

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

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Sawhill's Demise: A Matter of Style

When it became clear his trenchant public advocacy of a new federal gasoline tax had doomed him as Federal Energy Administrator, John Sawhill had a plaintive question for a friend: Hadn't Bill Simon been an even more persistent booster of the gas tax?

Indeed he had. As Deputy Secretary of the Treasury, as Sawhill's predecessor at the Federal Energy Administration (FEA) and now as Secretary of the Treasury, William Simon has stubbornly advocated a gas tax to cut consumption. But his advocacy has been confined to private administration councils or in the press as an unidentified "Treasury spokesman"—not in person on NBC's "Today" show as in Sawhill's case.

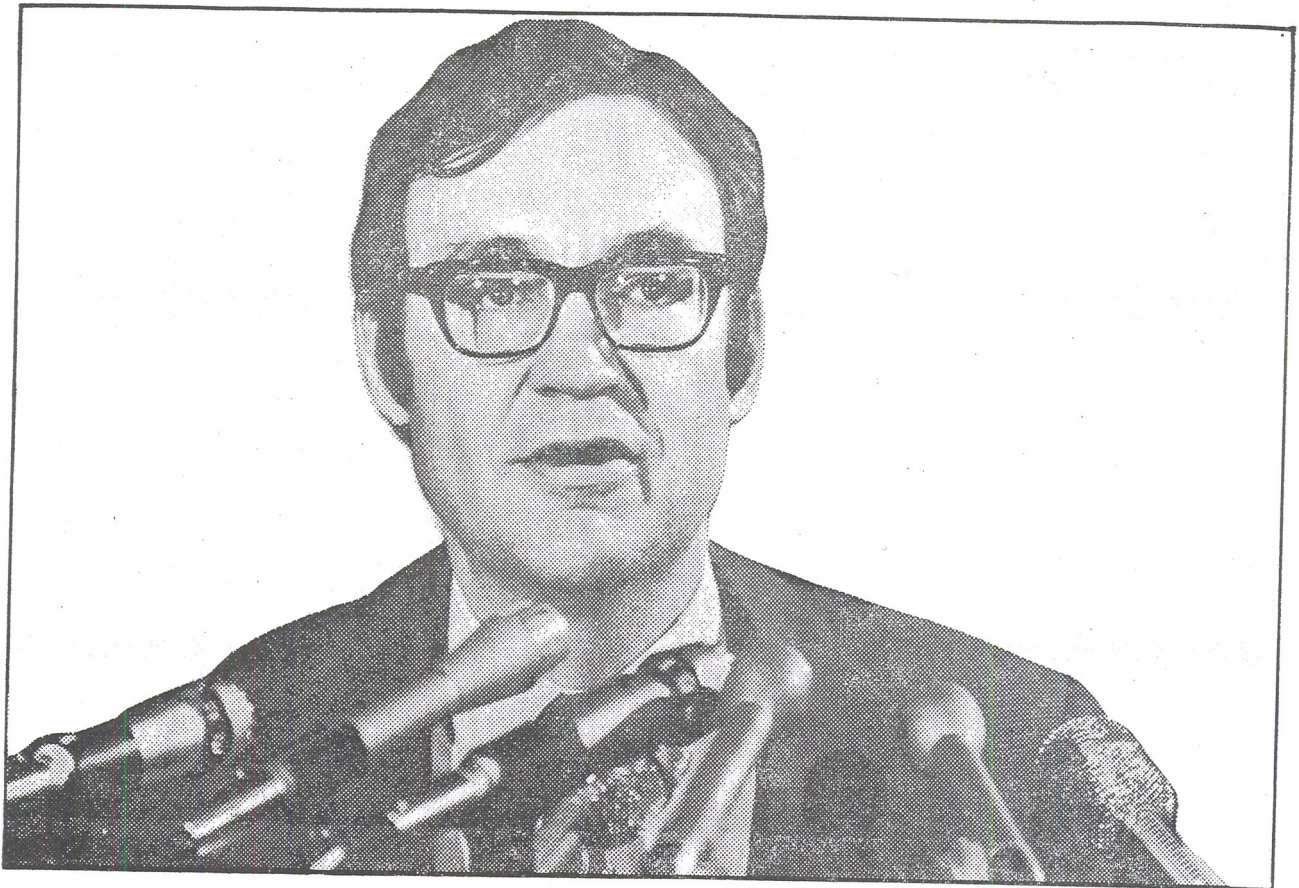
That failure to come to grips with Washington reality explains Sawhill's demise. Although he is now lionized by the liberals as a martyr fired for daring to take unpopular positions, that was not the root cause of his sacking. Future energy officials may survive with positions identical to Sawhill's if they maneuver more skillfully through the Washington jungle. In other words, it was style not substance that destroyed Sawhill.

