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The Week That Was

For the 113,000 members who did not attend the 142nd Annual Meeting of the AAAS in Boston, the Proceedings Issue will capture most of the sound but not enough of the light. As the annual meetings go, the 1976 version with its Bicentennial backdrop was, by common agreement, well above average. The scientific content was strong, sessions were overcrowded, policy debates were lively and on timely issues, there was a striking international flavor to the design of the meeting, and there was no evidence that anybody was bored. There was enough radical dissent to keep the record straight, but no interruption of the completion of appointed rounds. Facilities and escorts for the physically handicapped were available, and for the first time hundreds of physically handicapped scientists were in evidence, while the turnout of women and minority participants testified to a significant change. High school students came in droves, and a small army of press persons saw to it that the events were well reported. The local advisory committee, headed by Howard Johnson and Gerhard Bleicken, extended itself to raise funds and arrange special events, and the large crowd who attended the reception following Dr. Mead's presidential address disposed of historic quantities of a memorable clam chowder.

The context of the 1976 meeting also provided some contrasts with other years. The long winter of depressed funding for science seemed to be coming to an end, when measured against President Ford's substantial budget proposals. The Senate and House had each passed bills for new national science policy machinery, although the last act in that drama had yet to be written. An awareness of new and urgent dilemmas concerning policy for science and society was emerging, and concepts like "habitat" and "desertification" had emerged from being of specialized interest to being of general concern, adding to the already long list of intractable problems of energy, population, resources, food, climate, and environment. Institutional problems seemed to be increasing, touching now on the accountability and credibility of scientists taking sides in public controversies, and proposals for a scientific judiciary were gaining a kind of instant respectability. Euphoria over the federal R & D budget was dimmed by the realization that most of the buildup was designated for another lap in the weapons race, accompanied by Pentagon rhetoric to the effect that science and technology hold the key to America's hopes of prevailing a leading position in world affairs. Meanwhile, the fresh indicators were confirming general apprehensions about a decline in the rate and quality of industrial product and process innovation, boding little good for the long-term prospects of the nation's economy.

In short, the context of the meeting was not lacking in imponderables. Seven days in February hardly sufficed to absorb the content of a prolific menu of symposia, lectures, and special events, let alone to deliberate on the meanings of trends, risks, and uncertainties. The AAAS annual meeting is not a parliament of science, or even a convention of delegates elected by the members. More than 100,000 of us were not even there, and the 5,000 who did come had less ambitious things in mind.

Still, the meaning of trends and countertrends is central to coping with the ordeal of choices. These trends are not merely peripheral to decisions as to the right uses of science, technology, and, for that matter, all knowledge. We must find ways to address them, lest scientists one day be justly criticized for not caring what road we took as long as we kept marching. The Boston meeting is to be seen not just as an intellectual burst that briefly lighted up the skies but as a revealing glimpse of the distances that reason has still to travel.—WILLIAM D. CAREY, Executive Officer, AAAS, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036