

Consensus at Chicago

As anticipated, concern and dissent over social issues were very much in the air at the annual joint APS-AAPT meeting in Chicago (see page 67). But the physics community can take pride in the fact that no violent, or otherwise abhorrent, episode took place. Those who expressed dissent did so in an orderly fashion while both meeting officials and the body of attendees were respectful of the rights of the dissenters to voice their concerns.

Not all the issues raised, however, evoked a sympathetic response from those present—a kind of consensus appeared to materialize about what topics should be considered appropriate for discussion at a physics meeting. Thus session participants did not encourage on-the-floor discussion of issues such as Vietnam policy, the siting of the meeting in Chicago or the GE strike controversy. In contrast, physicists displayed considerable interest in using meeting time for discussion of issues such as the employment crisis in physics or how physicists can help minority groups.

One thing almost everyone appeared agreed on—if there is to be much of a future for physics, then physicists will have to expand their involvement with society in various ways. Some may still question whether physicists have any business dabbling in areas in which their training would seem to have no relevance, such as politics or social engineering. But let us remember that in the past, to create the systems they needed to make their observations, physicists have always had to function

as experts in fields outside their own discipline. Some years ago graduate students used to joke that to get a degree in experimental physics it was necessary to become an expert in electronics. More recently the necessary requirement would seem to be expertise in computer programming.

Now that physicists have become acutely aware that both they and their physical systems of observations are embedded within complex social systems, can we predict that the new adjunct skills required of the physicist of the future will be things like sociopolitical engineering or mass-media communications?

Before anybody dismisses this idea as too far fetched, let me point out that a well known experimentalist at Brookhaven is already working at producing his second motion picture explaining high-energy physics for nonspecialist audiences. Another example is the program to aid minority workers that has been set up by the staff of physicists building the 200-GeV accelerator at Batavia. The astounding success they have had training the hard-core unemployed to fill laboratory positions at little extra cost to their project budget merits study and imitation by other large-scale government contractors.

Granted, when it comes to understanding social systems, the physicist is in no position to pose as an expert—but then who is? The Batavia experience gives us reason to believe that some of our fellow physicists will prove that they are able to do as well in this area as anyone.

—Harold L. Davis