

# A portable phone? C'mon!

*Life was easier when people wrote letters, columnist says*

A man named Kent, who works for Motorola, was nice enough to send me a note about one of their space-age products.

"You know the importance of dead-lines," Kent said, "and the importance of being able to be in immediate contact with people and they with you."

"Consider a Motorola factory direct mobile or portable cellular telephone (or a combination of the two)."

"Do you carry a pager? Why, when you can easily carry a phone?"

"Take it to work, to play, to lunch and still keep up with your customers, your suppliers, your life."

And he invited me to phone him so we could talk at greater length about this wondrous device.

I have to admit that I am a wondrous-device freak. I have a wristwatch that is combination calculator, data bank, stopwatch and alarm clock. I have an electronic gizmo that tells me if there is a fish under my boat. I have a car with buttons that tell me how long I've been gone and when I can expect to get where I'm going and when I'll get back. I have a personal computer that has a button I hit to find out if I have any money left after buying so many wondrous devices.

However, I'm not going to call Kent from Motorola, because if there is one wondrous device I don't want, it is a portable telephone.

Sure, I know the importance, as Kent said, "of being able to be in immediate contact with people and they with you."

But I know something of greater importance — being able to hide from people. And to do that, you must maintain a safe distance from telephones.

I hate telephones. I have one in my office only because it's necessary for my work. I have one at home only because I can't order out for pizza without it.

Life was better before telephones

became common. Back then, if someone nuisance wanted to say something stupid to you, he had to sit down and write a letter or get on a streetcar and ride several miles to your home.

This took considerable effort. And there were defenses. Even today, if someone rings my doorbell, I can peek through a hole in the door and see who it is. If it's someone I don't want to talk to — which would include about 99 percent of the human race — I just remain silent and eventually the intruder goes away. He might ring the bell one more time, but that's about it.

But now, because of the telephone, all he has to do is hit seven numbers

being able to make immediate contact.

You are sitting in a bar after work, rewarding your frayed nerves for having earned another day's pay.

Suddenly your portable phone rings. You answer it and the familiar voice says: "I was about to put dinner on. Are you on the expressway?"

"Yes, yes, that's where I am, on the expressway, but traffic is terrible. Must be a big accident up ahead."

"What's that noise?"

"All those voices. I thought I heard someone shout 'bartender, another round.'"

"Oh, that? Yes, traffic is so jammed up that drivers are leaning out of windows and shouting things like 'we better go around.'"

"I hear a juke box."

"That's my car radio."

"Turn it down."

"I can't, it's jammed."

"Are you really on the expressway?"

"I can't hear you, we have a bad connection."

"You aren't on the expressway."

"Hello, hello, I can't hear you. Good-bye."

Life is so less complicated, relationships are so much more stable, if the bartender answers his phone and simply says: "No, he ain't been in this year."

So I wish Motorola or someone would invent the kind of phone I've been yearning for.

It would work this way. It would have a little screen on it. And after one ring, the screen would show the name of the person making the call. It would also have a button. And when I pressed the button, the caller's phone would emit an ear-shattering obscenity.

Call me, Kent, when you put that on the market. Better yet, drop me a brief postcard.

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Royko is a Pulitzer prize-winning columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

## Mike Royko



and he can come crashing into your life. He can keep ringing dozens of times. Or call back every five minutes.

The only defense is that truly humane device — the recorded message machine. Naturally, I own one. And I don't care who knows it — when my voice says: "Hi, I'm not in now . . ." I'm lying. I'm probably there, but I don't want to talk to you. If I did, I'd have called you in the first place.

That's the kind of message I wanted to put on when I first got the answering machine: "I'm right here, but I don't want to talk to you. And please don't leave a message. Send a brief postcard." But my wife wouldn't let me, the wimpette.

And Kent from Motorola wants to make a phone my constant companion?

Consider just one terrible consequence of owning a portable telephone and people knowing your number and

photographic memory, and I simply cannot recall with confidence whether what I am writing is or isn't original." The trustees, duly impressed, kept the president on.

Such a happy-ending story was briefly available to Sen. Joseph Biden, but then came his fateful encounter with "Frank," the legendary figure who asked him last April quite innocently where Biden had attended law school and how well had he done. Biden greeted this rather innocent query with a vituperative kick in the groin ("I think I have a much higher IQ than you do") and proceeded to describe an academic career

## William F. Buckley Jr.



that would have made Erasmus proud. And . . . of course, it turned out not to be so.

