An Olympiad of Science

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In his first message on science and technology, calling for a strong new effort to marshal science and technology to strengthen our economy and improve the quality of our life, President Nixon disclosed, among the various steps he had in mind to enhance the climate of innovation, the following (*1*):

> To foster useful innovation, I also plan to establish a new program of research and development prizes. These prizes will be awarded by the President for outstanding achievements by individuals and institutions and will be used especially to encourage needed innovation in key areas of public concern. I believe these prizes will be an important symbol of the Nation's concern for our scientific and technological challenges.

In its comments on the Nixon message *Science* (*2*) said:

> The only truly new program announced is a series of Presidential prizes for achievements in research and development, although no details are given on who will be eligible, or by what measure they will be judged.

New? Buried away in the ancient files of Congress there is a 123-year-old similar proposal, with equivalent objectives and targets as those outlined in President Nixon's message—and giving details.

In 1849, Thomas Ewbank, third U.S. Commissioner of Patents, in his report to Congress on the operations of the Patent Office, made a proposal that that body sponsor an "Olympics of Science" to stimulate science and invention (*3*). "We have a political Olympiad," he said; then asked why not add to it a scientific Olympiad?

Mr. Ewbank was the Commissioner of Patents who, 18 days after his appointment to that job, granted patent No. 6469 to Abraham Lincoln, who later became President of the United States, for his invention on buoying steamboats over shoals.

A scientist in his own right, author of treatises on hydraulics, natural history, and anthropology, Commissioner Ewbank was keen to utilize the annual Patent Office reports made in those days to arouse popular interest and enthusiasm in science. "[T]he arts and science," he said, in his report, "so long neglected, are now recognized as 'rivers of life' to an otherwise sluggish and sterile world."

He told Congress back in 1849 that it was its business to stimulate and encourage science and invention:

> To foster the development of new discoveries in science and improvements in the arts, . . . should be among the acknowledged aims of legislation. As yet, less has been done for inventors by government here than has been accorded to them in other parts of the civilized world.

His "Olympics of Science," in stimulating science and invention, would, he believed, contribute to the prosperity and duration of the nation.

His plan? The scientific Olympiad would be held at the U.S. Capitol every 4 years on the day after each presidential inauguration, at which time the federal government would reward with cash awards and medals, outstanding scientists and inventors who had made important contributions to science and invention. Commissioner Ewbank told Congress:

> By associating these scientific festivals with the beginning of each administration, the occasion of awarding the premiums would be heightened in interest and be witnessed by citizens from every section of the Union, and also by strangers from abroad. We should thus hold a kind of scientific Olympiad . . . with competition between intellectual instead of physical athletae [athletes].

And, according to the Commissioner, it could be carried out "not by soliciting any money from the treasury, nor putting the public to any expense whatever."

In his report, the Commissioner asked Congress to set aside $100,000 to "be held sacred and intact as a permanent Inventors' Premium Fund." Cash prizes to be distributed once every 4 years would come from the interest (6 or 7 percent, the going rate at that time) earned by this fund. The scientists and inventors to be rewarded and the prizes would be selected by a "board of examination and award" composed of heads of scientific institutions and organizations. The board would be above all personal and political influences.

Commissioner Ewbank even went so far as to list some inventions that the nation needed and the prizes that might be offered to those who would make them. It is surprising how similar they are to what President Nixon set forth in his message as being pressing domestic needs—new sources of energy and safe, fast, transportation.

To anyone who invented an economical mechanical plow, one which would work land without horses or other animals, Commissioner Ewbank recommended a prize of $10,000.

For inventions that would permit a ship to cross the Atlantic at least three consecutive times at an average of 20 miles an hour, a prize of $20,000.

An award of $100,000 would go to that inventor who designed an efficient and economical electric motor, or an engine that would operate by utilizing atmospheric pressure, or an explosive that could be utilized to drive a cheap light engine. Here the Commissioner probably had in mind what is today the internal combusion or gasoline motor. Even if the prize were a million dollars it would be none too much, he said.

> It is cargoes of fuel, tanks of water, and huge boiling caldrons, with their dangerous adjuncts, in steamers and locomotives, that are wanted to be got rid of. . . .

Today all these inventions are a fact. But his Olympiad of Science is not.

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References

1. R. Nixon, *President's Message to Congress on Science and Technology*, 16 March 1972.
2. D. Shapley, *Science* **175**, 1343 (1972).
3. T. Ewbank, *U.S. Patent Office Report by the Commissioner of Patents* (1849), vol. 1, p. 518.