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America and Taiwan: allies and friends

By John Gale

Taiwan is located half way around the world from Nebraska, but its links to Nebraska and the rest of the United States are powerful. I recently got a first-hand lesson on this when I visited Taiwan to attend the inauguration of its president. The trip brought into sharp focus a variety of issues that are a regular part of the daily news: globalism, foreign trade, the advance of democracy and international tensions.

I was part of a delegation from the National Association of Secretaries of State that represented our respective states at the May 20 inauguration of President Chen Shui-bian. (The Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office of Washington, D.C., paid our travel expenses.) President Chen was reelected in an extremely close election that saw over 80 percent of eligible voters turning out. The election required a recount and was subject to two court challenges. It reminded us of our own presidential election in 2000!

We spent almost a week visiting with government leaders discussing trade, education, election processes and electronic advances affecting government. We reflected upon our long-standing friendship as democratic people and as good trade partners. Meeting their president was a very great honor, and a tribute to that long friendship. Some 3,000 foreign dignitaries, including a congressional delegation representing our nation, gathered for the inauguration. I was honored to be a part of such an historic event.

Taiwan has been the sanctuary of the Republic of China since 1949, when the Nationalist government was defeated by the communist forces of Mao Tse-Tung and forced to retreat to this quiet island. Taiwan received widespread diplomatic recognition in the international community for a time, but this changed during the 1970s. Mainland China, known as the People's Republic of China, replaced Taiwan in 1971 as a member of the United Nations. Many nations ended their diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China during the 1970s, with the United States doing so at the end of 1978. (The United States and Taiwan have maintained an indirect, but transparent, working relationship through nonprofit, quasi-government entities.)

Despite this major diplomatic shift, Taiwan continued its own constitution, government, way of life and culture. It has been a risky status quo, preserved in large part by the U.S. government's strong support of Taiwan. The 23 million people of Taiwan are hard working, well educated and global in their outlook. They face each international crisis, usually related to mainland China, calmly with courage and resolve.

Nebraska has had a close sister state relationship with Taiwan for over 20 years. During that time, Taiwan has become one of Nebraska's best trade partners. The nature of the close relationship is illustrated by Taiwan's donation of \$10,000 to aid victims of the recent tornadoes in southeast Nebraska.

Taiwan has rapidly progressed from an agricultural country to a manufacturing country to a modern global trading country. It is known as the "Green Silicon Island" because of its highly sophisticated and modern computer technology industry. Having some \$150 billion of cash reserves, it has a strong and aggressive investment philosophy. The average personal income exceeds \$12,000 per year, an impressive figure for an emerging country.

Taiwan is the 15th largest trading nation in the world. Japan, South Korea, the United States, Latin America and, ironically, China are some of its best trade partners. In fact, some one million Taiwanese are living and doing business in China, despite the personal and business risks.

Maintaining its status in the world has been a challenge for Taiwan. International groups, such as the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization, have snubbed it. China has objected to Taiwan being an affiliate of the World Trade Organization and an observer to the World Health Organization. These challenges pose grave difficulties for Taiwan.

Taiwan was just tested on May 20, the day that President Chen was sworn in for his second term. One major issue was whether President Chen was running on the issue of independence from China and threatening the status quo of the one-China principle. (China regards Taiwan as a breakaway province.) China made many threats of military action if President Chen made any statements about independence in his inaugural address. Fortunately, President Chen walked a tight line and said the right things to preserve the status quo.

I came away impressed with the quality of democracy that is emerging in Taiwan; the wonderfully courteous and productive citizens we were privileged to meet; and the very modern, clean, beautiful and well-planned national capital of Taipei, a city of 2.7 million. I hope Nebraska will retain its close trade, educational and cultural relations with Taiwan. I hope the United States never waives in support of this ally of over 50 years.

We are witnessing the process of China absorbing Hong Kong, and the price paid by Hong Kong could be severe restrictions on the freedom and liberties of its people. While we seek closer trade, educational and cultural relations with China, the underlying state control of its people and their limited freedoms haven't changed yet.

The United States, through all presidents since Eisenhower, has stood firm on the commitment to support Taiwan. However, as the economic, trade and military power of mainland China grows,

this three-way relationship will require creative diplomacy and a mutual dedication to peace to adjust to changing times.

We want a world with free trade and economic growth for all peoples, but we also want democracy and individual liberties to be respected where they are emerging. It is the combination that will bring more world peace and cooperation. Let's be firm in our resolve as Americans and as Nebraskans to stand by our friends who share our values, and yet be open to the hope of peace and freedom in all nations with whom we trade.

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