It is somewhere recorded that at age 13, when asked what he wished to be when grown, Joseph Biden responded, "Orator." That exactly is what he grew up to be. But he should have taken his gift to the stage rather than to the Senate, where it is expected that the senators will acknowledge whose words they are using, except when those words are their ghosts'. The crowning difficulty came when it was suspected not only that Biden was using other people's words, but other people's personae. He became Robert Kennedy, Neil Kinnock and Hubert Humphrey, but now finds himself in their company only in that all four of them can claim to have passed unpleasantly from the political scene.

Biden was one of the majority who voted to introduce television to Senate proceedings. Witnessing last week the philistine rage at the expense of Robert Bork, one knew that the tormentors were (for the most part) camera-orient-

ted, mulcting every dormant passion in America, declining only to denounce Bork as an enemy of the redwood tree. It is perhaps for that reason a nice poetical coincidence that a little television camera was grinding away when Biden was explaining to "Frank" what he and Sir Isaac Newton had in common. Attention suddenly turned to the question: Who supplied the press with a copy of the C-SPAN tape? The statistical probability is that it would have disappeared with the rest of the day's detritus.

Robert Bork needs to live with essays written in 1971. He has coexisted with such over a long period and is no more disdained for the evolution of his thought than Rubinstein for the difference in the way he handled Chopin 15 years after he began. But Joseph Biden came face to face with material only a month old, and it proved mortal; in his case, suicide. In the matter of Bork, Biden plans homicide.

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## Editorial Policy

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## The tale of plagiarist Malott

# Biden's historical counterpart

Sen. Joseph Biden may take consolation from the story of another plagiarist, as related to me 30 years ago by the late screen actor Adolphe Menjou.

The spiffily dressed, urbane actor, best suited for roles either as urbane blueblood or as urbane blueblood's urbane butler, was a gentleman of considerable learning who attended Cornell University.

The crisis arose when Dean Malott was inaugurated as president of Cornell in 1951. A few weeks later, The New Yorker magazine ran one of its devastating "Funny Coincidence Department" pieces. In the left-hand column, it reprinted a few hundred words from President Malott's inaugural address. On the right, a few hundred words from an essay published in the 19th century by an obscure British scholar. The left-hand column and the right-hand column were for all intents and purposes identical, and quickly Cornell became the laughingstock coast-to-coast.

"The board of trustees called an emergency meeting to fire Malott," Menjou related. "And when they walked into the administration building, Malott said he had one request: He wanted the board to meet in his private study instead of in the cabinet room. They said OK."

"Then he turned and said, 'That wall of books over there is books I haven't read but hope to get around to reading. That wall over there' — he pointed to the left of the room — 'is for books I have read.'"

Then, Menjou said, Malott asked the chairman of the board kindly to pick up some of the books from the shelves on the left. The chairman did so.

"Now please pick out a book — any book — open it, and read from it."

The board chairman dumbly did so, and began reading.

"Stop!" Malott said. And then, I kid you not, my dear Bill, the president proceeded to recite word for word the ensuing three paragraphs. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'You see my problem, gentlemen. I have a

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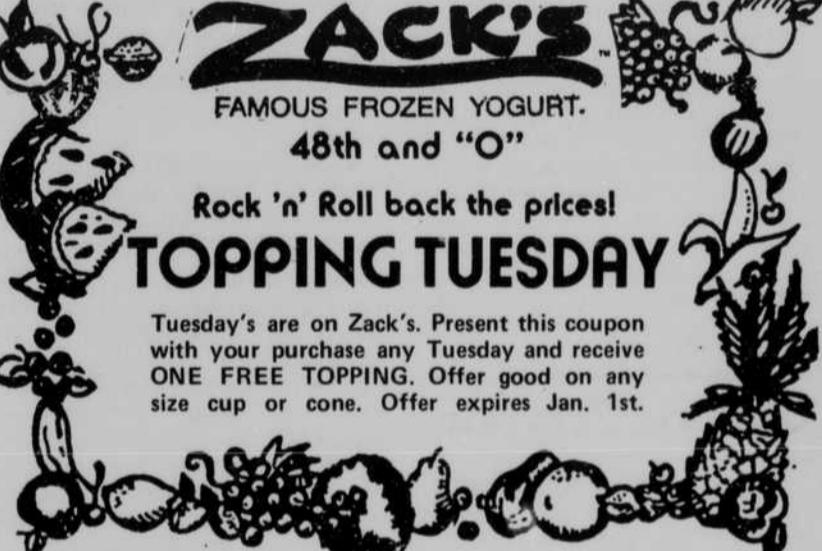
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