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*Past 10-1-74*

# Oil: Mr. Ford's Uncertain Trumpet

That usually amicable man, the gay and insouciant boulevardier from Michigan, Gerald Ford, has suddenly begun addressing the oil exporting nations in tones as severe as those used by King Arthur when chastising Guinevere in the nunnery at Almesbury.

Indeed, like the youth who bore "mid snow and ice, a banner with the strange device, Excelsior," the intrepid Mr. Ford recently popped up in Detroit, where he delivered a speech containing a word that I thought had been put in mothballs for the duration of the current generation of peace. The word was "war."

True, he used it obliquely, as bettis a man who has a Nobel Peace Prize winner as his Secretary of State. He said that the cartel of oil exporting nations has set "exorbitant" prices which could cause "the breakdown of world order and safety." And he added pregnantly: "Throughout history, nations have gone to war over natural advantages, such as water, food or convenient passages on land or sea."

Mr. Ford was trying to tell someone something, but who, and what? Con-

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cerning history, he is accurate. But he is not conducting a history seminar.

True, there was a time when the advanced nations issued decrees to the lesser breeds without the law, and the decrees were enforced with no more difficulty than the Kaiser experienced when telling Prussian postmen about a cut in their pay. Which is to say, there was a time when powerful nations regularly used force (with irregular success) against small nations that had an inconvenient notion of their own self-interest.

But times have changed, at home and abroad, and if it was not immediately obvious that Mr. Ford's talk was blatherskite, it was obvious shortly thereafter when Defense Secretary

James Schlesinger laconically said we "are not contemplating" war. Everyone knows we would not make war without an extended period of contemplation.

Because everyone knows that the United States has a velvet hand beneath its iron glove, Mr. Ford is trying to get the oil exporting nations to see the sweet reasonableness of a principle, which he phrases this way: "Sovereign nations cannot allow their policies to be dictated, or their fate decided, by artificial rigging and distortion of commodity prices."

But that is a principle that turns around and bites you on the ankle if you are President of a nation that does its level best to influence. We influ-

ence, other people rig and distort prices of meat and wheat and other commodities that some people need as much as we need oil.

Even more than I wonder what kind of rigging Mr. Ford thinks is not "artificial," I wonder this: Does Mr. Ford think that the oil exporting nations, all of whom fancy themselves sovereign nations, should allow the pricing and production of their sole commodity, and hence their fates, to be dictated by the oil importing nations?

By now the only thing that is clear is that our government is not clear in its own mind about what it can or should do about oil prices. Someone should send Mr. Ford a nice needlepoint pillow bearing Lord Curzon's golden rule of foreign policy: "Know your own mind and make sure the other party knows it as well."

Certainly Mr. Ford's uncertain and implausible war trumpet is not making oil exporters giggle nervously. They are giggling, but not because they are nervous.