

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Clint Andrews

Is the world better than it was two years ago?

[photo]

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Out with the old, in with the new. My term as president of SSIT is ending and Brian O'Connell will take the reins on New Year's Day. I'm happy to say that the leadership of the society is in good hands, membership is up, and the volunteer base is getting re-energized.

I have been privileged to serve you during two particularly interesting but difficult years, as the world has weathered mass terrorism, war, and an economic slump that hit the electrical engineering and computer science professions particularly hard. These events weakened the financial health of the IEEE and complicated its international conference and publishing activities. SSIT was not affected as badly as some other IEEE entities, thankfully.

We have accomplished much in the past two years. This magazine has won another award, it has had a successful editorial transition, and its number of pages published and use of color have increased. Members now have free online access via IEEE Explore. The Society has started an electronic newsletter to keep members in better touch with one another. We have held successful annual International Symposia for Technology and Society (ISTAS): the 2002 event was held in Raleigh, NC, U.S.A. and the 2003 event was held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. ISTAS'04 will be in Worcester, MA, U.S.A. We held our first regional conference in Champaign-Urbana, IL, U.S.A., with another planned for 2004 in Austin, TX, U.S.A. We conducted our first-ever survey of members and learned a great deal about your likes and dislikes. Rest assured that this will inform future Society decisions.

Returning to the big picture, events of recent years remind us how terribly profound are the social implications of technology, and hence, how important are our efforts to understand them. For example, which buildings should we design to withstand collisions with jetliners? When should we describe weapons of mass destruction as merely rhetorical versus overtly physical devices? Where is the appropriate balance between collective security and personal privacy? What should employers and governments do to keep engineering careers attractive in a globalizing economy? Why do voting machines fail to capture the intent of the voters? How do we organize electrical power systems to avoid — really avoid — cascading blackouts? And while we're at it, how do we keep a heat wave from killing thousands of our elderly and infirm? And what are the prospects for mitigating or adapting to climate change? And so on.

As you close out this year and start the next, I urge you to take a long, hard look at yourself in the mirror. Do you like what you see, any grayer hairs or extra girth aside? Is your work making the world a better place, better for all of us?

Engineers tend to be systems thinkers. This is a good time of year to think a little more broadly, to consider higher-level systems questions. Instead of optimizing only a product or a process, reflect for a while on how to improve the enterprise that employs you. Then take another moment to think about how to improve the way that enterprise contributes to the overall human experience and to the world we live in. Now you're in the SSIT zone. Stay right there, and have a happy, healthy, and possibly subversive, new year!

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