

Reflections on Elections

*What makes some men run
— and what makes others run from running*

The rainy season finally came and the crazy hats were pulled out of closets. It got cold, too, so there was snow on the mountains. People went skiing and they went on snow parties, even if they couldn't ski—just to fool around in the white powder. Others weren't fooling around at all. One Monday night, the shortest nomination speeches in history were made, and out of those nominations came a not-surprisingly short list of ASCIT candidates.

Immediately, two questions arose within the student body: Why were so few people running? And why were the candidates who were already in the race running? Of course, the questions had direct bearing on each other, and they both referred back to the age-old, "What do I want out of Caltech?"

In the pre-awareness days, the student house used

to put a lot of pressure on its members to carry the house name to a blaze of glory by placing five or six men on the influential ASCIT Board of Directors. Now, however, a completely different concept has arisen. Individualism has crept into the picture. Candidates no longer just *say* that they can do a good job and that they have had experience and that they want to sit on the BOD because they have great ideas on how to spend 15,000 dollars—they *mean* it.

Many of the men running admit to having struggled with themselves for days and weeks and months and years, trying to decide whether to run or not. Then, in a torrent of anguished realization, they *knew*. They knew that they could do the job, that they could furnish the leadership so necessary to student government at Tech, that the experience gained in handling money and people was well worth the time. And they knew that they had decided for themselves. Nobody had high-pressured them into running for the honor of the student houses; this was an individual choice based completely on intelligent rationalization.

Many of these potential leaders did not discover themselves until sometime during the week that ASCIT had decided to keep open for further nominations—but once they had tossed the hat into the ring, their convictions strengthened every day. And then they went around to all the student houses and told the masses why they thought that they were the best for the office and what they thought was wrong with the office and what they were going to do about it and what they thought was wrong with ASCIT policy and what they were going to do about it—and the smell of manure permeated the dining rooms.

The reasons for running were poor; the ideas were even poorer. Nine out of ten blamed the disinterest in school government offices on the "lack of coordination between the students and ASCIT." They cited experience, desire, anything that they could think of to convince the interrupted diners that they were *it*. And many of the rocks of self-realization summed it up in one sentence: "I would appreciate your vote next Tuesday." Maybe that could be rephrased: "I



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would appreciate winning next Tuesday because that means that you have accepted me and that you like me better than the candidates I'm running against and I would like very much if you liked me better."

But it's not all as basic as that. There are other serious motives. The student may really feel that he can get to know many of the people that he wants to know through an ASCIT office; he may feel that he can actually change a lot of school policies towards things he doesn't like through this office; he may even feel that he will learn about his potentialities and learn to understand people by working with them on the Board and through the Board.

Very few of these dreams ever come true, unfortunately. It's pretty hard to realize your values and understand your fellow officers when any kind of ego-ambition stands in the way; it's harder still when no principles are involved, but only the desire to win—to win elections, to win minor points, to win prestige.

What about those who didn't run? First and foremost, they didn't think they could win and nobody took the time to either talk them into the fact that they *could* win, or to rationalize their "fears." Secondly, they honestly did not want to have anything to do with elections, win or not.

What kind of animal is this out-of-it that has no

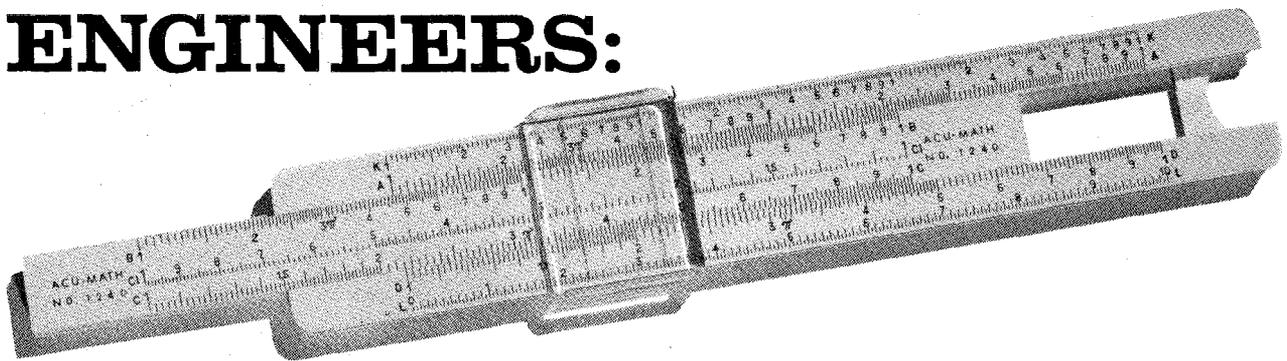
desire to reach the apex of self-importance? Does he study constantly? Does he have no sense of social prowess? Does he become extremely cynical at any given time? The main reason, essentially, that the almost-candidates were not, was that they considered the BOD a waste of energy; being an officer was simply a security that they did not need.

These are not cynics. They are people who have thought and felt that the way to understanding was not through prestige but through close relationships with students and faculty and the outside world—the kind of relationships that can be achieved without running for office and perhaps burdening themselves with unnecessary responsibilities. Some of these are students who are students and do not include in their goals their name at the top of a piece of ASCIT stationery. Some of these know what it is to govern at Caltech and they realize the ridiculousness of the whole idea.

And when it all comes down to the vote, it doesn't matter who you are or what you are running for—the only thing that counts is how many friends you have and how many friends the other guy has and how long your name is and what letter it starts with and when it's all over and maybe you won, what does it matter when you decide not to run next year?

—Martin Carnoy '60

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