A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

THE PREENING OF THE PRESS. We are willing to allow that freedom of the press is a foundation stone of democracy. No, we go further than allowing; we affirm, assert, and rigorously defend the proposition. But the proposition is made less plausible by the frequently self-serving and self-righteous antics of its proponents. Chief among its proponents is of course the New York Times. Those advocate great principles have no obligation to exemplify their exhortations. True, the Times staff has a little in-house newsletter that presumably chronicles its sins, usually limiting itself to grammatical peccadillos. But the more grievous offenses deserve more public display in its columns. Two recent but by no means atypical instances come to mind.

You will remember that a few months ago the nonaligned, so to speak, nations met in Havana. There and shortly after at the U.N. the debate was over recognizing the new Vietnamese puppet regime in Cambodia or the old and at least equally odious Pol Pot regime. Representatives of the Pol Pot group claimed that their resistance forces still controlled as much as a quarter of Cambodian territory. Representatives of the Pol Pot group claimed that their resistance forces still controlled as much as a quarter of Cambodian territory. Times news columns consistently pooh-poohed the Pol Pot claims as outrageously exaggerated. Then, on September 26, we read in a dispatch by the truly distinguished reporter Henry Kamm (writing not from Turtle Bay but from Indochina): "The Pol Pot forces are thought to contest actively from 80 to 90 percent of Cambodia's area. They control parts of the civilian population and food supplies in a country where, one knowledgeable source said today, 'massive starvation' is a general condition." Nowhere in the Times appeared any apology for earlier misstatements, any effort to reconcile the conflicting accounts. Contradictions notwithstanding, the news must go on.

The second instance has to do with the Reverend Jesse Jackson's visit to the Middle East. On October 4, in accord with its assault on all things connected with Jimmy Carter, the Times reported that the president had personally tried to persuade Begin and other Israeli officials to receive Jackson. Later, on October 8, there was a story about an Israeli spokesman's insistence that Carter had not "directly or indirectly" done any such thing. After stating the denial, the news story continued: "It was not clear that a request from Mr. Carter would have made much difference" (since the Israelis had already decided that Jackson had made up his mind in a hostile manner). Did Carter intervene or didn't he? The cavalier answer of the Times is that apparently he didn't, but, even if he did, he was, as usual, inefficient. The handling of the story not only demonstrates an indifference to the facts of the case but along the way manages to get in two swipes against Carter.

As we say, the freedom of the press relentlessly to pursue the truth is essential to democracy, and so forth. We would be more encouraged were the premier proponent of that freedom to manifest more concern for integrity.

THAT PARTISAN POPE. In recent years "liberation theology" has been strong in insisting upon the need for a "partisan Church." That is, the Church is not aloof from the human struggle but must "get on the right side" of the revolution. To the extent this approach would make the Church's witness captive to narrow causes, it has been generally resisted and was strongly criticized by Pope John Paul II in Puebla, Mexico, earlier this year. John Paul is second to none, however, in insisting that the Church is and must be critically engaged in the movements of history. It therefore comes as something of a surprise that some convinced democrats thought John Paul trimmed his sails during his recent American visit, assiduously giving a "balanced" picture of the evils of communism and Western consumerism, as though the horrors were somehow equivalent. It seemed evident to us that John Paul was appropriately partisan in his expressions of sympathy for the so-
cial and political alternative represented, however inadequately, by the U.S. If he ever visits Moscow, one cannot imagine him saying anything about that socio-political system comparable to what he said repeatedly about America. In Philadelphia, after quoting the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence: "These are the sound moral principles formulated by your Founding Fathers and enshrined forever in your history. In the human and civil values that are contained in the spirit of this declaration there are easily recognized strong connections with basic religious and Christian values." Or at Battery Park in New York: "On this spot I wish to pay homage to this noble trait of America and its people: its desire to be free, its determination to preserve freedom and its willingness to share this freedom with others. May the ideal of liberty, of freedom, remain a moving force for young nations and for your nation and for all the nations in the world today!" Most particularly, we would refer those who say they were disappointed to the pope's closely reasoned statement at the U.N. There he unequivocally challenged Marxist dogma and every theory of Left or Right that denies that the "spiritual life" has priority over the economic. He asserted that the right to determine one's belief and to confess it publicly is a constituent element of peace and prosperity, in the absence of which all other securities are spurious.

It is not too much to say that never before in American history had so many people heard the clear statement of the Christian message as during "the week of the pope." Nor is it an exaggeration to say that seldom has the basic argument for a free society been so lucidly expounded. True, he did not say "God bless America" in a way that would bless a holy war against totalitarianism. That would have contradicted his own argument that all social systems, even the best, must be kept under critical judgment. But for those who are willing to work through his logic, especially in the U.N. speech, he did spell out the premises for renewed commitment to a world order respectful of the infinite dignity of the human person.

Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.