

Chancellor's letter to INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY urges scientists and engineers to run for Congress

January 15, 1963

Should scientists and engineers run for Congress?

Yes, says Chancellor Herbert York of the University of California's San Diego campus.

In a letter to the Editor appearing in a recent issue of the magazine International Science and Technology, Chancellor York says that he personally is in favor of the idea, but sees two drawbacks: 1) scientists and engineers might not be acceptable to political leaders in an individual district; 2) they might not spend a long enough time in Congress to become effective.

York's letter was stimulated by an editorial in an earlier issue of the magazine. In it the editor pointed out that while there are over a million scientists and engineers in this country but only 250,000 lawyers, lawyers are by far the dominant group in Congress. Two Senators and three Representatives have some engineering background.

In the same issue, AEC Chairman Glenn Seaborg, a professor of the University of California on leave, suggested that technical men ought to run for Congress.

The magazine points out that many technical men have come to Washington to advise or administer on the executive side of the government. Among them is cited Chancellor York, who spent the years 1958 to 1961 as a top scientist in the Department of Defense.

Chancellor York's statement on the matter is:

"I wholeheartedly agree with the idea that there should be some scientists and engineers in the Congress; however, two problems come to mind.

"First, I think that most people could, in fact, be persuaded that it would be a good idea to have, say, some small fraction of the national Congress consist of scientists or engineers, and, no doubt, of certain other professions, also. Unfortunately, however, Congress is not elected on a national basis, and it would, no doubt, be much harder to persuade the electorate of any one specific constituency that their particular problems, as opposed to the nation's general problems, would be better handled by such a representative. The political leaders in any one district are likely to believe that they will be best served directly by someone who is known to be adept at something, which, for want of a better name, may simply be called 'politics.' This usually will mean that they will prefer to have someone representing them who has a background in law or local political affairs.

"Secondly, there is the matter of how long it would take the individual to become effective...This is a much more serious problem for someone serving in the legislative branch than for someone serving in the executive branch, since in the case of executive-branch service, the man would be involved, largely, with matters within science and technology, whereas such would not be the case in the legislative branch of government.

"Despite the above problems, I would, personally, encourage anyone who thought he could be of service, and was interested in trying, to make the attempt to get elected."