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Most of the time, 'it' can be done

Sometimes it seems as though there are two kinds of experts. One appears to delight in saying it can't be done—or predicting doom if you do, disaster if you don't. The other type gets his jollies in trying to prove the first expert wrong. We need both, of course. For without the one, we wouldn't have the other. Point, counterpoint.

The it-can't-be-done philosophy has snookered many a good man over the years. Simon Newcomb, eminent astronomer and mathematician who died in 1909, once flatly stated: "... no possible combination of known substances, known forms of machinery and known forms of force can be united in a practical machine by which man shall fly long distances through the air. . . ."

In 1945, Dr. Vannevar Bush had this to say about intercontinental missiles: "Technically, I don't think anyone in the world knows how to do such a thing, and I feel confident that it will not be done for a very long period of time to come. . . ."

But don't become too smug as you chortle over those gaffes. Several years ago, a noted American scientist opined that all the great scientific discoveries had been made, that it's mainly a matter of tidying up. Yet, only a few days ago, word of a newly found subatomic particle three and a half times as heavy as a proton made news and set physicists to work on how to mesh the discovery with present theory.

Actually, we don't have to look any further than our own chemical process industries for other examples. Not so long ago some industry representatives were peddling their own brand of doomsday talk when it came to environmental and energy matters. Make us do these things and you'll bring down the industry, they seemed to be saying. Yet, we've been learning to handle both kinds of problems reasonably well—in some cases, outstandingly—as the industry forged ahead. (For a rundown on how CPI companies are shifting their product mix as a result of the energy shortage, see CW Report, p. 29.)

More recently, we have the case of vinyl chloride and its link to angiosarcoma, a rare liver cancer. To be sure, it was the industry, to its credit, that pinpointed and ultimately publicized the problem. Still, when the Occupational Safety and Health Administration moved to set stringent limits on concentration of the gas in the workplace, the industry trotted out experts to testify that meeting the contemplated reduced standards on a practical basis was "impossible," that it would shut down a vital industry. Some seemed more concerned about what limit the industry could live with rather than with what the workers could live with. We agree that this industry is vital, that it has brought an array of low-priced, useful products to the world consumer. But we don't agree that the new standards can't be met.

Indeed, technical solutions, short of space suits or remotely controlled devices, may well be in the offing. KemaNord will soon test an air-curtain system in its PVC plant in Stockvim designed to meet Sweden's 1-ppm. exposure limit at little additional cost. Norway's Norsk Hydro will shortly try out a closed autoclave system that may permit the company to reopen its PVC plant at Heroya now closed because of the vinyl chloride question. And Wolfgang A. Mack, president of Werner & Pfleiderer Corp., described at a recent meeting of the Society of Plastics Engineers several new compounding techniques for cutting vinyl chloride content in PVC compounds to OSHA standards.

The it-can't-be-done trap has snared many a knowledgeable person who should have known better. Most of the time "it" can be done. And if history is any basis, "it" almost always is—sooner or later.

Patrick P. McCurdy