

Editorial

U.S. role must adapt to modern world

There are dangerous portents in the wind. For the most part, our country has wrapped itself in enough bureaucratic nonsense to keep any wild decisions from knocking us out of kilter. But occasionally statements pop up that clue us in to the shocking lack of reason that lurks underneath all the red tape.

President Reagan made a few such statements a while ago when he hopped down to Orlando, Fla., for none other than the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals.

His speech was full of fire and brimstone and pompous boasts about the role of the United States in world affairs. "There is sin and evil in the world," he said, "and we are enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might . . ."

He went on to say that "America has kept alight the torch of freedom." He spoke of Russia as under a "totalitarian darkness" and said that we should "be aware they are the focus of evil in the modern world."

It is just this attitude that is making it so difficult for the United States to find the right place for itself in the modern world.

President Reagan's so-called modern world should have faded away long before Vietnam ever made it painfully clear that the United States does not have the power or the right to force itself on the rest of the globe.

The focus of evil cannot be pinpointed

in Moscow. There are bits of it all over the world. A close examination reveals that we cannot simply divide the world between white hats and black, between good and bad, between American and Russian.

El Salvador's government, supported by U.S. military aid and coached by U.S. military advisers, has been ranked by Amnesty International as one of the bloodiest killers in the world today.

Argentina and Guatemala are also on Amnesty International's list. They are supplied with arms by Israel, the spunky country whose chief defender in the world is the United States.

These tragedies do not exceed those of Afghanistan or Poland, but they do equal them. It is completely false and dangerously unreasonable to ponder notions that it is we, as Americans, who can wave "the torch of freedom" in the world's face.

If we do indeed bask in this light, then the evils in which our country plays a part are all the more inexcusable.

Russian citizens have no power over the government and are, to a large extent, kept ignorant of its actions. Americans cannot enjoy such bliss.

In a recent interview, West German author Gunter Grass spoke of the dangers of attitudes like those of our president. "I am convinced," he said, "that in the United States . . . strong fascist tendencies have become apparent in recent years and that a land . . . that to this day pract-

ices racism . . . in which I don't know how many millions live below the poverty level . . . that relies — now under Reagan — on early capitalistic methods of exploitation and develops them anew, that this land has no right, or has lost its right to point critically at others."

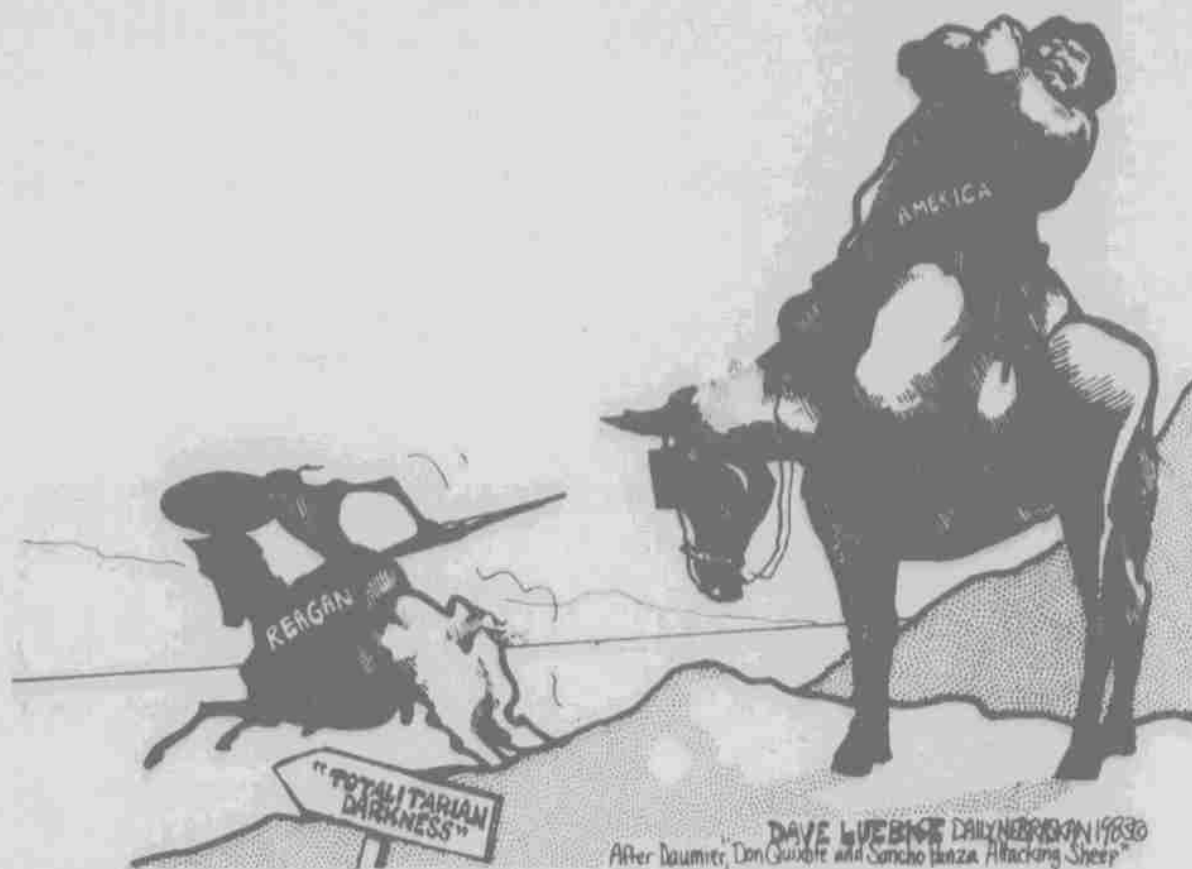
We have not lost that right completely. It is the right of any perceptive individual to point out the truth.

