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*In this period of reflection, it would be good to re-evaluate America's consumption of the world's resources, starting here on campus./2*

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## U.S. Consumption Deserves Reappraisal

By DAVID A. CLEVELAND

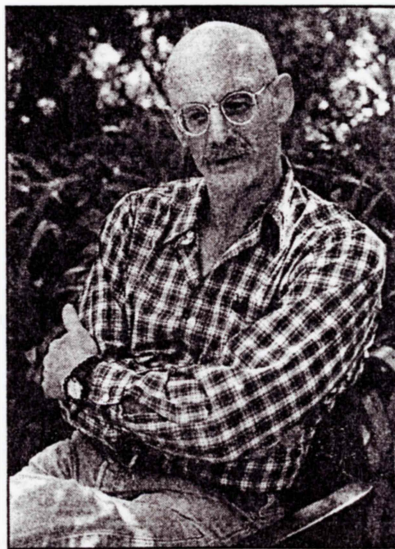
IN RESPONSE TO the tragedy of September 11 many political leaders have told us that American freedom and standard of living have been attacked, and that we should resume our usual high rates of consumption as a patriotic act. This response conflates the great American ideals of equality and of physical, religious, and intellectual freedom, admired throughout the world, with the ability to consume more resources.

An important point has generally been overlooked—that the freedom to consume *less* may be more important than the freedom to consume *more*. However, by mistakenly equating consuming more with our national identity and future well-being, our freedom to consume less may be compromised.

Why is discussing this alternative viewpoint so important now? First, there is increasing scientific evidence that our consumption of natural resources is approaching or has exceeded the limits of sustainability, both in terms of the limits of supply and limits to absorbing the pollution that consumption creates. In addition, the world's population of 6 billion is likely to double before leveling out later this century.

Secondly, the global inequity of consumption and pollution is high and increasing. For example, the United States, with 4 percent of the world's population, accounts for 22 percent of world energy consumption. Its per capita consumption is 14 times greater, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions rate 18 times greater, than the low-income countries with 41 percent of the world's population. The richest 10 percent of

### POINTS OF VIEW



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*'Our consumption of natural resources is approaching or has exceeded the limits of sustainability.'*

Americans (25 million people) have an income greater than the poorest 43 percent of the world's people (2 billion).

Thirdly, drawing boundaries in a highly globalized world is more and more difficult because actions in one place have effects—economic, biophysical, sociocultural—everywhere, and into the future. These points suggest we Americans need to discuss the proposition that for us consuming less may be a better way to ensure

our future well-being, and to improve our image and relations internationally, than consuming more.

We need to consider to what extent our "life style" depends on access to resources, waste facilities, and cheap labor in other places. Does this dependence compromise not only our own future, but the possibility of equality and freedom in other countries, contributing to the creation of people with nothing left to lose?

We could begin discussing such questions as how to decrease our dependence on car-based transportation. How can we positively affect the health of the environment and society in our choice of products and services, such as campus landscaping and financial investments? How can we adequately serve the educational needs of California without large increases in physical growth? When we do grow, how can we optimize environmental and social effects? How can we guard our freedom as a public university to evaluate the lower consumption alternative in our teaching and in our research?

American culture is tremendously popular around the world, including in the Moslem world. Could we use this influence to set an example that freedom can include the freedom to consume less, the freedom to treat the Earth more gently, the freedom to share more equitably? If successful, it might lead to more freedom to wage peace.

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