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DAVID NYHAN

Competing with Japan

Here is the United States, says William Norris, the 75-year-old computer pioneer, and there is Japan: "We got their engine started; they improved it; and they went right by us. It's very unfair. They learned from us, tremendously; we have not learned from them."

Norris, now retired as chairman of \$5-billion-a-year Control Data Corp., is one of the most outspoken businessmen in the country in the area of corporate responsibility.

Just back from Japan, he's on a mission to alert Americans about the threat posed by the cohesive, non-confrontational society whipped together by Japan Inc.

One of our biggest problems is "the very high degree of technical illiteracy in our country - politicians, economists, just about everybody. They don't understand that most jobs come from innovation." Norris says Congress is way behind the governors and state legislators when it comes to paving the way for innovative businesses and job creation.

"The state-level people are down there where the hurt is."

Though Norris is not a Roman Catholic, he holds firmly that the recent pastoral letter on the economy issued by the US Roman Catholic bishops makes the best argument yet for an integrated approach to economic reform in the nation.

"That's the only sector of the society that's really showing any leadership. The corporations are worried about raiders. The unions are looking for a role. The educators are looking inward. The nonprofit [organizations] are not there. I think the leadership could come from the church."

In what areas? "Ethical and moral precepts, practical jobless programs, community-based development, new directions for agriculture, new ideas for developing countries."

Norris is convinced that "somehow we've got to pull together our society" to compete in the world economic environment.

"The Japanese do it from the top down, not through their politicians, but through their bureaucrats. We've got to do it from the bottom up, that's our strength."

He warms to a subject dear to his heart: small business. "The Japanese don't have small business

like we do. Our country has to make technical advice and seed money and new technology more readily available to small business, create nurturing in which small business can grow and create jobs."

Lest Norris sound like just another business tubthumper, he's got the right credentials. In Minnesota, he's revered the way Edwin Land, An Wang and Kenneth Olsen are here.

He's developed a litany of laments about our educational system. Japan graduates 40 percent of its college students as engineers and scientists; here, it's 7 percent. Japanese students come here, get educated, go home, and build products that take our markets. We don't sell nearly enough to Japan.

He doesn't hold out much hope for improvement under the Reagan administration: "Ronald Reagan is a simplistic person when it comes to economics."

Norris, despite some catcalls from the computer wiseacres, hews to the conviction that Control Data's best long-haul bet is to stay with PLATO, the computer network of programmed learning and educational testing that he feels will revolutionize the way people learn.

"If I have a top priority, that's it. Our schools are very labor intensive. Costs keep going up. Productivity is declining - I guess, because no one ever measures it. PLATO can free the teacher from testing and scoring.

"People can learn at their own pace. Knowledge is delivered very effectively. The tool of simulation can do things an individual teacher would take too long to do. Slow learners, or those with handicaps, don't fall behind, they learn at their own pace, so they don't get discouraged."

So why has the teaching profession been so slow to embrace this brave new world of technology? "College professors simply don't want to change the way they teach. There's some improvement in grades K-through-12. But there is no other answer. We can't afford the current methods. There's too much new knowledge for teachers to master. We have to move faster."

David Nyhan is a member of the Globe staff.



Globe file photo

WILLIAM NORRIS



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