

EINSTEIN AND THE PRESS

The world media turned a great physicist into a mythical figure and then quoted him widely as if he were an expert on every subject.

Abraham Pais

Nearly four decades after Albert Einstein's death, his role as a mythical figure in our culture continues undiminished. Articles centering on him still appear in the press. He is the main character in plays and operas, and is pictured in advertisements, some witty, some vulgar.

It is evident that Einstein, creator of some of the best science of all time, is himself a creation of the media insofar as he was and remains a public figure. It is therefore of interest to follow him as he was perceived by the press. This I have done, covering the times from 1902 until the present. I have scoured through newspapers and magazines from Britain, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Palestine, Switzerland, Spain and especially the United States. It is very significant that Einstein never appeared in *The New York Times* until 10 November 1919, three days after the *Times* of London published the news that started Einstein's worldwide fame and gave birth to the Einstein myth. That is where this article begins.

In the interest of space I have had to omit interesting references to earlier years. Nor will my account of the later years be complete. I have in fact passed by topics close to Einstein's heart, notably his opinions on pacifism, Zionism, supranationalism and civil liberties, all of which were reported extensively in the press. I have done so because these are easily accessible in Einstein's collections of essays *Out of My Later Years*¹ and *Ideas and Opinions*,² both available in inexpensive paperbacks. In this article I shall endeavor to entertain you with less familiar news items. All material omitted here is treated *in extenso* in my recent book *Einstein Lived Here*.³

Birth of the myth

Let me now turn to the above-mentioned London *Times* article of 7 November 1919, which starts as follows:

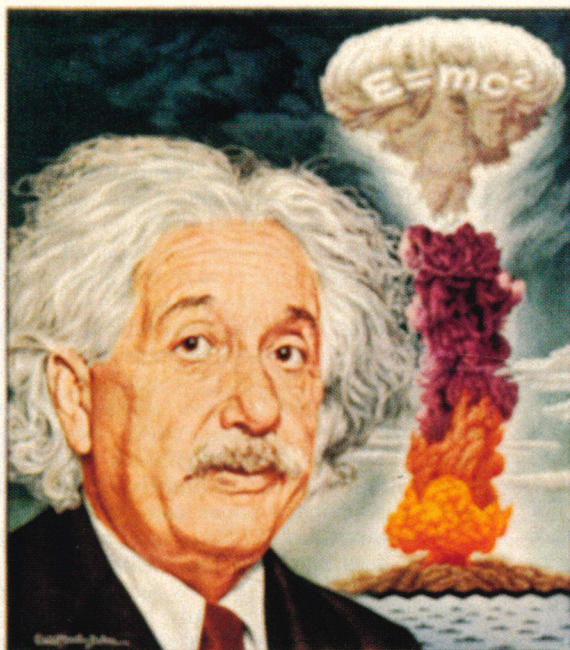
REVOLUTION IN
SCIENCE
New Theory of the
Universe
Newtonian Ideas
Overthrown

Yesterday afternoon in the rooms of the Royal Society, at a joint session of the Royal and Astronomical Societies, the results obtained by

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TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE



On the cover of *Time* magazine, 1 July 1946, Einstein is paired with a mushroom cloud, even though after the US bombing of Hiroshima in August 1945 he had stated: "I have done no work on [the atomic bomb], no work at all." (© 1946 Time Inc, reprinted by permission.)

for the different predictions for the bending of light in the new as compared with the Newton theory.

On 10 November 1919 *The New York Times* picked up the news in an article multiply-headlined "LIGHTS ALL ASKEW IN THE HEAVENS/Men of Science More or Less Agog Over Results of Eclipse Observations./EINSTEIN THEORY TRIUMPHS/Stars Not Where They Seemed or Were Calculated to be, but Nobody Need Worry./A BOOK FOR 12 WISE MEN/No More in All the World Could Comprehend it, Said Einstein, When His Daring Publishers Accepted it." On 11 November 1919 the *Times* reported, "This news is distinctly shocking and apprehensions for the safety of confidence even in the multiplication table will arise."

