

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Our sophisticated modern society approaches problems of great magnitude quite differently from the way people did thirty or forty years ago.

Back then, and for many years before then, an apparent need was like a vacuum. And, a vacuum being something nature abhors, the rush to fill the need was almost a stampede.

In the early days of World War II word went out across the land there was a shortage of copper, brass and other metals. In every community scrap metal drives sprang up overnight.

People brought piles of pots, heaps of pans, and contributed large quantities of metal to the drives. Everything from antique copper wash boilers and old automobile engines to the metal rims of wagon wheels ended up in the scrap drive.

Anything made of metal that wasn't in constant use, anything made of metal that could be spared, went to help win the war.

In recent years cynics deride the drives as no more than public relations gimmicks to stir people up and involve them emotionally with a fervor and feeling of participation.

Maybe that's all it was, I don't know. I do know people did everything they could, everything they thought might help the G.I.s doing the fighting. Many families were affected in important ways by the war; others were changed in smaller ways; no citizens, young or old, went untouched. Each was expected to do his own part.

Highway speed limits were reduced to 45 MPH to save gasoline needed by the armed forces and to save rubber tires. Rubber was the only material then in use to produce tires; it was all imported to this country from Asia; our sources were cut off by hostilities in the Pacific.

Meat, sugar and butter were rationed; the soldiers needed them. Two pairs of shoes a year were rationed out to each civilian. Sailors and soldiers needed the production of the shoe factories. No one asked what those servicemen had worn on their feet before they donned uniforms.

Prices, wages, rents — all were frozen. Not controlled. Frozen. No one questioned. If that's what was needed to win, that's what would be done.

Wherever a need appeared, any number of people flew around to fill it. When we needed ships to carry material and supplies overseas to our soldiers, sailors and marines stationed in outlandish parts of the globe, we built Liberty Ships in record time.

Overnight, private pleasure craft became Coast Guard boats; ocean liners became troop transports; aircraft was designed and started rolling off assembly lines faster than the enemy shot our planes out of the sky. Practically over the weekend, Detroit retooled to build jeeps, trucks and tanks. No cars at all were produced for the civilian public.

That's how Americans responded to a need thirty years ago. Whether the need was real, the call sincere, or the response naive isn't the point. The point is, the response was unified and immediate and effective.

Today the need isn't as pressing, perhaps, because we're not under direct and open attack by enemy forces. We're in just as much danger as though we were, of course, for once our dwindling supply of vital materials is exhausted, we'll be the victim of whatever "hold-up" our less profligate suppliers may wish to impose, exactly as the Arabs now have us over a

barrel with oil.

It seems to me the natural response to the oil crisis would be a rush to fill the energy resource vacuum. It seems to me the natural leaders would be the industrialists since they're already organized to research, develop and distribute similar products.

Not so. Not so at all. Today we do it differently.

The New England Council for Economic Development has recently submitted to the federal Energy Research and Development Administration its Proposal for a Solar Energy Research Institute.

The Institute, if the proposal is accepted by ERDA, will begin its work in January, 1977, and will study possible solar and geothermal energy development. Presumably, if the proposal to fund the Institute gets through Congress, and if the Institute comes up with some good ideas for ways to use the sun to generate power which, in turn, can be converted to various uses in our society, then — and only then — will industry get into the picture.

I know I'm just naturally impatient, but if there were a longer, more complicated possible route to go from Point A to Point B, doubtless we'd now be taking it!

If Henry Ford and his contemporaries who launched the automobile, if Alexander Graham Bell and the telephone pioneers, if Cornelius Vanderbilt and other railroad tycoons were around today, they wouldn't believe it. If the industries that grew from their efforts had been forced through councils, required to draw up proposals to be submitted to government agencies for approval, needed to await federal funding before proceeding from dream to reality, I think we'd still be driving buggies, news would still pass by word of mouth and The West would still be wild and woolly frontier.

It's true, of course, people laughed at the first horseless carriages, made fun of the Wright brothers, and not everyone rushed to order telephones and radio when these newfangled gadgets first came on the market.

There were a few bugs in the early models and each year's new ones offered refinements and improvements designed to corral additional customers.

Possibly the modern approach is more efficient and will lead more rapidly to broad use of solar energy as a power source. Perhaps a reasoned and controlled transition from a coal, gas and oil-based economy will create less upheaval and trauma, politically and economically.

Routing the infant industry of solar energy through government channels from the start may pay dividends to the general public.

I don't believe it will, but I could be wrong.

I believe the most efficient method of developing solar energy is through competitive development by private industry.

If a dozen engineers formed a subsidiary to Mobil Oil and another group was subsidized by General Motors, and one by Westinghouse, and still others by other industry leaders, these groups, let loose to compete for solutions to the problem, would shortly come up with them.

I believe the American public would welcome the opportunity to invest in a new industry and see it as a chance to get in on the ground floor, that Americans believe in the system and will buy into it, given a chance and a reasonable promise of decent return.

Initiative has been drained off by government controls. Now we've relinquished our chances to create a new market for much-needed sources of power, and a new market for much-needed investment dollars to put new life into our economy.

The newfangled way of going about the business of business is certainly confusing.