Sawhill was a sympathetic figure inside the federal energy bureaucracy if only for his enemies—particularly big oil's well-paid lobbyists. "The worst elements in this city conspired against him," says one knowing official.

More important, Sawhill's insistence on measures to reduce U.S. fuel consumption to reduce imports is regarded within the administration as essential to any sane energy policy—ignored by President Ford at the nation's peril. Having mastered the energy field, ex-financier Sawhill quickly arrived at the proper policy.

That he flunked his course in the Washington quicksand was clear last April when, shortly after succeeding Simon, Sawhill joined John Gardner's Common Cause. The White House was apoplectic that a high official appointed by then President Nixon should join Nixon's arch-enemy.

Sawhill quit Common Cause as quickly as he had joined it, but the damage was done. Not only was suspicion planted deeply in the administration but a flaw in his own tactics was revealed: He was trying to strengthen his position with liberals and congressional Democrats while neglecting his exposed flank in the administration.



The point of no-return between Sawhill and the administration really came a few weeks before the celebrated "Today" show of Oct. 2. Sen. Henry M. Jackson of Washington as chairman of the Senate Interior Committee submitted written interrogatories to administration officials, beginning with this loaded question: Did the administration have a plan to halt or reverse the rise in world oil prices? All other officials ducked, but not Sawhill. He answered, honestly and concisely, no.

Jackson, ever alert for an opening in the administration's energy policy, attacked. Top officials, particularly Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, were outraged at Sawhill. "The feeling was," confides one official sympathetic to Sawhill, "that Sawhill was making brownie points with Scoop Jackson at the expense of Ford, Kissinger and everybody else." Buttrussing that feeling was the fact that Sawhill submitted his

answers to Jackson without distributing them in the administration.

Even before he blundered by publicly advocating the gasoline tax after President Ford publicly rejected it, Sawhill's position had become untenable. Irritations between him and Simon ripened into a feud (helped by Sawhill's cutting remarks in private about Simon). Worse yet, Sawhill had no relationship whatever with the new energy czar, Interior Secretary Rogers Morton.

By mid-October, Mr. Ford had decided to sack Sawhill. What delayed the execution was the inability to find a successor (unbelievably, feelers were put out to Interior Under Secretary John Whitaker, the old Nixon advance man, who wisely rejected them). Sawhill's aides at FEA took advantage of the delay to seek support from congressional liberals. The reaction: Zero. While critically damaging himself

downtown, Sawhill had failed to build a loyal following on Capitol Hill.

Yet, Mr. Ford surely will have to swallow the bitter medicine ruthlessly prescribed by John Sawhill. That means much tougher conservation measures, including import restrictions. Ultimately, it may well mean that hated gasoline tax.

Consequently, the early conduct by ex-Federal Maritime Administrator Andrew Gibson as Sawhill's successor is being viewed with both hope and apprehension. In contrast to Sawhill, Gibson sits through meetings silent as a sphinx. That could mean he will take the course of non-resistance to the oil lobbyists and their allies in government. However, there is also hope that such silence means he will follow Sawhill's correct policies, but with more discretion, tact and even success.