And on 16 November 1919: "These gentlemen may be great astronomers but they are sad logicians. Critical laymen have already objected that scientists who proclaim that space comes to an end somewhere are under obligation to tell us what lies beyond it."

These various press reports not only make clear that practically overnight Einstein had become a heroic figure but also, it seems to me, contain major clues as to why that happened and why this perception of him has endured to the present day. I have often heard it said that Einstein's popular fame is due to his photogenic appearance. I do not believe that at all, particularly because at the time this fame began he was a potbellied gentleman dressed like a bourgeois. Sweatshirts came much later.

In my opinion Einstein's worldwide renown was caused by the role of language. Even though so very few had and have a real grasp of Einstein's contributions, their contents nevertheless lend themselves very well to expression in everyday language. Take "Space 'Warped.'" Everybody thinks he or she knows what "space" means, and everybody knows what a warp is. Yet hardly anyone understands the meaning of a warped space. At the same time, the words are sufficiently familiar to convey to the reader a sense of having been let in on a highly esoteric

British observers of the total solar eclipse of May 29 were discussed.

It was generally accepted that the observations were decisive in the verifying of the prediction of the famous physicist, Einstein, stated by the President of the Royal Society as being the most remarkable scientific event since the discovery [in 1846] of the predicted existence of the planet Neptune.

What had happened? According to Newtonian mechanics, light from a far star grazing the edge of the Sun is bent by about 0.85 seconds of arc, whereas general relativity predicts 1.7 seconds—twice the Newtonian value. This doubling pitted an old, established giant against a young, emerging one. The experimental decision constituted therefore a moment of high drama in the history of thought.

Further down the London *Times* article one finds a secondary headline:

Space "Warped"

Until Einstein came along, it had been assumed—most often tacitly—that space is flat, like a book page. General relativity implied, however, that in the neighborhood of very massive objects, like the Sun, space is actually curved, more like the surface of a ball. It is this space warp that accounts

piece of information. "Stars Not Where They Seemed . . . to be" is again a phrase that is easily communicated even though the contents carry mystery. I believe it is precisely this nearness to mystery, unaccompanied by understanding, that accounts for the universal appeal of the man who created all this novelty. Add to this that stars had forever been in people's dreams and myths and that irregularities in the skies have of old been considered to be omens.

My views on the causes of Einstein's mass appeal have been particularly strengthened by his own opinions, expressed only once, as far as I know—in an interview with a Dutch newspaper in 1921: "Does it make a silly impression on me, that excitement of crowds, here and yonder, about my theories of which they cannot understand a word? I think it is funny and also interesting to observe. *I am sure that it is the mystery of nonunderstanding that appeals to them. . . . it impresses them, it has the color and the appeal of the mysterious . . . and one becomes enthusiastic and gets excited*" (my italics).

Nor did this insistence on mystery ever wane. For example, in 1928 *The New York Times* wrote, "It is a rare exposition of relativity that does not find it necessary to warn the reader that here and here and here he had better not try to understand."

Life as a star

In 1919 Einstein was 40 years old and just past the midpoint of his life. Until then his mind had been practically uniquely focused on physics. He had now reached the acme of his creative efforts. In the years to follow,

physics would continue to be of overriding importance to him, yet from the time of the events just recounted we note a distinct spreading in the subjects he wrote about. The unique focus had gone. Up till 1925 he would continue to produce seminal work. Thereafter it was not all over, but his contributions would become distinctly less influential.

One of the reasons for this is that he had to pay the price for being, much against his own desires, in the limelight. Demands on his time and energies would come from a variety of directions. Here I shall attempt to follow only how these changes were reflected in the ways Einstein was covered by the press.

Note first of all that from now on Einstein's opinion was solicited on all kinds of subjects.

