

Poster

The Frying Pan To the Fire: Off the Walls

A Commentary

2/4/74

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Last Wednesday the President was on the tube bragging that he'd brought peace to our "burning and besieged" cities. By the weekend the National Guard had been called out in Pennsylvania and it began to appear the fighting had simply been transferred from the ghettos to the gas pumps.

Even conceding the full measure of credit he claims for bringing peace, the pattern of moving from crisis to crisis, established in the late '60s, continues. In fairness, you've got to say that by no means does all the fault lie with him. Nevertheless, the way Nixon runs his office deprives him of foresight and handicaps him in taking effective action when he does belatedly see a problem.

This executive incapacity would have been plainer to see if it hadn't been for Watergate, which is as much of a distraction to his critics as it is to him. Take the wheat deal. In a way he got off the hook because everybody assumed it be another crooked money-maker for his campaign contributors. But let's say it was an honest mistake. In that case neither Nixon nor Kissinger knew how badly the Russians were hurting for food.

Then the question arises, what do they know now? There is a considerable body of scientific opinion (see Fortune magazine for February: "Ominous Changes in the World's Weather" by Tom Alexander) that holds the planet has already undergone a basic shift in long-term weather behavior, and that, as a consequence, the relative abundance that we've had in the global food supply for the past 50 years is over. We won't know if these predictions are right until after the African famine spreads to India and is recognized as permanent, or until perpetual droughts hit Russia and China and the floods in the lower Mississippi basin become annual disasters.

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From the Frying

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But do Nixon, Kissinger and Butz know about these probabilities? Have they taken any precautionary steps? Judging from our hyper efforts to export every last soy bean, the answer is no.

As far as we can tell there is no plan, no study, no seeking of information, and no follow-through on closer-in future events that are certain to happen.

Food prices, we know, are going up, and as they do consumers will have less money to spend on other products, thus causing recession in other industries. The government response is to sell more food abroad; but then in housing, a terribly depressed, terribly over-priced industry, the administration is getting ready to pump in money before the prices drop, thus insuring

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more inflation but not necessarily more jobs and prosperity.

In energy, with the truckers already out on the expressways with shotguns, the Department of Transportation proposes to drive up the price of fuel and multiply our trouble, social and fiscal, by abandoning 61,000 miles of railroad tracks.

Instead of rationality, we have theatricality. Kissinger zooms into London and makes a famous speech urging cooperative endeavors on joint research and tactics for the oil-consuming countries. But nobody else in his government knows anything about it: no staff preparation, no follow-up. The result is that our European and Japanese friends wander off to make their own one-to-one private deals with the Arabs.

At home, in a spasm of ignorant showiness, the White house asks for Daylight Saving Time, and Congress, ever frightened and uninformed, votes it. Then we find out

it doesn't save electricity although it may kill children.

Luckily Congress' inherent inability to bite the bullet and make tough decisions saved it from approving the recklessly thrown-together emergency energy bill, although the Senate is still under the power of that legislative hysteric, Henry Jackson, who thinks ragging the baronial oil monopolists is progress.

Henry Kissinger once said of running the American government that, "The only way secrecy can be kept is to exclude from the making of the decision all those who are theoretically charged with carrying it out." That's how he and his boss do it, with the result that the Pentagon spies on the White House, which in turn thinks the proper conduct of government is a series of unthoughtout, uninformed, contradictory surprise announcements. It's enough to make a truck driver pick up a rock and throw it.