

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## Editorial

### The *Notices* as a Forum for Debate

"I recently learned with astonishment that, pursuant to an act of Congress, every holder of an NSF fellowship must swear to defend the Constitution. It is time the mathematical community began to look some gift horses in the mouth." Thus began a strongly worded letter to the editor from Henry Helson, published in the February 1959 issue of the *Notices*. For the past four decades or so the *Notices* has served as a forum for discussion of a wide variety of issues mathematicians are concerned about, from research funding to mathematical typesetting, from human rights to educational and academic policies.

Almost from the start of the "Letters to the Editor" column in the June 1958 issue, human rights was a prominent theme. Around that time a number of letters discussed the case of mathematician Chandler Davis, who had been imprisoned for six months for refusing to answer certain questions of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Over the years, there have been many letters about the situation of mathematicians in the former Soviet Union. In the 1970s and 1980s there was also a steady flow of letters about whether the AMS should refuse to hold meetings in states where the Equal Rights Amendment had not been passed. At least one member, fed up with the amount of politics on the AMS agenda, wrote a letter proffering his resignation from the Society.

There has sometimes been tension between the view that the *Notices* should let people air their opinions on just about any issue and the view that the content of the *Notices* should be controlled by the editors. On occasion, when this tension escalated, the AMS Council has stepped in. One such case arose in the early 1990s, when about 450 mathematicians signed an open letter to the Russian mathematician I. R. Shafarevich asking him to renounce his treatise "Rusophobia", which many believe is anti-Semitic. The controversy reached the Council after the letter was rejected for publication in the *Notices*. The Council directed the *Notices* to publish the letter, with the full list of signatories, as a free advertisement. The letter appeared in the March 1992 issue.

Another Council action led to the creation of today's "Forum" column. In the mid-1980s, the AMS was roiled by controversy over funding of mathematics research by agencies of the Department of Defense. At the Joint Meetings in January 1987, motions pertaining to these issues were brought before the AMS membership. Upon recommendation from the Committee on Science Policy, the Council instructed the *Notices* to open its pages to discussion of the motions. The resulting column, "Commentary on Defense Funding", appeared in five issues of the *Notices*. In January 1988 about 7,000 members voted in the referendum, many more than in a typical AMS election. The motions, which can be loosely characterized as against military funding for mathematics, passed by wide margins. Many appreciated the short-lived column the controversy spawned, and so it was reincarnated, without the focus on military funding, as "Forum".

Nowadays few letters or opinion columns in the *Notices* touch on matters like human rights or military funding. The focus seems to be more practical and less idealistic: Can young mathematicians get jobs? Will traditional publishing disappear in the electronic age? What is the right way to teach calculus? Whatever issues arise in coming years, the *Notices* will strive to provide a place for fair-minded and constructive debate.

—Allyn Jackson