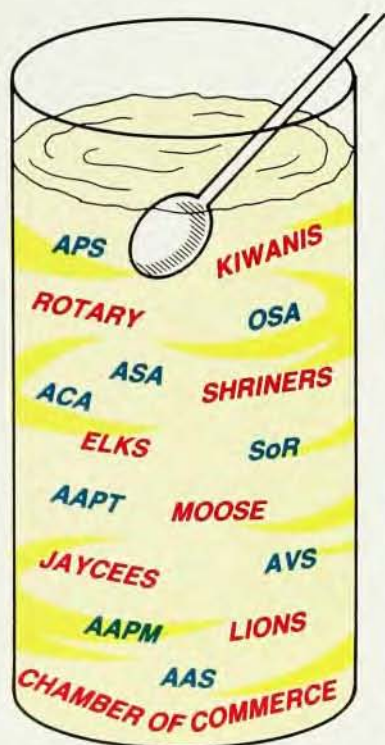


Science and Technology Awareness Month

Alvin W. Trivelpiece

During the past three years, I have testified before several Congressional committees on various aspects of some of the Department of Energy's science and technology programs. A recurrent theme of the questions asked by the members of these committees has been, "What are we getting for our money by supporting basic research?" In reply, I have used what I now call the "standard argument." I usually cite some of the Federally supported basic and applied research conducted ten or twenty years ago. I then point out how many of our present goods, services, products, health-care benefits and so on can be traced to that support. For DOE it is an impressive list that includes nuclear power, nuclear medicine and radiation processing. It is clear that some substantial portion of our gross national product comes from this kind of activity. Unfortunately, this explanation is not particularly useful to a representative or senator seeking ways to explain to the nonscientist constituent why the present levels of government support for basic and applied research are essential for the future economic growth in certain technical areas where the US must remain among the leaders. Without such support, we could easily lose our ability to compete internationally in these areas.

The importance of having members of Congress informed on this issue can't be underestimated. Those of us who testify help by keeping them informed. But they are busy, and science and technology are not always their highest priority. For this reason, I believe that it may be more important for a substantial number of our citizens to have a better appreciation of the fact that virtually everything that they eat, drive, fly, view, take, wear and so on exists in its present form in part due to past government support of basic and applied research. Industrial support of



applied research and development is also essential to this process and needs to be encouraged. However, at the moment, I am more concerned with the government role in the basic end of the activities.

I have a suggestion on how to improve this situation of public understanding of the role of science and technology in our lives. I believe that it is time for scientists and engineers to take more responsibility for explaining science and technology in ways the rest of our citizens can understand and appreciate. That is, we need to convince *them* that science and technology are important to our nation's future. How to accomplish this? Pamphlets, tv, radio and other media events help. Traveling lecturers who give excellent views of technical subjects in entertaining ways help. However, in my opinion there is no substitute for person-to-

person contact between scientists and engineers and members of the rest of the community in which they live.

Therefore, I propose that October be designated "Science and Technology Awareness Month." What this means is that members of scientific societies such as the Physical Society, the Chemical Society, IEEE and so on, should volunteer to give simple, jargon-free talks on what they do and why they believe it is important to our nation. They should give these talks to their local chapters of the Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce or any other appropriate civic or service organization. Far from being put off, I find that the public that I come in contact with is fascinated by science and technology and is willing to learn about them and the benefits they produce. It helps if things are put in terms that they understand and the explanation comes from a friend or neighbor.

My objective is to cause the greatest possible mixing of those who earn a living as scientists or engineers with those who do not. If this kind of interaction is to occur, it needs to be stimulated but need not be too highly organized. In my attempt to try to stimulate this activity, I am sending this same letter to several civic service clubs and booster organizations with the hope that they will contact the various local or national technical professional societies to make arrangements to have some of you talk to them. If you believe that a better informed public is important for the health of US science and technology, then please volunteer to help make conditions better by talking to your local service club, high-school PTA or civic clubs. By the way, invite your mayor, councilman, representative or senator. They might enjoy your talk and add some thoughts of their own. Because this is being suggested in the spirit of volunteerism, I will give a talk on DOE's basic research programs to the first service or civic club that invites me. □

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