In 1921 the Berlin correspondent from the London *Daily Mail* wanted to know whether Einstein believed that other planets are inhabited. According to a news report, "Professor Einstein believes that Mars and other planets are inhabited." I find that a bit hard to believe, but that is what the paper said.

According to a 1927 *New York Times* report, "Professor Einstein does not favor the abolition of the death penalty. . . . He could not see why society should not rid itself of individuals proved socially harmful. He added that society had no greater right to condemn a person to life imprisonment than it had to sentence him to death."

In 1929 the *Times* reported that "in an address at Boston, Cardinal O'Connell warned against Dr. Einstein's theory of relativity as 'befogged speculations producing universal doubt about God and his creation,' and 'cloaking

'Photo op' with President Harding. Einstein and a delegation from the National Academy of Sciences met the President at the White House on 25 April 1921. According to Einstein's wife Elsa the meeting consisted of "pantomime" and "picture taking" because Einstein and Harding did not share a common language.



BETTMANN ARCHIVE

This **WORLD**
of **OURS**

Clare Beebe Brooks

FASHION is a human of human interests. While, during the most recent years, it has been seen as a society appropriated and dominated by the female sex. Nevertheless I am about to prove I think I am, that in spite of the almost universal standardization of men's dress and the strict unimaginative uniformity laid down for their *American* clothes, still to make the man more important than the material he wears, still to make their clothes fully express their personalities. In fact, such is the genius of the male sex in this respect that there is hardly a famous man living today who cannot be instantly identified by a brief description of some particular article of dress he is in the

CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S smokes for balance, are symbols of a personality that all the world recognizes as Charlie—even without Charlie in them. From Shanghai to Key West you can find one a theater front with a pair of sloppy shoes, and, if you will, a flexible bamboo cane, and battered plug hat and you need not mention Charlie's name, or show his face, for everyone will know who is playing the entire world fell a-

Constantly Expressive—Einstein Warms Up to His Subject



Professor Albert Einstein in a group of characteristic expressions, all moving slowly toward his famous smile in which his face actually lights up as he replies to the questions of his interviewers.

These portrait photographs, taken yesterday as he answered the 20 newspapermen who crowded around him, show him first, listening eagerly; next, getting a gleam of insight into the question; third,

explaining slowly and patiently; fourth, making his point clear and last—the smile itself. He did not hesitate to say, "I don't know," frequently in reply to queries by his interviewers.

ATOM ENERGY HOPE IS SPIKED BY EINSTEIN

Efforts at Loosing Vast Force Is Called Fruitless.

SAVANT TALKS HERE

Now Indicates Doubt Of
Relativity Theory He
Made Famous.

Blind chance, or cause and effect—which ever you prefer—may run the universe.

It may be curved, or not (curved, flat or even, please?)

Whatever you decide, no one can contradict you, because no one has as far been able to prove any one of these contentions. Still, you

That is the contention of Prof.

But the "energy of the atom" is something else again. If you believe that man will someday be able to harness this boundless

energy—to drive a great steamship across the ocean on a pint of water, for instance—then, according to Einstein, you are wrong.

Energy of Atom.
The idea that man might some day utilize the atom's energy

brought the only emphatic denial from the noted scientist yesterday when he was interviewed by a score of newspapermen at the home of Nathaniel Spoor, near

Einstein makes the front page. The lead story in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on 29 December 1934 was Einstein talking about atomic energy.

the ghastly apparition of atheism.'” Asked for comments, Einstein replied that “Cardinal O’Connell’s assertions left him cold and were devoid of interest.”

In a 1929 interview, an American in Berlin asked Einstein what he considered the best formula for success in life. Einstein answered, "If A is success, I should say the formula is $A = X + Y + Z$, X being work and Y being play."

"And what is Z ?"

"Keeping your mouth shut."

