

John J. Scheuren, Jr. In His Own Words

The following excerpts illustrate the breadth of John J. Scheuren's writing, from engineering and Arctic exploration to technology, public policy, stewardship, and humor. More than thirty years after his death, they reveal an insightful twentieth-century voice speaking to many of the questions we still face today.

Technology and Judgment

"We cannot escape what we have made, nor should we try. The question is not whether technology will continue to advance, but whether we will advance with it. We have the knowledge, the tools, and the experience; what remains uncertain is our judgment, our discipline, and our willingness to understand both the power and the limits of what we create." — p. 360

Irony on the Ice Cap

"Western Electric had hired my old friend, Adm. Donald MacMillan, the legendary Arctic explorer, to brief personnel on living on the Greenland Ice Cap. Mac had sailed with Peary and made many voyages aboard his schooner, Bowdoin, but he had never actually stood on the Ice Cap itself. He had always wanted to. Because he was in his eighties, the doctors would not allow him to visit the Ice Cap stations at an elevation of about 8,000 feet. We were both traveling to Thule, and I planned to take him out on a routine flight so he could finally walk on the Ice Cap. The plan unraveled when an elaborate VIP reception separated us after arrival, and Mac never made the trip. The irony of his not being allowed to visit the Ice Cap at 8,000 feet while being allowed to fly in an unpressurized aircraft at 12,000 to 13,000 feet on the way to Thule is the kind of irony of which the world is full." — pp. 173-174

Good Fortune and Bad Luck

There is also the matter of ethics and of luck. We rely on both more than we care to admit. Ethics must guide decisions where rules and specifications fall short; yet even the most careful design and the most honest efforts are sometimes overtaken by chance. Good fortune is often mistaken for good judgment, and bad luck for failure, but the two are not the same. — p.359

Cold War

"When the power was turned on, a target appeared, and the red button was almost pushed. However, it turned out to be a rising moon. All were looking at the screen, and no one looked out the window." — p. 155

Sisyphus

"I have often thought about Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up a hill for eternity, only to have it roll down each time he reached the summit. Had he been an engineer, he would have chucked the boulder at the top and sat down to rest." — p.360

Stewardship

"Wilderness or not, the preservation of the world still exists so we can enjoy it today and save it for coming generations. But if we don't leave our descendants a habitable, life-affirming world, we will deserve to be forgotten." — p. 360

Cold Regions Engineering

"When permafrost is frozen, it is a good foundation. Unfrozen, though, it melts literally into mud and water. Construction had to be based on protecting the permafrost." — p. 138

Public Policy

"Do engineers qualify to shape public policy? They design and build the systems that support modern life; yet politics dominates decision-making. There is a need for understanding on all sides. Engineers benefit from exposure to the humanities; non-engineers must also understand something of science and technology. A society that depends on complex systems cannot function if most of its members cannot understand even their operation." — p. 357

The Whole Person

"The development of the whole person, the training of individuals for service to the community, may be the highest problem of life. The betterment of conditions throughout the world does not depend solely on scientific knowledge, but on the fulfillment of human traditions and ideals." — p. 357

Maintenance

"Our archaeologists dig up cities buried in their own midden heaps and irrigation canals filled with silt because of lack of maintenance. All past civilizations have failed because of lack of maintenance." — p. 359

Understanding Technology

"The problem is not technology itself but how it is used. Before the motor vehicle, those who drove horses understood far more about the care and feeding of their animals than their descendants now understand about their automobiles." — p. 359

Public Relations at the South Pole

When Dufek [first person to land a plane at the South Pole] landed at the Pole in his ski equipped R4D (AirForce and Army called it C47), we used to joke when picturing this feat of the first man to land at the Pole by air, because Conger [Navy photographer] was really there first. Dufek jumped out, then Conger jumped out, and then Dufek popped back in and then jumped out very photogenically. — p. 231