But it is the truth we must keep in

mind, not grandiose visions of the United States as the Lone Ranger galloping off into the "totalitarian darkness" with guns blazing.

When decisions are made about increased aid to El Salvador, increased defense budgets and such, we should look around us at the world and let nothing cloud that view.

David Thompson



Telephones: The impersonal way to be personal

My friends live in other places: other neighborhoods, other towns, other states. When we get together, it is often our fingers that do the walking from one home to the other.

For us, the telephone is a meeting hall, a neighborhood, the way we keep our own small community



Ellen Goodman

together. We advise and consult each other by dial tone; we console and congratulate by area codes and digits.

By voice, we do the maintenance that keeps friendships alive, and sometimes families. If we have some piece of news to share, it goes out almost always, almost exclusively, by word of mouth.

This is called, in our culture, keeping in touch.

Yet I sometimes wonder whether there isn't a hidden cost to this piece of technology, too. I don't mean the costs of intrusion. It's true that the phone insults our quiet and insists its way into our privacy. But I will trade that for this lifeline.

Nor do I mean the cost that shows up on my bill. I rationalize that easily with friends from other area codes: Long distance is cheaper than planes or therapy . . . or disconnection.

But isn't it possible that this staple of modern life has had some odd consequences for us. Isn't it possible that the instrument has actually been an actor in our culture over a century?

John Staudenmaier, a Jesuit and visiting assistant professor at M.I.T.'s center for Science, Technology and Society, talks about the birth of the phone in 1876 as "the first time in human history that we could split voice from sight, touch, smell and taste."

What does that mean to us? That we no longer have to be in the same room to talk to each other. That we can choose friends across space and keep friends over distance.

But doesn't it also mean that we can ignore the people who live in our hallway? In some ways, the same machine that offers us a handy shortcut through loneliness may also make it more likely for us to live alone.

"The hometown, the street and neighborhood has also been eroded particularly by the telephone," believes Staudenmaier, "because the real relationships in my life are not the people on my street and not the people in my apartment building. They can be strangers because I have 'real' friends connected by electronic rather than physical bodily connections."

It isn't just the phone that does this, I know. The car, the television set and manufacturing have also changed us so we live more in the wide world and less on our own block.

But I suspect that this odd and utterly routine ability to communicate by sound alone has altered another

piece of our human psyche. We are more able now to protect and distance ourselves in human communication.

How many difficult conversations today take place by phone because we won't have to see someone's else tears? How skillfully have we learned to control our voices and hide our emotions? How often do we use the phone so we won't have to, literally, face each other?

I know a woman who bought a portable phone so that she could garden or scrub the sink or unload the dishwasher when her mother called. I know a man who regularly broke up with the women in his life by phone because it was so much easier.

We have all, at one time or another, retreated to a phone to share something personal while we are invisible. We are able to screen our messages, offer less, reveal less, feel less vulnerable. We can even hang up. The telephone is wonderfully efficient, and less intimate.

I am no Luddite, raging against electronics. In my home there are four extension phones, a hundred feet of cord and one teen-ager. I work by phone, send my column from one city to another by phone. I maintain — though I never make — friendships by phone.

Yet I think it's crucial to remember the limits, to remember the trade-offs of the technology we live with. The telephone company encourages us to reach out and touch someone. Funny, that's one thing we can't do by phone.

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Tales of rich people reveal their discreet charms

Wealth.

To someday be wealthy is, I have no doubt, the goal of most people here at UNL. Why not? It's a great life



Dave Milo Mumgaard

when one is wealthy. Wealth usually comes along with power and prestige, so to be able to tell other people what to do and to have the best kinds of people for friends surely must be the cat's meow. To be rich is to be wealthy. To be wealthy usually is to be greedy, but I know lots of people who are greedy but who aren't wealthy. They sure would like to be, though.

Today I've included a few rich people stories for those of you who are planning to be rich. Yet, when I originally read these stories, I couldn't help but think of Thoreau's

saying that "superfluous wealth buys only superfluities."

For instance, in a recent New York Times story on investment opportunities, one millionaire got caught up in the idea that 1982 was the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Francis of Assisi, a profound ascetic if ever there was one.

Discussing the inflation psychology and whether it has ebbed, Laurence A. Tisch identified the key questions: "Have we changed the style of our country? Are we less things-oriented than we were in the 1970s? Does the family really need three cars, a second home, a third television set?"

Tisch is the chairman and chief executive officer of the Loews Corporation and has a personal fortune estimated at \$300 million. That would let him buy, let's see, about 6,000 \$50,000 homes, or about 12,000 Mercedes-Benzes, or especially if Tisch liked cable TV about 300,000 big-screen TVs.

Another example of the discreet charm of the rich comes from the mouth of Clare Booth Luce. In a recent

interview in Geo magazine, she told how her social circle viewed the world. What about the majority of her fellow Americans? "I see them as a somewhat spoiled people." On immigrants from Latin America: "They're coming over the border and they're coming in with wives and sisters and nieces who get pregnant immediately because they can then become Americans and go on relief." On why this immigration is different from previous waves: "But the vast majority of 19th-century immigrants were of a fundamental culture, and they were all white. They were not black or brown or yellow." On the obligations of the rich to those in poor countries: "I do not know of any other identification I can make, say, with the condition of the people in the Sahara. I repeatedly see pictures in the papers of a starving mother with her child holding out its hand. I think I would be hypocritical if I didn't say that I would feel a little more compassion if one of my pet birds had broken a leg in its cage in my own house."

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