

Iron Rings temper our mettle

Far from simple tradition, this ritual marks the beginning for professional 'geers



GRAHAM
LETTNER

In the final semester of their degrees, all engineering students in Canada are presented with their very own Iron Ring. It's part of a larger ceremony called the "Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer." Oddly enough, and at roughly the same time, non-engineers seem to perceive a general doubling of hubris and halving of humility on the part of these same engineers.

To the outsider, the Iron Ring might seem like a colossal and exclusive love-in between engineers. But for me, the Iron Ring ceremony was an important transition between this campus and a career. To gauge how widespread this feeling was, I spoke to some of my fellow graduates after the ceremony—first, in the control state of "sober," and then while incrementally increasing the variable "drunkenness." At all levels of sobriety I observed sentiments similar to mine.

Like it or not, university life eventually needs to come to a close. We need to make a transition at the end of our degrees—one in which we finally move on from the world of Wednesday-night benders and wearing the same pair of jeans three (okay, five) days in a row. For engineers, the Iron Ring ceremony connects us to professionals in our field and helps make this transition easier.

Receiving an Iron Ring is important—it means taking on new challenges. There will still be the analytic

rigour we've become accustomed to: churning out weekly assignments, outputting endless lab reports, hacking away for hours in fluorescent computer labs, and generally being "shit-pumped" for the last four years, as one of my peers so eloquently put it. But as an actual engineer, there exist additional challenges—all of which the Iron Ring ceremony helps prepare us for.

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Once you enter the workforce, there becomes a real ethical dimension. Equations and computations merge with people and circumstance—because in the grayscale professional world, ethics can no longer be academically abstracted away. As part of receiving an Iron Ring, each graduating engineer spends the morning before the ceremony studying a set of ethical case studies alongside a practicing professional engineer. This may sound like a dull way to spend a Saturday, but explicitly developing an ethical foundation before entering our profession is key to making a successful post-graduation transition.

Moreover, climbing the ranks from

amateur to professional requires learning the character of professionalism. No, engineers aren't particularly behind in this because of any liquor-induced lack of competence or skill; rather, professionalism is an ethos that raises the bar of expectation. The career engineers at the ceremony take their work seriously, and it shows. They understand that often times a "wrong answer" can cost human lives. Understanding that our work must always uphold the public interest is something these individuals know intuitively. The Iron Ring ceremony helps graduating engineers to begin to understand it as well.

Finally, this ritual makes it clear that it's time for us engineers to shelve any lingering cock-of-the-walk swagger once and for all. Carrying around intellectual chips on our shoulders might be fine for a few cheap laughs around campus, but in the real world, it's fatal. The form and history of the ceremony helps to stress the importance of humility. This rite of passage perfectly captures the transition from carefree university days to the real responsibility of the working world.

Okay, sure, there's the odd engineer who thinks his or her Iron Ring is just a shiny status symbol, an obnoxious table-rapping noise-maker, or a convenient bottle opener. But they're assholes, and have missed out on both the Iron Ring's meaning and their own transition from university to the grown-up world.

For the rest of us, it reminds us of what we've achieved as students, and how little that achievement is compared to what we're asked to become as professional engineers.

And for me, at the end of a long university career, that's a good final lesson.

Despite its faults, we need the US on top



VICTOR
VARGAS

Let's review how utterly fucked the Americans are right now. They're massively in debt, their army can't seem to get Iraq under control, their traditional hold over South America seems to have been vaporized, they can't seem to control illegal immigration into their country, and their currency is falling like Gerald Ford. The time of living in a world where the United States is the sole hyper-power may be coming to an end, but forgive me if I'm not celebrating.

Sure, the Americans have done some very stupid and underhanded things over the years, and they've been arrogant jackasses all around, but on the scale of world empires, they actually rank quite low on the evil scale.

People also forget that the Americans have actually done a large amount of good in the world. At the end of WWII, they bankrolled the Marshall Plan, and were one of the chief impetuses in transforming Germany and Japan into functioning and less militarily inclined democracies. During the Cold War, they were actually fairly restrained and reasonable in dealing with their allies, and managed to keep free speech intact. They even tried to make amends

at times for the horrible things they had done—like when Jimmy Carter paid Colombia compensation for the mess created over the Panama Canal.

Of course, people are often so busy shooting their mouths off about America that they seem to forget about historical and even current threats. For example, what if we were to take the worst criticisms about the United States—notably the exaggerated ones—and try to guess what real-world nation most embodies them?

The fact of the matter is that when the United States leaves the throne, there isn't any one nation that can replace them.

I'm talking about supporting evil corporations, selling out human rights, large-scale pollution, bullying other nations, and being largely controlled by two seemingly identical parties. If you guessed China, you'd be right.

The fact of the matter is that when the United States leaves the throne, there isn't any one nation that can replace them. The European Union would be a nice successor—that is, if it wasn't a complete pipe dream. While they may have a growing currency and some military weight behind it, thus far they haven't shown a willingness to

do anything to actually intervene in any trouble spots. At most, the EU seems to give nations a stern lecture on why they shouldn't abuse human rights, followed by the strong insistence that some "dire consequences" like an embargo might occur—assuming France or Germany's trade interests aren't at risk. They might talk big, but unless they actually take some action on issues, no one will ever take them seriously.

As for other potential successors to the Americans, none of them seem to be willing or able to command global politics. India is too embroiled in its own internal problems as well as a standoff with a now-destabilized Pakistan. China seems only concerned with securing the resources needed to fuel its regional empire, while Russia is too obsessed with reasserting the old Soviet Empire to actually care about global issues that don't directly affect it. The result is that in a time when we are faced with threats like global warming and we need one nation to take charge, no one is going to be able to do it.

Yes, the Americans are to blame for their own sorry state. Several of their allies told them that Iraq was going to be a military and political disaster, economists foretold that the debt was going to ruin the economy, and they've been warned more than once about the long-term impact if their trade deficit with China continues. But the truth is that, considering the alternatives, it would be nice if the Americans would stay on top of the heap for a few more decades.

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