

## The Director's Corner

by Gary White

### Interesting Times?[1]

Are we living in interesting times? Surely we must be, since as I write this, for example, the United States government is, almost overnight, considering, drafting, debating, legislating, etc., the single largest bailout package in the history of the planet. Meanwhile, in a parallel universe, the blogosphere is abuzz with fears that the Large Hadron Collider at CERN will produce mini-black holes that will swallow the whole world, or even France.[2] I don't know much about the former except that its cost rivals our most expensive wars, but regarding the latter, I am quick to tell anyone who will listen that cosmic ray collision energies in the upper atmosphere vastly exceed anything that the Large Hadron Collider will achieve, so the concern about France-eating black holes is just so much sky-is-falling rhetoric or, for the truly subversive, wishful thinking.

Whether or not these two examples alone make the case for "interesting," it does seem that modern technology and science is subjecting the human condition to an unprecedented acceleration, which might qualify these times as *extraordinarily* interesting, in my view. Thus, the arrival of the 2008 Sigma Pi Sigma Congress, with its theme of "Scientific Citizenship: Connecting Physics and Society," is especially timely. On November 6-8 at FermiLab, the physics honor society will host hundreds of students, faculty and other professionals with physics backgrounds as they listen to prominent civic scientists, deliberate future directions for the society and present their own efforts to connect physics and society. The necessity for large fractions of the population to have some understanding of science and technology has never been more acute.[3] These times call for civic scientists to take action more urgently than in any past era, in my view, and not only because of the many conveniences and complexities that science brings to bear on modern civilization.

In many ways, there is reason for optimism on this front, because more action seems evident. For example, an all-time high of three U.S. Representatives are physicists,

with Bill Foster recently joining Vernon Ehlers and Rush Holt. Furthermore, other elected officials with physics backgrounds seem more common as well—consider Germany's Angel Merkel; Tennessee's Governor Bredesen; and even AIP's own Governing Board Chair, Lou Lanzerotti, who has served as both a mayor and a school board member. Other physicists have been successful in putting science back into science curriculum standards and keeping non-science out. Finally, and perhaps closer to home, the "hidden physicist" stories seem to come in at much higher rates than in the past, and with a breadth that is almost breath-taking. The added value that they bring to their roles as programmers, engineers, managers, doctors, medical and military professionals, and to numerous other fields, is evident from their stories. All of these examples and more will be seen at the Congress, too, so please consider joining us at FermiLab.

In this issue of *Radiations*, you will find much that addresses the idea of civic scientist: from Victor Alpher's revealing portrait of his father's science and citizenship, to Ed Neuenschwander's moving remembrance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and other physicists who have challenged authority at great cost, to the reprint of Carl Sagan's plea to members of the science and religious communities to preserve the earth. In addition to those stirring examples from the past, note that there are present and future considerations within these pages as well, I think you'll find the suggested reading list for the upcoming Congress stimulating, Krystle Williams fulfills the role of civic scientist admirably by relaying in enthusiastic terms how the Society of Physics Students is addressing diversity issues with its Future Faces of Physics effort; and the growing list of new inductees represents a bright future for physics and society.

I hope you are able to participate in the Congress in some way, either by your attendance, your support of student travel, or

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# AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PHYSICS

## American Institute of Physics

The American Institute of Physics (AIP) is a not-for-profit membership corporation chartered in New York State in 1931 for the purpose of promoting the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of the science of physics and its applications to human welfare. In order to achieve its purpose, AIP serves physics and related fields of science and technology by serving its Member Societies, individual scientists, educators, students, research and development leaders, and the general public with programs, services, and publications—Information That Matters.

The Institute publishes its own scientific journals as well as those of its Member Societies; provides abstracting and indexing services; provides on-line database and e-mail services; disseminates reliable information on physics to the public; collects and analyzes statistics on the profession and on physics education; encourages and assists in the documentation and study of the history and philosophy of physics; cooperates with other organizations on educational projects at all levels; and collects and analyzes information on Federal programs and budgets.

The Institute represents approximately 110,000 scientists through its Member Societies. In addition, approximately 5,000 students in more than 600 colleges and universities are members of the Institute's Society of Physics Students, which includes the honor society Sigma Pi Sigma. Industry is represented through 50 Corporate Associates members.

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## Other Member Organizations

Sigma Pi Sigma, Physics Honor Society  
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vicariously through the variety of reports we are planning on the website, [www.sigmapisigma.org](http://www.sigmapisigma.org), and here in future issues of Radiations.

And after you have had a chance to let it all sink in, decide for yourself whether we live in truly interesting times or if, in fact, the whole idea that these times are extraordinarily interesting is yet another example of humans (mistakenly!) thinking themselves the center of the universe.

[1] "May you live in interesting times," is often cited as a Chinese curse, such as Robert F. Kennedy did in his Day of Affirmation Address in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1966; but most who have studied it say it has origins in modern literature, via Carl Jung, or perhaps a