Another newspaper item from the 1920s includes the following direct quote from Einstein: "Why do people speak of great men in terms of nationality? Great men are simply men and are not to be considered from [that] point of view . . . nor should the environment in which they were brought up be taken into account."

Minor personal events in Einstein's life were deemed worthy of appearing in the press. An example: "When one evening Einstein took a bath before going to bed but did not reappear after an hour, his wife became worried and opened the bathroom door. There he lay in his tub, deep in thought, which he interrupted as if coming out of a dream. 'Ah well, I thought I was sitting at my desk.' " Another: "Taking the train in Paris for Berlin, Einstein left his baggage behind him." If you find it hard to believe that such trivia would appear in print, just look up *The New York Times* of 6 November 1927.

All the above events relate to Einstein's Berlin period. During that time he frequently traveled abroad. Thus in April-May 1921, he paid his first visit to the US, in the company of Elsa, his second wife, and of Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Organization (and later Israel's first president), whose first objective was to garner financial aid for the Zionist cause. Einstein was to raise funds for the planned Hebrew University, and of course he intended to visit scientific institutions. Jewish legionnaires who had fought in Palestine were planning to

march to Hoboken, New Jersey, to meet them as they disembarked from the SS Rotterdam.

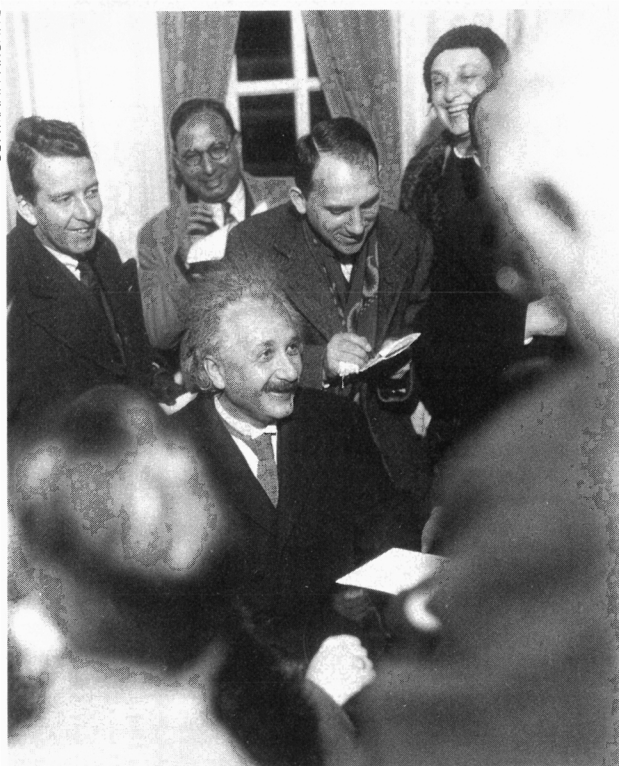
After a welcome by thousands of fellow Jews, they drove by car to the Hotel Commodore. *The New York Times* reported that “the sidewalks were lined nearly all the way uptown with thousands who waved.” Einstein’s own impression, according to the 4 July 1921 *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*: “Jews, Jews, nothing but Jews. It was the first time in my life that I saw Jews *en masse*.”

On 8 April 1921 he and Weizmann received the freedom of New York City. On the 11th they were honored at the Metropolitan Opera House for their work in the cause of Zionism. On the 15th Einstein gave the first of three lectures on relativity theory at Columbia University. During this trip he gave all his lectures in German.

On 25 April Einstein, together with a delegation from the National Academy of Sciences, called on President Harding at the White House. According to Elsa, “the meeting was a pantomime since President Harding and Professor Einstein could not talk together at their meeting. The President speaks neither German nor French, and my husband does not speak English. The brief meeting consisted of friendly handshakes and joint picture taking.”

