

Mr. President,
Your Answers
Beg Questions

Printed
2/27/74
A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The boxes in the White House press rooms showed His Czarship, the Fuel Simon, having at the Shah of Iran for saying that if the Americans believe in the oil embargo they probably also put small portions of their inflating currency under their pillows for the tooth fairy. The reporters paid no attention. Nor did they ask themselves was it good news or bad news that traffic fatalities are dropping faster than new car sales.

In a few minutes they would be meeting Nixon at his first press conference in months. "He's only having it to show us snapping and snarling at him," someone said as another remarked that with Herbert Kalmbach's guilty plea to two minor infractions of the election law, yet another Watergater was getting off almost free. In exchange for the leniency the President's personal lawyer is supposed to be a witness against the more important principals, but there are doubts about that.

"They're going to let Nixon plead guilty to jay walking," said a television man, "in return for which he's promised to name higher ups."

A few minutes later Nixon faced us in the ballroom and 30 or 40 of our number were up and down in their seats trying to get him to call on them. Some of us, though, had no question, had nothing to ask and really didn't believe he had anything to say. He had said all that needed to be said to read him long ago, so now there was nothing left but to try and trap him if catching him up still amused anyone.

No, Mr. President, I didn't have my hand up. Well, do I have a question anyway? Only if you have an answer. Would you care to use this occasion, Mr. President, to announce the end of a war or an embargo.

Actually, Mr. President, what I'd like to know is what do you mean when you say, "Ambassadorships cannot be purchased?" Is this a ringing reaffirmation of leadership, like I am not a crook and I do not expect to be impeached, or are you being lawyerly and what you really mean is "There's no action on ambassadorships but on judges we'll deal."

"We are going through a downturn in the economy but not a recession," you say, but if there's a run on the banks and we're lining up in the streets for soup, are you going to slip out of it by claiming, "You didn't ask me anything about a depression, or I would have told you." Forget the future. The man told us there is a better than even chance that he won't ration gasoline because while we haven't solved the problem, we're over the crisis, and besides a price rollback would lead to shortages as opposed to what we have now and, anyhow, do you want 17,000 new federal bureaucrats messing with what you put in your tank?

In fact, there are already 2,000 new federal bureaucrats in his Czarship's Federal Energy Office, not roll-

Mr. President...

COMMENTARY, From B1

ing back prices, not rationing gasoline, not doing much of anything but causing motorists trouble and handing out pieces of paper on which things are written like "FOR FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1974 P.M. RELEASE . . . SIMON ANNOUNCES CREATION OF ENERGY CONSERVATION CORPS . . . WASHINGTON—William E. Simon, Administrator of the Federal Energy Office (FEO), today announced the formation of an Energy Conservation Corps (ECC) to enlist the aid of elementary and high school students in voluntary programs to save energy."

All this dynamism is centered in the rooms where the post masters general of the United States used to have their offices. The old red rug is still on the floor and in the wall niches of Simon's office there are silver, social realism statues of Eskimo postmen, flying postmen, postmen postmen, all that remains from the era when the mail did go through.

The people you meet at Simon's are very nice and modest without pretense about shaping the national destiny. "Listen, fella," one of them told me, "you can't fuel all the people all the time, so even though it's a little chic here to stay to 10, some still tend to leave early."

The last question at the press conference was a meany, designed to make Nixon squirm, not to elicit information. Did Mr. President think he'd paid his fair share of taxes? The guy who asked it had the tiniest little smirk on his face while Nixon sloshed through the answer.

All in all it was the best Nixon performance in months, and just as well, too. We can't lose him now. Without money, without gas, without fuel, hate'll keep us warm and running. Hate is so high octane, if Exxon can bottle it, Simon has already promised to let them raise the price 2 cents a gallon.

Copyright 1974 The Washington Post/King Features Syndicate