

The Confidence Game

If an administration really works at it, there are several ways in which public confidence can be deflated to that point at which a crisis is acutely felt while belief in its solubility vanishes.

The first device is amiable apathy tinged with a bit of mysticism, known as the God-will-take-care-of-it-so-we-don't-have-to-try school of public confidence mashing. The Ford administration has been working that furrow for some time now; as unemployment rises, inflation roars in the corridors, business confidence slumps and stockpiling decreases, the administration has reasserted its profoundly held belief that economics are governed by Natural Law and that, given time, this one will right itself.

The second best device for sapping public confidence in your ability to cope is to contradict yourself in the public contemplation of curative devices. This is known as the Bach fugue technique of public utterance.

John Sawhill was fired as federal energy czar, we were given to believe, because he strongly advocated a gasoline tax as a fuel conservation measure. He was given the boot by Interior Secretary Rogers Morton who then, a few weeks later, seemed

to be advocating a new gasoline tax as a fuel conservation measure. Mr. Morton was amiably reprimanded by President Ford and Mr. Sawhill stayed fired for advocating what his firer had subsequently advocated.

Then we have the President's request for an income tax surtax—which is the same thing as a tax increase. Following on that, Treasury Secretary William Simon and Chairman Alan Greenspan of the Council of Economic Advisers held a joint news conference at which

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Simon said, among other things, that the administration was considering a tax cut.

The result was a Bach fugue in some bizarre minor key whose contrapuntal climax left us with the impression that the administration wanted, simultaneously, a tax increase and a tax cut. At the end of his press conference Secretary Simon said, "We do know what we're doing."

That's nice.