Editorial

Farmers' plight deserves immediate action

Some things just aren't that pressing. Mailing that thank-you letter to Aunt Mabel for the birthday gift she sent you in January hasn't cost you a night's sleep yet. Your life doesn't depend on it.

But here in Nebraska, people's lives are at stake. The situation presses harder and harder on those lives, the lives of Nebraska farmers and all the people they feed.

Gov. Bob Kerrey can't feel the pressure, because he is leaning away from it. He is leaning away from calling a special session of the Legislature to solve the question of differences in agriculture and commercial land valuation.

Nebraskans have struggled for several months with the Nebraska Supreme Court decision brought by the owners of the Kearney Holiday Inn. The owners contested the inn's tax valuation on the basis of low tax valuations for surrounding farmlands.

But the issue goes beyond whether commercial landowners should pay a higher property tax rate than farm owners. It bumps into the area of farming in general.

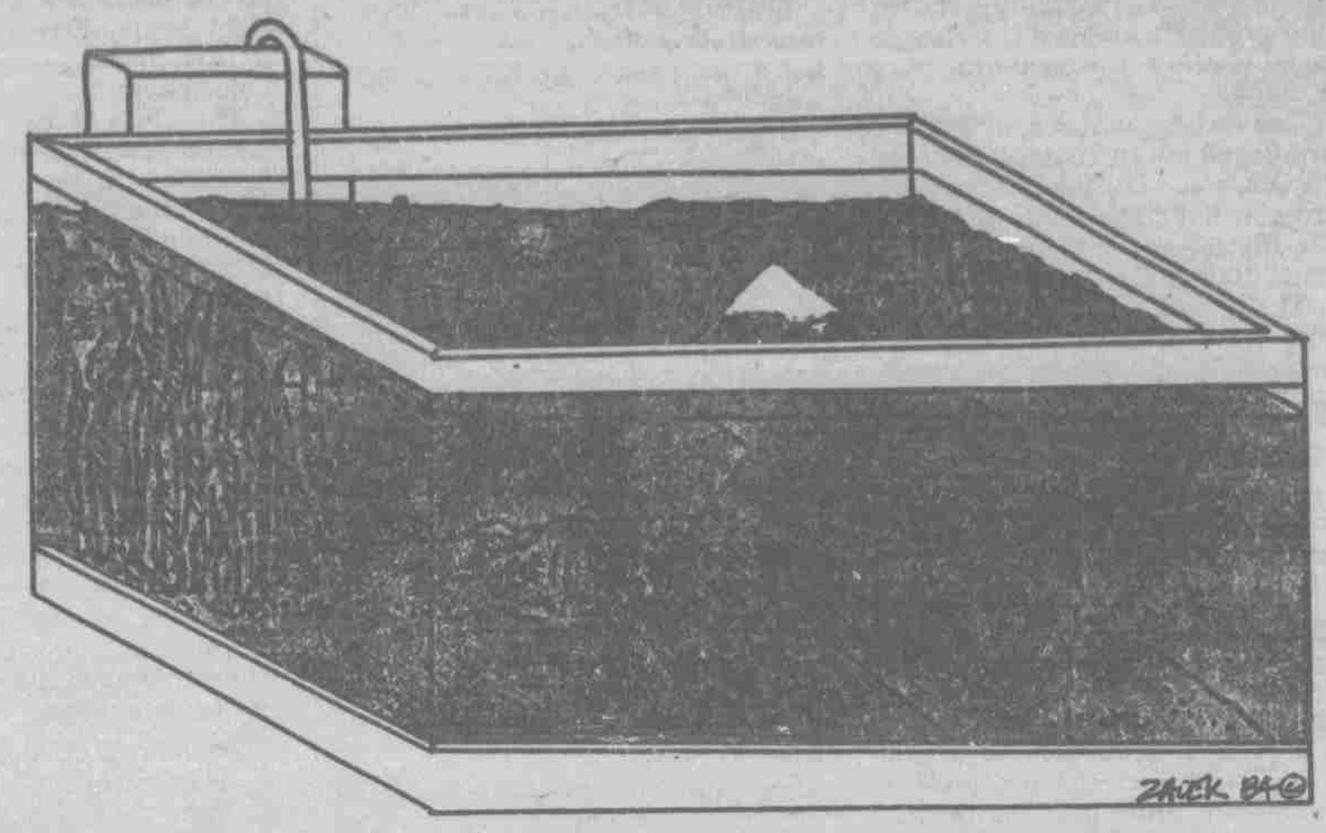
For the past year, Nebraskans have heard and read about the crumbling state of farming in general: More farms are going bankrupt, more are sinking into indebtedness, and the government — state or federal — does nothing concrete to remedy the situation.

Kerrey went to Denver early in the spring for an agricultural summit meeting with 12 other Midwest governors. According to the Lincoln Journal, they agreed that the problem with farm foreclosures and indebtedness was growing. And the traditional helping agencies were not doing their jobs.

Minnesota agriculture commissioner Jim Nichols said part of the problem could be solved if the federal Farmers Home Administration would release about $1.5 billion in unallocated loan funds. FmHA chief Charles Shuman had said at the summit earlier that he agency had only $200 million to loan to farmers each year. Somewhere there is a descrepancy.

July's National Governor's Association meeting in Tennessee might help other states' governors realize the farmer's plight. Having the meeting might help spawn ideas of how to solve the farmer's problems.

But solutions don't always come from the outside. Nebraska should start with Nebraska. Kerrey doesn't need to call a special session of the Legislature to figure out property tax rates. He needs to call one for the future of the farmers and the state they live in.



