

# Editorial

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## Math hysteria Panic of the year overrated

Last year's hysteria of choice was drugs. Not only were the social ramifications of drug abuse widely bemoaned, but the factual item that closed the case for making it a national disaster was its impact on the U.S. economy. "The business of America is business," so any and every problem is to be linked to America's failing international competitiveness if it's to be accorded true seriousness.

The fashionable hysteria this year is lamenting the low level of American students' mathematical achievement compared to foreign students' (usually limited to Oriental students). And, of course, declining math capabilities are "incontrovertibly" linked to America's declining international competitiveness.

Lynn Arthur Steen, a college math professor, recently made the case: "Because of its widespread utility in industrial, military and scientific applications, mathematics is a crucial indicator of future economic competitiveness."

Maybe and maybe not. The last big emphasis on math and engineering started in the late 1950s after the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, and the push extended through the '60s along with NASA's space buildup, ending with the Apollo program. Math was a downright patriotic subject.

When NASA successfully ended its push to the moon, thousands of individuals solidly imbued with math capabilities were thrown onto the private market. If there really were such an obvious link between having a labor force solidly schooled in higher math and economic productivity, one would expect that sometime over the last decade or so the fruit of the massive inflow would have made itself known. But even in spite of a plethora of technocrats

hanging about the board rooms of America, domestic productivity rates have continued to sag. Not exactly a comforting fact to the math hysterics.

The Orientals are always held up as exemplars of what a solid math program does for an economy. Steen found U.S. students to be much less versed in math skills than their Japanese and Chinese counterparts. Undoubtedly this constitutes conclusive proof of the hysteric's thesis. After all, we all know what an incredible industrial powerhouse China is.

And then there is our Japan fetish. Americans are always looking for the "one" crucial element explaining Japan's success story. Last week it was "factor z" in their industrial structure, this week it's math, next week it'll probably be their consumption of sushi (after all, fish is "brain food," isn't it?) Of course the thought that maybe the Japanese just work a lot harder than Americans is ignored — but then a new work ethic can't be mindlessly instilled by having the government throw billions of dollars at the problem.

The point is definitely not that math isn't an important and worthwhile subject. As a mental discipline and scientific tool it is obviously an "integral" part of any schooling scheme worthy of the title "education." But pseudo-statistics and leaps of economic logic hardly serve to bolster the case for a more rigorous math curriculum.

The key question that is ignored by the hysterics is whether U.S. businesses have enough people skilled in math to fill the need. If we do, then having janitors capable of doing double integrations or matrix multiplication probably won't do a whole lot for the economy.



## Night mares invade Contragate

In search of falafel, Ron encounters his worst fears

Continued from last week . . .

It's 2:30 a.m. in the emergency-care ward that, by day, doubles as a hearing room in the Contragate affair. There is the quiet gurgling of fluids entering and leaving the bodies of the witnesses. All is relatively silent. A nurse enters, checks a wall of monitors and computers, glances briefly at the patients and exits. Suddenly a blood-curdling scream emits from one of the beds. A red light flashes on one of the headboards.

Voice in the Darkness I: No! It can't be! Heaven preserve us!

Voice in the Darkness II: (sounds as if underwater) Quiet down, Ron, it's just that dream again!

(Sounds of a man wrestling with his bedsheets, whatever that sounds like.)

Voice in the Darkness II: Ron! Wake up, it's me, Casey . . .

Voice in the Darkness I: Bill, is that you?

Voice in the Darkness II: I'm here, sir.

Voice in the Darkness I: There's no place like home, there's no place like home . . .

(Four large nurses enter and the lights flick on.)

Nurse I: Ron, were you dreaming again?

Ron: Sorry, Nurse Gretch.

Nurse II: Was it that dream again?

Ron: It was the one where I had this craving for falafel in the middle of the night. I pressed a button and waited. About 20 minutes pass and I, uh, well,

they, the falafel guys, that is, come and they're Israeli agents. They want arms in exchange for falafel. I sell them a Third-World country and they still say it's not enough. I press the button again to get a different falafel place and a bunch of Iranians show up, but they've already eaten all their falafel. I push the button again and everything blows up. Like magic, Nurse Gretch! But nobody dies because it was all part of a sweeps' week miniseries.

### Charles Lieurance



All the people in Nebraska and the cast of "Green Acres" stand on the state border and take a bow. They begin to can-can. Bruce Springsteen is right in the middle. Finally this great spinning falafel comes out of the sky and Mario Cuomo gets out . . .

McFarlane: No! No! That was my dream exactly . . . Meds! I want meds! Stop these dreams, Nurse Gretch!

