Opinion
Culture



by Thomas C. Fox

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I write today from a fourth floor room at NCR's midtown headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, the very room where I gathered 50 years ago with Robert Hoyt and his fledgling staff. I had just returned from two years in Vietnam, working with war victims and beginning my journalism career as NCR's "Vietnam correspondent." My purpose then was to "debrief" the NCR staff after witnessing the brutal war close-up as a volunteer with International Voluntary Services. (That debriefing ended up in the July 24, 1968, issue beneath the headline "Tom Fox Sums Up: How war — and the way we fight it — destroys a people.")

My purpose now, emerging out of a three-year retirement, is to lead the company, focusing on successfully completing a much-needed $10 million endowment campaign. It's embarrassingly called "The Tom Fox Fund to Sustain Independent Catholic Journalism." (Note: All funds go to endowing NCR editorial work.)

Five decades back, a younger version of Fox saw the world very much in disarray. The Vietnam War was at a high point. The Tet Offensive had turned Vietnam on its head, ripping away a pretense the war was being won. A total of 16,592 U.S. soldiers perished in Vietnam in 1968; tens of thousands more Vietnamese were killed;

hundreds of thousands more lost their homes and livelihoods. Our nation was bitterly divided. Family members wouldn't speak to each other because of political differences. Turmoil grew in the wakes of Martin Luther King Jr.'s and Robert Kennedy's deaths. Days of rioting were breaking out in Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit and elsewhere.

These many years later, an older version of Fox looks out at the world and sees similar divisiveness and disarray. Who could have imagined a morally rudderless, compulsive liar as president? A U.N. climate reports gives the planet 10 years to seriously curb carbon emissions, lest we enter into a catastrophic and likely unstoppable heating. Government institutions — courts, Congress, justice, state — appear buckling under the pressure of big money and demagoguery. Mindlessly, we're on a course to build a new generation of nuclear weapons, the very weapons the U.S. bishops boldly condemned 35 years ago.

Much has changed; much seems to remain constant — at the top of the list human fallibility. What has also remained constant is NCR's independent Catholic reporting of the church and wider world. NCR has kept to its mission through these many years: professional reporting, edgy opinion, a relentless advocacy for the marginalized, holding authority accountable. These have been consistent NCR traits through years of staff changes.

My latest return — as CEO — is traceable to Caitlin Hendel's resignation last April. That move touched off a job search, which ended unsuccessfully earlier this month when the top candidate took herself out of contention. This, in turn, moved the NCR board of directors to ask me back for an undesignated interim period until a new search can be initiated.

Having accepted the post as NCR CEO/President, I asked former NCR editor and more recently editor-at-large Tom Roberts (who in future issues will pen this column) to oversee all company editorial content with Dennis Coday working with and reporting to him. I'm sad to say this plan, collaborative in intent, moved Coday to resign earlier this month, writing in an email: "Given my removal as editor, I … do not see a way to continue with NCR."

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Coday, a tireless journalist, will be missed. I first hired him in 2003 when he was reporting for UCA News in Thailand. I appointed him editor in 2012. He oversaw the development of a number of processes, including several website redesigns, the eNCR version of the printed product, and Facebook Live events that aligned NCR's journalism with the digital age. He originated The Field Hospital project and NCR in Conversation, a regularly produced podcast.

Roberts, who served as NCR editor from 2000 to 2008, will remain the company's chief editor, at least through the successful completion of a search for a new CEO/executive editor. The NCR board of directors has yet to determine when that search will commence again.

Mirroring life itself, and a wider world facing serious challenges, just as it did 50 years back, NCR faces some uncertainty. However, beneath this is a consistent NCR commitment, extending back 54 years, to provide top-rate journalism and a much-needed moral voice in a world seemingly short on such voices.

For my sake, I feel blessed to have this opportunity to serve you, our readers, and to the degree possible, our church, helping to forge a way through the fog of these times. I recommit myself to this service, recognizing we are in this together, as we always have been, and that the church and world we want to pass on can be achieved if we continue to support each other.

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