

## Inflation, Oil and the Press Conference

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At one point in his most recent conference, President Nixon declared: "As you know, we are going into a new set of tough controls on Sept. 13." A new set of tough controls? But no new controls at all are scheduled to go into effect on Sept. 13. Food price rules will in fact be loosened a little at that time to allow processors to pass more of their rising costs on to their customers. But nothing more. It appears that Mr. Nixon simply mispoke.

Presidents make mistakes like other people. Perhaps it is surprising only that, in the tension of news conferences, they do not make more. But this misstatement was followed by other remarks that had a peculiar ring to them, as though they meant either more or a good deal less than the President apparently intended. These examples all fell in the parts of the conference in which Mr. Nixon was dealing with the economy and energy. Most politicians, regardless of party, now consider inflation and the energy shortages to be the principle public concerns in this country. The question is whether Mr. Nixon is giving these subjects the same high priority his constituents do.

When he spoke of a possible fuel shortage this winter, Mr. Nixon cited seven administration proposals pending before Congress. His administration is working on energy policy, he said. "But essential to our success in meeting the energy needs for this winter, and particularly for the future, is congressional action." For the distant future, some of those bills are highly important. But for this winter, they will have no effect at all. They involve things like the Alaskan pipeline, which will take years to build, and ports for supertankers. Even if all this legislation were enacted tomorrow, it could not substantially improve our fuel resources until late in the decade.

Did Mr. Nixon know that? If he did, he made a particularly crude attempt to shift blame onto Congress for the coming shortages. It is hardly a useful way to enlist the cooperation of Congress on this legislation. But there is also the possibility that, among all the material his aides had been providing him, the President mislaid the point that the pending bills do not affect supplies over the coming winter. In contrast, the President was a good deal more precise when he spoke after his energy meeting at the White House yesterday. On that occasion a policy seemed to be emerging although, unfortunately, it is emerging chiefly at the expense of some states' air pollution standards.

At the press conference, the President was asked about the threats of several Arab governments to limit

oil exports. In the course of his reply, he said: "Oil without a market, as Mr. Mossadegh learned many, many years ago, doesn't do a country much good." It was hardly market forces that threw Mr. Mossadegh out of office as premier of Iran in 1953. After a bitter dispute over his nationalization of the British oil concessions, he fell in a coup ably and successfully supported by this country's Central Intelligence Agency. In the customary terms of presidential pronouncements, the reference to this incident might be interpreted as a manifest threat to other governments. In this case, there does not seem to be any reason to think Mr. Nixon intended a threat. But if he did not mean it as a threat, what was the point of bringing up that very sensitive bit of recent history? Perhaps there was no particular point.

A reporter asked Mr. Nixon when the current inflation might end. The correct answer is, of course, that nobody knows because the current inflation is unlike the others that we have experienced over the past generation. Mr. Nixon said as much, but he declined to let it go at that. "I'm afraid," he said, "I can't be any more perceptive than my economic advisers have been, and their guess with regard to—you know the numbers insofar as inflation this year have not been very good. I do not blame them, however, because as you know we had the problems of weather in the United States and abroad, an unprecedented demand abroad which was unforeseen as far as we were concerned. That gave the impetus to food prices. And there were other factors which led to the inflationary pressures which our economic advisers did not foresee . . ." That answer has a disquieting resemblance to Mr. Nixon's explanation of the Watergate affair: he has suffered from bad advice and bad information from those he trusted. There has not been a President since Warren Harding as eager to persuade the voters that he has been badly advised by his own men.

Whenever the press conference turned to the subjects of inflation and energy, the words were strangely imprecise. The answers do not bear the kind of close examination to which a president's words are usually subjected. That imprecision is not characteristic of Mr. Nixon and it can prove very troublesome to him. At a press conference, a president is addressing a public that includes some very sharp listeners. Among others he is speaking to his opposition in Congress, to foreign governments and most particularly to his own huge bureaucracy. The most recent conference gave no one much idea where the President now wants to go on questions that have come to worry Americans deeply.