Schultz: Could we have a bedtime story, Nurse Gretch?

Ron: The one about eternal youth and the repeal of that awful amendment that says a perfectly healthy, distinguished gentleman can't be president more than two terms?

Nurse Gretch: You have a busy day at

the hearing tomorrow. I think you should try and get some sleep.

Ron: But the falafel dreams! The cast of "Green Acres," it all seemed so real. I'll never be able to sleep after that. Mr. Haney seemed so real he could have bit me!

Nurse Gretch: I take it you want sleeping medicine.

Ron, Bill, George, et al.: Sleeping medicine! Sleeping medicine!

Nurse Gretch: No medicine. The Senate vetoed any of you getting any more medication until this hearing is finished. They want some answers. Clear answers.

(Group moan.)  
Gretch exits with the other nurses and the lights go off.

(Ten minutes of silence. Then the red light goes on over Casey's bed and there is much screaming. Soon all the red lights are on.)

Ron, Bill, George, et al: No! No! (Nurse Gretch rushes in.)

Gretch: What is it now?

Casey: Mr. Haney was a Soviet agent and he arrested Mr. Douglas for kicking his tractor . . . Ron ordered falafel again and . . .

Ron: This time Gary Hart delivered and . . .

McFarlane: The falafel was shaped like Elliott Abrams . . .

Gretch: (Shrieks) OK, nurses, bring in the sleeping pills!

Lieurance is an English, philosophy and art major and a Daily Nebraskan senior reporter.

## Letters

### 'Amerika' promotes American ideals

Perhaps Charles Lieurance (DN, Feb. 18) was right in thinking that "Amerika" is predictable, but if that is all he is getting from this miniseries, he missed the boat.

"Amerika" is not anti-Soviet, it is pro-American. This series is asking you to take a look at yourself and answer the question, "Are you really an American?" Sure, you live here, but are you doing all you can to be part of what America stands for? People who don't exercise their right to vote aren't. And many points like that are brought out in this miniseries. One of the messages "Amerika" has is that each of us must exercise our rights or they may be taken away from us.

The oppression and desperation of the people in "Amerika" are things experienced every day by people in war-torn or occupied countries. We don't find these things particularly pleasant to watch on TV when we see what it could be like for us. Can we still ignore the injustices other people endure when we see ourselves in their place?

Although the miniseries "Amerika" may not have any "new" material, allow yourself to ponder the messages it has. If you are like me, it may scare you into becoming a more responsible American citizen.

Julie Powers  
graduate student  
agronomy

### Professor explains Koefoot's actions

I am writing to comment on the Daily Nebraskan editorial of Feb. 17 concerning Regent Dr. Robert Koefoot's proposal to close several NU colleges.

First, the gratuitous reference to his fighting expulsion from the medical society without any explanation at all was uncalled for. Koefoot has been accused of practicing surgery in rural

areas and turning over routine post-operative care to — horror of horrors — local physicians. The Academy of Surgeons, while it does many good things, is a cartel. While its regulations are always cloaked in the guise of quality of care, they are many times designed

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## Democratic domestic generosity to be paid in sky-high taxes

The euphoria that has overtaken the Democrats since November, when they captured the Senate and the Iran/contras controversy began to unfold, appears to be cresting in a conviction that liberalism is about to make a comeback. That, at any rate, was the recent conclusion of Mayor Joseph Riley of Charleston, S.C., president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. "The continued assault on American domestic policy has ended," he announced happily at the organization's annual midwinter meeting. "Our programs and our needs and the needs of our cities are not going to be slashed any further." He predicted that mayors would now be able to go on the offensive for the first time since Reagan became president, demanding more funds for their ever-needy burghs.

state chairmen and the party's national executive committee, Texas Commissioner of Agriculture Jim Hightower — a red-hot liberal who never really cooled off — went even further. Hightower denounced the bankers and the "robber

Hightower was surrounded by state party officials requesting a transcript of his remarks and inviting him to speak in their states."

Of course, all this generosity to the voters will have to be paid for with higher taxes — a point that is traditionally ignored in Democratic campaign oratory. But shucks, you can't play poker without a few chips, can you? The Democrats' strategy is obvious: Raise taxes sky-high, on the pretext that this is necessary to reduce that dreadful federal deficit, then earmark about 10 percent of the proceeds for debt reduction and spend the other 90 on "benefits." In Harry Hopkins' immortal words, "Tax and tax, spend and spend, elect and elect."

### William A. Rusher



barons" of big business, and called for more federal spending to help farmers, college students, the unemployed and low-income Americans.

The assembled high Democrats loved it. According to one reporter, "Mr.

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