

in the final analysis

“The greatest challenge to any thinker is stating the problem in a way that will allow a solution.”

—Bertrand Russell

The science and engineering community is an orderly one. Its members excel at stating and solving problems as our physical world responds nicely to the discipline of observation and experimentation empowered by such tools as mathematics, mechanics, chemistry, physics, and boat loads of natural and physical laws. Less orderly by countless orders of magnitude is the world of politics, politicians, and government, where facts can be fictions and fictions can be facts (or both or neither) depending on the speaker, the beholder, and the hour of the day. Occasionally, the realms of science and engineering and politicians and government intersect, and this interface of the orderly vs. the expedient can be difficult to manage. The effort is, however, necessary as the science and engineering community cannot stay silent while lawmakers and their advisors receive so many informed and uninformed inputs from so many other parties with so many other agendas.

Within TMS, the group tasked with helping express the interests of the Society’s membership is the Public and Governmental Affairs Committee. As TMS members represent a multiplicity of technical, employer, business, sociological, cultural, national, and personal interests, it is a reasonably thin line that the Public and Governmental Affairs Committee and the Society must tread when considering advocacy messages to the U.S. government, while avoiding disconnects and conflicts of interest with our membership constituency. What fits such a narrow profile? Good question. Some years ago, our Board of Directors created a specific set of advocacy guidelines for the Society. These positions comprise (1) funding for broad-based materials-related research and development; (2) support for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs; (3) promoting the materials science and engineering profession; (4) production, use, conservation, and storage of energy; (5) environmental and health impacts and applications of materials; (6) sustainable materials design and processing, including resource recovery and recyclability; (7) materials and manufacturing innovation, including integrated computational materials engineering; (8) more effective approaches to the issuance of visas that maintain open borders for genuine scientific exchange. The guidelines clearly lean toward the non-controversial.

The non-controversiality of Number 8 changed a few weeks before the TMS 2017 Annual Meeting & Exhibition, which, ironically, employed the tagline “The World Comes Here” (more than half of TMS Annual Meeting & Exhibition attendees come from outside of the United States). The challenge came in the form of an executive order from the U.S. President that affected entry into the United States by residents of seven countries. The implementation of the executive order became a subject of protests, superheated rhetoric, constant news coverage, court conflicts, and many individual personal dramas. Some of those dramas for TMS2017 were in the person of more than 40 planned presenters from the restricted countries but who were studying or working in 14 other countries. With their ability to enter the U.S. for the conference being either impossible or in doubt, they understandably canceled their travel plans. Some unaffected but otherwise sympathetic members foreswore attending future meetings in the United States.

What can a professional society of 13,000 U.S. and international members do? More importantly, what should it do? In the short term, we have given words of support (and full refunds) to would-be TMS2017 attendees who had to cancel their travel plans. On the advocacy landscape, TMS signed on to a joint public statement by multiple engineering societies that encourages “the Administration and Congress to work with all interested parties to ensure that our country’s visa and immigration systems maintain the flow of individuals and ideas upon which our country’s prosperity and progress depend.”

What else? That’s a subject for the TMS Public and Governmental Affairs Committee and the Board of Directors, who are undertaking the discussion as I write in mid-February. I hate an ambiguous ending, but this story is “to be continued.”

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