Oh, to live in a world where nothing — not even winning — is worth dying for

Ellen Goodman

What a luxurious feeling. An epidemic of goose bumps spread from the beaches of Normandy to the beaches of California. Words came out of mothballs like World War II planes and crisscrossed the skies of 1984: Heroism, sacrifice, valor.

Most Americans, born after D-Day, got at least a hint of a far-gone time when fighting was unequivocably the right thing to do. We relived a conflict that was without ambiguity, without doubts or dissension. A time when Americans were the good guys.

Forty years ago, Reagan had been billeted on a movie lot in Culver City. But last week, he got a chance to play a starring role in this D-Day extravaganza and he did it brilliantly. This was, after all, The War, imprinted in his political memory as a conflict between white hats and black hats, a moral struggle against evil. It's The War he regards as the rule of combat, rather than the exception.

On a windy bluff, Reagan gave a speech that sounded like the speech many would like to give him. "The men of Normandy had faith that what they were doing was right . . " he said. "There is a profound moral difference between the use of force for liberation and the use for force for conquest. They were here to liberate, not to conquer, and so they did not doubt their cause."

Even now, as the goose bumps subside and the beach at Normandy empties, I remember another line he dedicated to the men who threw their grappling hooks over the top of cliffs, "They knew some things are worth dying for . . . ."

This was, oddly enough, a phrase that I read elsewhere last week, written by a veteran of another war, another generation. John Wheeler, a graduate of West Point, veteran of Vietnam, coordinator of the Vietnam Memorial, an earnest man with a sense of mission, had used it as a central theme in his book about the Vietnam generation, "Touched with Fire."

In an attempt to be peacemaker between internal enemies — veterans and demonstrators, green berets and white armbands — Wheeler struggled for an ethical posture that left room for war. "When war protesters say, 'No more Vietnams!' they mean, "I wish we lived in a world where nothing is worth dying for!' " he wrote. "But the witness of a billion souls, from the South China Sea to Cape Cod to the Gulag, is that there are things worth dying for . . . ."

I agreed with Reagan that the men who hit the beaches of Normandy knew that there was something worth dying for. I know, as Wheeler does, the convictions, and courage, of those billion souls.

But creature of my times, I also thought that it's a rare war in which one side holds all the moral turf. Creature of my times, I questioned the "something" for which Iran and Iraq killed and died last week, the "something" that sent Sikhs and Indian army regulars into combat, that made Zulus struggle in clan warfare. There are more soldiers and more civilians who have died for the kind of "causes" Dr. Seuss creates — battles between those who butter their bread rightside up and upside down — than the causes our leaders fantasize.

In the midst of this World War II reminiscing, I thought about what nuclear weapons have done to the conceit of the ideal warriors. The D-Day we memorialize was the last full-scale, no-holds-barred assault launched before nuclear weapons. There are no such celebrations for the victory over Japan. It is no longer possible for nuclear nations to "risk everything," send forth their whole armadas, without the certainty of destroying what they want to protect.

We go into conflicts now — Korea, Vietnam — holding back our commitment. The definition "winning" has changed as much as the definition of glory. A full-scale war in the '80s would be one of computer-to-computer combat, push-button bravery, and mutual annihilation.

Our leaders are slow to understand how much has been changed by nuclear weapons. This D-Day, our own secretary of defense warns against those "fainthearted and siren calls" to cut the war budget. Our President is more comfortable walking the old beaches than sitting at the negotiating tables. One of the best of the Vietnam generation, John Wheeler, concludes tortuously that "somewhere inside masculinity is the idea that death is not the worst thing."

But our issue isn't whether there is something worth dying for, but whether there is anything worth extinction. Fueling our deep nostalgia on the beaches of Normandy was the certainty that the good wars are all behind us.

Right to live, die belongs to individual

Jeff Goodwin

An article in the Los Angeles Times last week told the story of a 70-year-old man who has five fatal illnesses. He currently is hospitalized but has taken his doctors to court to force them to turn off his life support systems.

His doctors say, while none of the illnesses are immediately life threatening, if his medication and life support systems were cut off the man would die within a few hours.

An issue like this touches everyone because old age is something that is going to effect everyone. No one escapes it. It must be thought about.

This case, and others like it, raise the issue of the quality of life that the patient is leading. Is a life really worth living if it has to be sustained by a machine? What is the value of living if all you have to look forward to is the prospect of slowly wasting away until you're little more than a skeleton?

It could be argued (and people always do) that there's always hope and scientists could invent a cure any day.

Maybe so, but I'm not buying it. My grandmother died of cancer last year and the truth is I was glad —no, relieved — when she died because I knew that she had been in great pain. The last few weeks of her life she had stopped living and merely was existing. The only thing that kept her going as long as she did — five weeks — were painkilling drugs.

Nothing could have helped my grandmother. But many people — thanks to modern technology — can be kept alive for months and even years after most of their body has stopped running. Machines can keep a body alive even after the brain has ceased to function.

All of this presents a dilemma for the medical profession. They are sworn to save lives and stop suffering, yet, in the context of modern medicine, they may actually prolong the suffering of a patient by keeping the alive.

There is another part to this dilemma: money. Keeping someone hooked up to a life support system can cost thousands of dollars. And in many cases, insurance companies won't pay for the entire bill. A major illness or hospitalization can literally bankrupt a family. America is threatened with the specter of a health system that only the rich can afford.

So what is the solution? I don't know. One of the basic human rights should be to choose whether or not you want to live. No power should be able to determine that for a person.

But the medical community also has a duty to uphold life. The problem is caused when these two collide. Perhaps the solution lies in thinking more about the *quality* of life we want for our society and not so much in terms of *preserving* life.

In any case, it's something that people should think about more. Thinking about it forces the realization that there are no simple solutions. That in itself is the beginning of a solution.