that embrace science and public policy. It actively receives, by way of open meetings, member opinion on suitable topics. I urge that APS adopt a similar mechanism. Such a group would be free to examine any question and make any recommendation. If APS councilors will trust this group not to make irresponsible pronouncements concerning the war, I will trust it to take my suggestions seriously. I must say that such mutual feelings of trust do not appear currently to obtain between the APS Council and the membership.

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### Declining interest, 1699

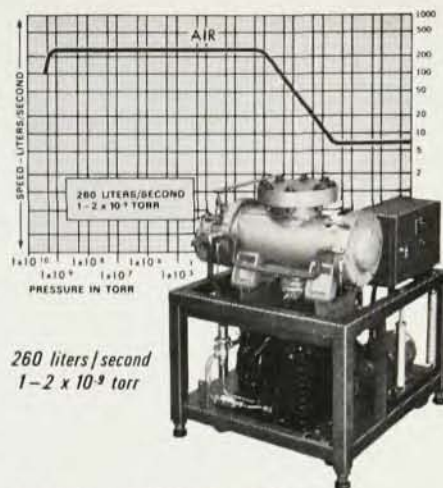
It will not be long before we have figures for the new academic year on the enrollment of students majoring in physics. The release of these figures

will no doubt lead to a continuation of the debate on whether young people are losing interest in the physical sciences. I would like to point out that in 1699 Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz wrote a letter to the mathematician John Wallis in which he says that interest in the physical sciences seems to be declining, commenting that "... very few of our juniors are ambitious to attain the glory of their predecessors." Wallis replied to Leibnitz as follows:

Oxon, April 20, 1699.

"Sir, What you complain of, that the sublimer studies are not now pursued so eagerly as formerly, and nature has fewer diligent observers, may be in some measure true; but it is not to be wondered at that the studies of men should have their vicissitudes like all other things. Doubtless in the present age, which is now drawing to a period, knowledge of all kinds has experienced very great and even unhopd for improvements, as physics, medicine, chemistry, anatomy, botany, mathematics, geometry, analytics, astronomy, geography, navigation, mechanics, and even, what I least rejoice at, the art of war; and indeed far greater than for many ages before. For formerly men seemed to aim at nothing more than to understand what had been delivered by Euclid, Aristotle, and the rest of the ancients; having little concern about making any further progress, as if they had established the limits of the sciences, which it might be presumptuous to extend. But after some few had ventured to look further, others were thence encouraged to enter the wide field of the sciences. Thus a new ardour, a new effort, urged them to attempt new things, and indeed not without success. But when the novelty ceased, this new ardour gradually declined. Many of the diligent scrutinizers of nature are dead, and others must soon follow them; and the novelty of the subject will no longer, as before, excite the young men to tread in the steps of their predecessors.

"The matter also itself was great, but is now partly exhausted; so that a harvest is not to be expected, but



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