Shortly after Einstein's return to Berlin, *The New York Times* reported on a small gathering at which, among others, the president of Germany was present and during which Einstein reported that the United States was violently anti-German but that indications were that a change of heart was taking place. In England, he said, statesmen and scholars had in mind to bring about renewed friendly relations with Germany.

As to the German press, many papers recorded Einstein's travels with pride, but there were also nasty comments: "The whole Einstein trip was a giant bluff. . . . He who had done nothing to ease human suffering [or] the pressing problems of human life was received as a royal highness in the world of the mind. . . . important men of



Meeting with reporters in New York City.

science attack the theory of relativity as erroneous."

In December 1930 Einstein paid a second visit to New York. On arrival he permitted a 15-minute interview on board ship. According to one reporter, "Einstein looked like a man who would pay a high price to escape. . . . Mrs. Einstein spoke English fluently. 'Bank books? Ach! He knows nothing about bank books. I must handle the bank books.'" During his stay in New York he addressed a mass meeting in Madison Square Garden in celebration of Hanukkah and met with Arturo Toscanini, Fritz Kreisler and John D. Rockefeller. In California he met Charlie Chaplin. Also there, the Einsteins were invited to a film screening one day. While they were watching in the cinema, the film suddenly stopped in the middle, the lights went on and a woman marched down the aisle heading for Einstein. She addressed him as follows: "My name is Mary Pickford. I am sorry to disturb but I wanted so much to shake your hand." Einstein made some polite reply, the famous film star left, and the theater turned dark again, whereupon Einstein turned to his wife and asked, "Who is Mary Pickford?"

One last press item from that trip: A pastor who was designing a new Protestant church, Riverside Church in Manhattan, had decided to decorate its facade with statues of great men who had honored humanity. On requesting from the best-known scholars a list of 14 names, he found only one in every answer: Albert Einstein. When the pastor showed Einstein his effigy in stone, he commented, "I could have imagined that one day one would make me a Jewish saint, but never that I would become a Protestant saint."

Space does not permit me to mention here fascinating news items from Einstein's journeys to France, China, Japan, Palestine, Spain and South America.

Move to the United States

In October 1933 Einstein and his family arrived in New York to settle permanently in the United States. Even

before his departure from Europe, a group of patriotic American women had protested to the State Department the granting of a visa to a person whom they described as a Communist. Einstein's response was acerbic and witty:²

Never before have I been so brusquely rejected by the fair sex, at least never by so many of its members at once!

How right they are, those vigilant, civic-minded ladies! Why open one's door to someone who devours hard-boiled capitalists with as much appetite and gusto as the Cretan Minotaur devoured luscious Greek maidens in days gone by; one who is wicked enough to reject every kind of war, except the inexorable war with one's own spouse!

Give ye therefore heed to your prudent and loyal womenfolk and remember that the Capitol of mighty Rome was once saved by the cackling of her faithful geese.

Einstein remained very much in the public eye during his American years, and his charisma did not wane. Press clippings help demonstrate this once again.

In February 1936 Einstein spoke at the opening of the New York Museum of Science and Industry, in Manhattan: "Most [men] live like strangers in the world entrusted to them. . . . There is one advantage which primitive man has over civilized man—he is acquainted with the primitive tools he is using; he can make his own bow and arrow, in fact even his own canoe. How many civilized people have to any extent a clear idea about the nature and origin of the things they use for consumption, of which they take so much as a matter of course?"

