

Presentation of the Distinguished Public Service Award of the Mineralogical Society of America for 2015 to J. Alexander Speer

PETER J. HEANEY¹

¹Department of Geosciences, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802, U.S.A.

Mr. President, Honorees, Members of MSA:

Twenty years ago, our Society confronted an array of challenges. The severity of the situation can best be described by reference to that illustrious American philosopher, Donald Rumsfeld.

We faced the “known knowns”—the challenges we knew we knew. These included a plunge in membership from a high of 2900 in the early 1980s down to 2200 in the mid-1990s—a 25% reduction.

Next, the Society faced the known unknowns. In 1995, the financial prospects for MSA were murky. Our endowment was recovering from a steep recession, but income from membership fees and journal subscriptions was steadily dropping.

Finally, MSA faced the unknown unknowns—the challenges we didn’t know we didn’t know. Could any of us at that time have imagined that the internet would allow people to download MSA’s intellectual property with the click of a mouse?

The good news—or more accurately—the great news, is that we found someone to navigate our way past these obstacles. We hired J. Alexander Speer—Alex to everybody. Alex had earned a Ph.D. from Virginia Tech with Dave Hewitt. He had served as an assistant professor at North Carolina State University and as an associate editor for the *American Mineralogist*. He had published dozens of mineralogical papers on subjects ranging from phase transitions in titanite to the crystal chemistry of micas in igneous rocks. In other words, Alex was one of us. No one needed to explain our culture to him. He would always be a scientist first and a businessman second.

In his first few years, Alex’s influence showed itself in subtle ways. Alex created a business environment that nurtured the extraordinary talent and dedication of the staff who handle MSA’s day-to-day affairs. I have seen evaluations of Alex that call him “the best boss ever.”

In a short time, Alex also created a nurturing environment for us—the scientists. Alex’s organizational talents liberated the inventiveness of our members to focus on the big problems. Council meetings that legendarily had run from early morning to midnight transformed into engagements that were time-efficient, on point, and intentional. Discussions led to decisions. The resulting initiatives have restored MSA to a position of international leadership, and they were made possible by Alex’s guiding hand.

Let me cite two of many examples.

I was a member of the Council when then-President Rod Ewing proposed that MSA spearhead a new publication that

would highlight the most exciting developments in the mineral sciences. We all liked the idea, but was it financially viable? Alex has always protected the MSA endowment with the ferocity of a “tiger mother” guarding her cub. If he told us that a new publication was not economically tenable, the story would have ended there. But instead, Alex worked with Rod on a variety of funding scenarios that would carry this idea from dream to reality, and most of us regard the birth of *Elements* as representing the best of what our Society does.

Here is a second example. There was a time when the *American Mineralogist* existed only as a physical entity, a paper journal with its trademark orange-yellow cover. In that distant era, then-President Doug Rumble announced to Council that Alex was working on a new paradigm for journal publications—one that would earn revenue for MSA every time a subscriber downloaded one of our articles. Alex co-founded GeoScienceWorld (GSW) well before other societies even recognized the need for it. The era of electronic articles roared forth, and MSA’s income from GSW has helped offset the losses from the drop in paper subscriptions. Alex’s prescience was nothing less than a lifesaver for our society.

During my presidency in 2008, I had the good fortune to work with Alex on a regular basis during what John Valley and Barb Dutrow described as his “fireside chats.” Alex called me every week at an appointed time, and for an hour he reviewed the latest issues affecting MSA. Mostly I listened as Alex methodically laid out one item after the next, suggested solutions to me, gently reminded me of things that I was supposed to have done, and generally turned the gears that make our Society hum. I marveled at Alex’s devotion to MSA. He casually mentioned that he had spent a weekend ferrying boxes of RiMG volumes from a warehouse in Virginia to another in Maryland to save MSA some rent money. Alex prepared thick binders of committee reports for each Council member before the biannual meetings, and he always included a selection of historical anecdotes that he culled from the MSA archives of previous Council meetings. He especially loved it when his sleuthing revealed that Council members fifty years ago complained about precisely the same issues that exasperate us today.

Alex is not merely the Executive Director of MSA. He is its heart and soul as well. Mr. President, I cannot think of a more deserving recipient for the Distinguished Public Service Award than Alex Speer. Please join me in thanking Alex for all that he has done for our Society over the past 20 years.