

letters

"fertile" to "fissile" nucleides or even breeder reactors. Most of these routes would ultimately involve recycle of plutonium or uranium-233. When we have to make the decision on whether or not to go to such a recycle economy depends on, among other factors: the future growth of our electrical energy use, the share of the electrical supply provided by fission, and the extent of our uranium resource. Currently projections of all of these numbers are quite uncertain—just like the current economics of plutonium recycle.

Spinrad's final comment is incorrect. As long as plutonium remains in spent reactor fuel, the intense radioactivity of this fuel will make it relatively immune to diversion. Furthermore, if we ultimately decide to recycle plutonium, it will have considerably more fuel value if it is saved for the initial loadings of breeder reactors.

FRANK VON HIPPEL
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey

Obituary problem

This is to acknowledge the receipt of a letter from PHYSICS TODAY rejecting the obituary for a colleague which I had submitted. [PHYSICS TODAY had already printed a short staff-written obituary.] I concede the reasonableness of your rules against two obituaries for the same person. However, if such a rule is to be enforced as rigorously as you apparently do, I would suggest that you submit obituaries to the close associates of these subjects at the time of death, and not print an obituary based mainly on outdated information.

HENRY W. NEWSON
Duke University
Durham, N.C.

EDITOR'S COMMENT: To prevent the problem of double obituaries, we strongly urge that those who wish to write obituaries for their colleagues contact PHYSICS TODAY within a few days after the death. This would enable the writer to receive guidelines on length and style, and avoid our writing an unnecessary obituary or soliciting a signed obituary from another associate.

Metrication and Motherhood

It has frequently been assumed that scientists unequivocally support a legislated metric conversion. However, 22 faculty members in our department representing 40% of those contacted signed the following petition:

"Many now believe that eventual acceptance of the International System of Units (the proposed standardized met-

ric system) is "inevitable." If this is true, then we believe that the "inevitable" conversion should take place naturally without the prodding of the ten-year program now being considered by the Congress.

"As scientists, we are well aware that the International System of Units is but a step in the evolving relationship of man to nature. Its origins are in the metric system, originally formulated during the French Revolution. The framers of that system could not foresee the impact which subsequent developments would have on technology. Units for developing sciences like electricity or optics were first introduced *ad hoc*. By the early part of this century, the metric system itself had been enlarged to encompass these 19th century developments. With little further modification, this enlarged system has become the International System of Units.

"Although recognized by statute the world over, the International System has not been fully accepted—even by European scientists and engineers. Depreciated units for such common concepts as force, pressure, and magnetic field persist because they are more convenient than their counterparts in the International System. More importantly, as a crystallization of basically 19th century technology, this system is poorly suited to 20th century developments. These developments have been in our understanding of fundamental atomic and molecular processes and in the use of binary—rather than decimal—arithmetic in computers.

"Within a generation, man may well devise a truly modern system—one which combines the coherence of the International System with the convenience of our customary one. We are concerned lest a legislated conversion to a rigid system deprive future generations of the benefits of a truly optimal system of measurement.

"Therefore, be it resolved that we, the undersigned members of the faculty of the Department of Physics and Astrophysics at the University of Colorado, urge the rejection of pending metric conversion legislation."

While circulating the petition among our colleagues, we discussed the broader problems of metrication. Some felt that a generation was far too long for an optimal measurement system to crystallize. The elements for such a system exist now. PHYSICS TODAY could help by publishing some of the many letters it has received that urge alternatives to the metric system.

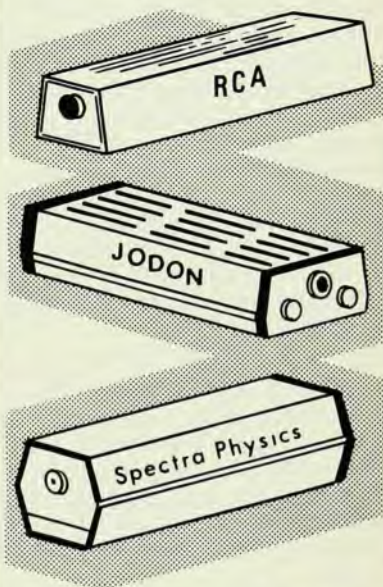
Even if an optimal measurement system is an idealistic goal, many faculty felt that the metric system itself is not sufficiently meritorious to warrant Congressional interference in the conver-

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