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Science and Technology Awards

This past 15 July, President Reagan awarded 20 National Medals of Science and 10 National Medals of Technology to some of our most outstanding citizens. The presentation ceremony was well attended by the families and friends of the medalists as well as media representatives (*Science*, 22 July, p. 410). In his remarks, the President pointed out the vital role played by science and technology in our nation's development and well-being. This event, however, did not receive much coverage, either by the electronic or print media. This is unfortunate because it is individuals like these medalists who have discovered or invented many of the things that we take for granted in our daily lives.

The discoveries made and honored have kept millions of people alive, reduced suffering, and opened up new frontiers for technology. There have been inventions that have made computers work better and faster and improvements to our weapons systems that have made the difference in our national security. The list of discoveries and developments from this group of medalists alone includes nuclear magnetic resonance imaging, high-temperature superconductors, a better understanding of human memory, and the design and production of many of our high-performance military aircraft.

Events like this, at which some of our leading scientists and engineers are honored, are not generally regarded as news by most of the media. This is also true of some of our other national awards, such as the Department of Energy's Fermi and Lawrence awards or the National Science Foundation's Waterman and Vannevar Bush awards. Sometimes the awards are mentioned by the recipient's hometown media because of the local interest, but otherwise there is not much coverage. This is not a criticism of the media. It is just a fact of life. There is not much pressure for the media to report on these matters. I wonder what would happen if as many of us wrote in to our local newspaper, television, or radio station and asked about the latest award or discovery as do those interested in hockey, football, or baseball scores. Maybe we just might begin to see better coverage of events like the awarding of the medals of science and technology.

Whether or not we get better coverage of the various awards, it is important to see to it that those deserving of recognition are nominated. The screening and evaluation panels should have the appropriate documentation as well as lists of candidates that include the very best in the various categories. For most of the awards with which I am familiar, the screening panels are not permitted to add to the list of nominees. Many of us assume that all the best people are included among the nominees available to be selected. Although the various lists do not want for outstanding candidates, all the outstanding candidates who should be considered are not always on the lists. I am a member of the evaluation committee for the National Medal of Technology. The individuals that we have recommended have all been outstanding, but there are other outstanding individuals who should be nominated and who have not yet been. In that regard, the various engineering and technical societies should examine their membership roles to identify worthy candidates and then persuade some of their members to do the work of preparing well-documented, first-class nominations.

There is today much concern with science and technology education and with the lack of interest shown by our children and young people in pursuing careers in science and technology. Many people lament that we no longer seem to produce the kinds of heroes and role models for our young people to admire and follow as we used to. Well, maybe, but to me these medalists and their fellow medalists from previous years are modern American heroes. Maybe it would help to inspire more young people and educate the public if there were a few more news stories about achievements of scientists and engineers who have saved millions of lives or changed the dynamics of the world economy as a result of a key scientific discovery or invention.—ALVIN W. TRIVELPIECE