In the Final Analysis

“What was that December editorial? I guess that you need to take one off every once in a while.”

— Alexander Scott

I am writing but a few days after the TMS Staff Holiday Party—the capstone event of the 2010 headquarters staff social calendar. Here, at a well-selected eatery, we colleagues gathered with not only one another but our guests and many TMS retirees. A merry time was had by all. The evening was even attended by our previous executive director, Alex Scott, who came with his wife, Angela. I often get asked how Alex is doing, and I can report that he is looking good and remains interested in all things TMS. In fact, Alex reports finding time to read *JOM*, and he still claims to enjoy In the Final Analysis, which he encouraged me to start writing 22 years ago (!). At the party, however, he did express some disappointment with the December column, finding my listing of most frequently downloaded *JOM* papers from SpringerLink to be, well, unremarkable. I could have outlined how I thought the topic was informative, interesting, and of genuine value. Instead, I explained my rationale with a simple but sincere, “Harrumph. Humbug.”

In hindsight, what I should have told Alex is that if I really wanted to under-exert myself, I could have written what is called in the trade a “notes” column. This is a collection of easily gathered short items that the columnist assembles to fill space and beat a deadline.

Allow me to demonstrate briefly. Let’s pretend the theme is “recent items that have passed through my inbox”:

- Some members of the U.S. House of Representatives have started a website called the YouCut Citizen Review of Government. It is designed to have everyday Americans identify what they see as wasteful government spending. The initial focus of attention is the National Science Foundation, which is reported to have funded both “worthy research in the hard sciences” and “more questionable projects.” The website provides a link to the NSF programs site and asks citizens to review the listings, look for suspect projects, and then report potential abuses to the keepers of the YouCut site via a convenient on-line form. I did a scan of the science press but can’t find anyone who thinks that this is, generously, better than a really bad idea. I do know that the peer-review system employed by agencies like the NSF may not be perfect, but it is better than a popularity contest. Especially since . . .
- . . . the STEM skills of U.S. students remain weak, according to the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development, which just released the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment. It reports that 15-year-olds in the U.S. rank 25th among 15-year-olds from 34 countries in math (Shanghai in China—oddly, not a country when I learned geography—rated number one). The U.S. math scores did show an improvement as compared to 2006 numbers, but the ranking of 25th remained the same. In science, the U.S. students improved from 21st in 2006 to 17th in 2009. Better, but not really a mark of distinction. The gathering storm, it seems, still shows no break on the horizon.

I could go on with more bullets and more notes, but you get the idea. Short items, easy to assemble, easy to write—perfect for the underachieving columnist. . . . Come to think of it, a “notes” column is not such a bad idea. In fact, I think that I’ll write a full one next month, just so Alex and I can have something to talk about at the next holiday party.

James J. Robinson
Publisher

JOM

184 Thorn Hill Road,
Warrendale, PA 15086, USA

Telephone: (724) 776-9000

Fax: (724) 776-3770

Web: www.tms.org/jom.html

E-Mail: jom@tms.org

PUBLISHER

James J. Robinson

JANUARY ADVISORS:

Nanomaterials for Renewable Energy

Powder Materials Committee

Fernand D.S. Marquis,

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Lynne Robinson

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PARTNER RELATIONS AND ADVERTISING STAFF

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JOM (ISSN 1047-4838) is published monthly by Springer Sciences & Business Media, LLC (Springer) 233 Spring St., New York, NY 10013 in cooperation with The Minerals, Metals & Materials Society (TMS).

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