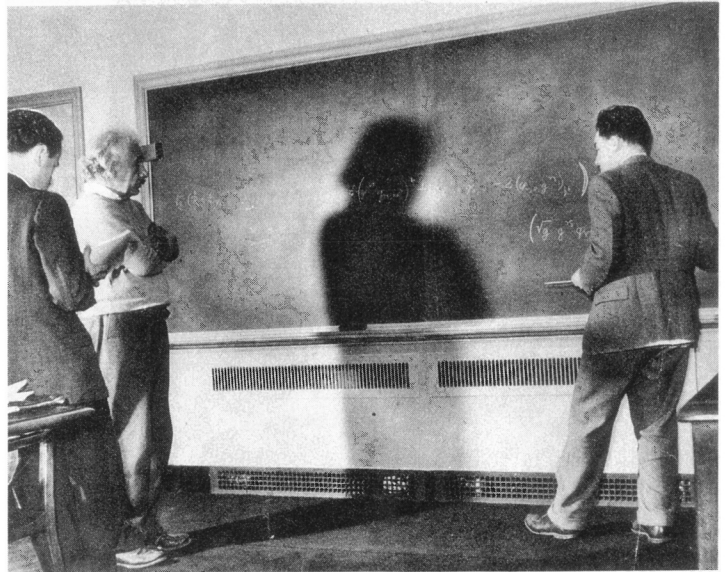
Here is Einstein on playing games, quoted in *The New York Times* in March 1936: "I do not play games. . . . There is no time for it. When I get through work I don't want anything that requires the working of the mind." Einstein had played chess once or twice as a boy but never indulged in bridge for relaxation. He had never heard of Monopoly. When the game was explained to him, he chuckled and remarked, "A very American game."

In August 1945, during the week after the United States bombed Hiroshima, Einstein declared: "I have done no work on [the atomic bomb], no work at all. I am interested in the bomb the same as any other person;

EINSTEIN AT WORK

The New York Times, 15 December 1940, shows

Einstein at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, with Valentine Bargmann (left) and Peter G. Bergmann. (© 1940 The New York Times Company, reprinted by permission.)



perhaps a little more interested."

Einstein made the cover of the 1 July 1946 issue of *Time* magazine. The picture showed him against a mushroom cloud, inside of which was written, " $E = mc^2$." The caption read: "Cosmoclast Einstein. All matter is speed and flame." Inside, the text stated: "Through the incomparable blast and flame that will follow, there will be dimly discernible, to those who are interested in cause and effect in history, the features of a shy, almost saintly, childlike little man with the soft brown eyes, the drooping facial lines of a world-weary hound, and hair like an aurora borealis."

In March 1949 Einstein was quoted as saying, "It is nothing short of a miracle that modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry."

In 1950, in accepting life membership in the Montreal Pipe Smokers Club, Einstein wrote, "Pipe smoking contributes to a somewhat calm and objective judgment of human affairs."

In February 1951 Einstein and the mathematicians John von Neumann and Norbert Wiener had their brain waves recorded "while they were thinking and also while at rest. They generally showed differences from the average." The *New York Times* report includes a picture of Einstein lying down with electrodes attached to his head.

In May 1952, on the front page of *The New York Times*, we learn that Johanna Mankiewicz, daughter of the Hollywood film writer Joseph Mankiewicz, wrote Einstein from Los Angeles for help in a geometry problem. Einstein's reply is shown. Johanna's teacher rebuked her, saying, "Great scientists should be bothered only by great problems."

On 19 November 1952, the front page of *The New York Times* included this item: "Professor Albert Einstein has informed Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion that he is unable to accept the Presidency of Israel. . . . [Einstein] remained incommunicado throughout the evening [of 18 November]. His secretary said that all questions on the subject would have to be made to the Israeli Embassy in Washington."

What was that all about?

Weizmann, the first president of Israel, had died on 9 November. Thereupon the Israeli government decided to offer the presidency to Einstein. On 16 November, the

prime minister sent the following urgent cable to the ambassador in Washington: "Please inquire immediately of Einstein whether he is prepared to become President of Israel if elected [by the parliament]. Immediately after election he would have to come to Israel and become an Israeli citizen. He could continue with his scientific work without interference. Please cable his answer immediately. Ben Gurion."

