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## Seeking More Respect for Engineers

You've probably heard some of the jokes about engineers — the engineer who figures out the problem with the guillotine before it's his turn to be executed; the engineer who puts the talking frog in her purse instead of kissing it because she doesn't have time for a boyfriend but thinks a talking frog is cool; the engineer who is more interested in the ultrasound equipment than the image of the baby; even the surgeon who likes operating on engineers because engineers understand when there are a few parts left over.

Then there are the "you know you're an engineer if ..." and "real engineers ..." lists, which accuse us of rotating our tires just for laughs, destroying things to see how they work, planning a family vacation with a Gantt chart, looking forward to Christmas so we can put together the kids' toys, carrying on a two-hour debate over the expected results of an experiment that will take five minutes to run, and on and on ...

And the ultimate insult: Real engineers don't find this stuff funny.

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield was famous for saying "I don't get no respect." Sometimes I feel the same way about engineers (although as an editor I should rephrase that to "we don't get much respect").

Several months ago, *USA Today* ran a story entitled "Engineers Tired of being Outshined by Scientists," which cites heroes of science such as Einstein, Newton, and Hawking, and asks "where are the heroes of engineering ... who built our modern world?"

In a speech at the annual meeting of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) last year, President Obama announced the goal of spending more than 3% of the nation's gross domestic product on research and development, saying that "Science is more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, our environment, and our quality of life than it has ever been before." He pledged to restore science to its rightful place. In his 40-minute speech, he used the word *scientist* six times and the word *science* 50 times, but *engineering* only six times and *engineer* twice.

Just when you thought things couldn't get any worse, a headline in the Sept. 10 *New York Times Magazine* blares, "Engineering Terror." The article discusses a study by Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog published in *The European Journal of Sociology*, which found that nearly 20% of those in violent terrorist groups had engineering degrees, compared with about 3.5% of the working-age populations in their (the terrorists') home countries. I won't speculate on this connection — I raise it out of frustration at the public's perception of engineers.

Obama issued a challenge to NAS members that we, too, should take up: "to use your love and knowledge of" *engineering* "to spark the same sense of wonder and excitement in a new generation. America's young people will rise to the challenge if given the opportunity — if called upon to join a cause larger than themselves ... Spend time in the classroom, talking and showing young people what it is that your work can mean, and what it means to you ... Think about new and creative ways to engage young people in science and engineering, whether it's science festivals, robotics competitions, fairs that encourage young people to create and build and invent ..."

National Engineers Week is right around the corner — Feb. 20–26, 2011. Why not start planning to get involved?

Cynthia F. Mascone, Editor-in-Chief

