The *Image* of Engineers

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THE cartoon penned by IEM Member Ir. Shaik, reproduced in this issue, should convey the underlying message rather convincingly. A person fainted and someone yells, "Doctor!" and a doctor will come to his rescue. The toilet gets choked and someone yells "Engineer!" and a not-so-happy-looking engineer emerges; the rest can be left unsaid.

The issue of the image of engineers, and our social standing, is important enough that it was the theme of Presidential addresses for a number of years.

Engineering as a profession did not have a good start. President Herbert Hoover, the only engineer among the American presidents, recalled the following incident in his *Memoir* where he described his conversations with "an English lady of great cultivation and happy mind" and who during the discussions "contributed much to the evanescent conversation on government, national customs, literature, art, industry, and whatnot":

> *"We were coming up New York harbour at the final farewell breakfast, when she turned to me and said,*
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> > *'I hope you will forgive my dreadful curiosity, but I should like awfully to know – what is your profession?'*
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> *I replied that I was an engineer. She emitted an involuntary exclamation, and said,*
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> > *'Why, I thought you were a gentleman!' "*

President Hoover is, of course, the American president after whom the great engineering project called Hoover Dam is named. He is unfortunately also the American president whose economic policy was blamed, rightly or wrongly, to have precipitated the Wall Street crash of October 1929 which ushered in the Great Depression of the 1930's. Too bad he is remembered more for the wrong reason.

Just one more illustration. Anyone who has watched the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon* would not fail to notice a naughty character who was a cynical pimp. His nickname? The Engineer! Since when has being a pimp anything to do with being an engineer defies comprehension. The damage is however done.

Somehow, engineers do not seem to gain recognition for their works. A splendid and spectacular building springs up and the one that gets attention and praise is often the architect. Engineers devise and design computers but it seems that most people have heard of Bill Gates and Paul Allen, no one seems to know who had designed and assembled the first computer. After a successful space exploration, attention is focused on the astronauts or the cosmonaut. The designer of the space shuttle? Who is that? Everyone can enjoy, applaud and gyrate to the music of Michael Jackson. No one seems to have noticed his team of sound engineers. The examples can go on and on.

What seems to be the case is that when children are asked to state what their ambitions are, more of them incline towards, for examples, doctors, lawyers, and even another Cristiano Ronaldo. (Remember that weird looking hairdo of another Ronaldo which was copied by kids throughout the world after the 2002 World Cup?) It is not often that the choice narrows down to engineer.

It may not however be true that the image of engineers has been eroded. The perception may not be truly reflective of the situation.

It may also however be due to the wrong (?) perception that an engineer's job is "dirty" as sometimes exemplified by his/her soiled cloths compared to the clean shaven image of a lawyer clothed in his/her gown with a thick stack of files in his/her hands or that of a doctor in white overalls with a stethoscope hanging around his/her neck.

It may also be his nerdy and less than "romantic" outlook compared to that of an architect. He/She may be good in numbers but an accountant's numbers seem to be the ones that really matter!

All however is not lost. I can do no better than quoting again from that engineer who became a President of the United States. He said,

> *"Engineering is a great profession. There is the satisfaction of watching a figment of imagination emerge through the aid of science to a plan on paper. Then it moves to realisation in stone or metal or energy. Then it brings home to men and women. Then it elevates the standard of living and adds to the comfort of life. This is the engineer's high privilege."*

Fellow engineers thus need not despair. Just pause to think about this. How will the world be without engineers? We may be playing indispensable roles behind the scene. Our jobs may not be glamorous. But then, without us? Just the thought of it is frightening. This may lend some comfort to us. But, then should we emerge from behind the scene? Well, this can be the subject of another Engineering Miscellany. ■