Actually, Einstein first heard this news one afternoon from *The New York Times*. What happened next was described in *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review* by a friend who was with Einstein that evening: "About nine o'clock a telegram was delivered . . . from the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Mr. Abba Eban. The highly elaborate terms of the telegram . . . made it quite plain that the earlier report must be true, and the little quiet household was much ruffled. 'This is very awkward, very awkward,' the old gentleman was explaining while walking up and down in a state of agitation which was very unusual with him. He was not thinking of himself but of how to spare the ambassador and the Israeli government embarrassment from his inevitable refusal. . . . He decided not to reply by telegram but to call Washington at once. [He got] through to the ambassador, to whom he spoke briefly and almost humbly made plain his position."

Einstein's last birthday to receive press coverage was his 75th, in 1954. The Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, formed in response to the investigations of the McCarthy era, was meeting in Princeton and wanted to bring flowers to his home. He refused: "You may bring flowers to my door when the last witch hunter is sentenced, but not before."

On the morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1955, the Israeli consul called on Einstein at his home to discuss the draft of a statement Einstein intended to make on television and radio on the occasion of the forthcoming anniversary of Israel's independence. The incomplete draft ends as follows: "No statesman in a position of responsibility has dared to take the only promising course [toward a stable peace] of supranational security, since this would surely



Young Einstein. Yahoo Serious, an Australian actor, wrote, produced and starred in this 1988 comedy film offering a fictionalized account of Einstein's early years. Nearly four decades after his death, Einstein remains a uniquely recognizable figure worldwide, and his appeal to artists and advertisers continues unabated. (© 1988 Warner Bros Inc.)

mean his political death. For the political passions, aroused everywhere, demand their victims."

These may well be the last phrases Einstein committed to paper. Two hours after this visit, Einstein was fatally stricken. He died in the early morning hours of 18 April. In the afternoon of that day he was cremated. The ashes were scattered in an unknown place.

Myth survives

Einstein's death did not diminish the attention the press paid to him. In some respects the opposite is true.

First there were the postmortems. On 19 April 1955, the day after his death, *The New York Times* reported the news on its front page, including a lovely picture of him. That same issue contains tributes by the presidents of the United States and West Germany and the prime ministers of Israel, France and India, as well as one by his colleagues on the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Study: "[He] has passed from among us into the indelible record of history, where his lofty place has long been assured." An editorial in that issue includes this phrase: "Mathematical physicists in Einstein's class are the epic poets of our time."

Later that same April we find numerous press items concerning the hero who had departed in body but not in spirit. Some people sent recollections to *The New York Times*. Here are two.

Einstein on clothes: "It would be a sad situation if a bag was better than the meat wrapped in it."

Einstein on politics: "When asked why could man discover atoms but not the means for controlling them, Einstein replied: 'That is simple, my friend. It is because politics is more difficult than physics.'"

Finally, this is from an August 1955 *New York Times* report: "The first full-scale hydrogen bomb explosion in the Pacific in late 1952 produced two new chemical elements, atomic scientists disclosed today. The researchers recommended that the new elements be named after Dr. Albert Einstein and Dr. Enrico Fermi, who played major roles in the birth of the atomic age." It has indeed come to pass that the elements with atomic numbers 99 and 100 are known as einsteinium and fermium, respectively.

Two final comments

It has often been said and written that Einstein was politically naive. I do not believe so. On the contrary, his political ideas were always to the point, though often they might not be realizable in the short term. That is because he never compromised. He understood well that political compromise is a necessity, but he would leave such steps to others.

I shall leave you with a question that Einstein himself raised in a *New York Times* interview on 12 March 1944 and that may well have occurred to many of you: "Why is it that nobody understands me and everybody likes me?"

* * *

I based this article on the talk I gave after receiving the Gemant Award at the American Physical Society meeting on 20 April 1994.

References

1. A. Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, Philosophical Library, New York (1950).
2. A. Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, Crown, New York (1954).
3. A. Pais, *Einstein Lived Here*, Oxford U. P., New York (1994). ■