

What Leadership?

President Ford chose an unfortunate rhetorical device in opening his inflation message to Congress yesterday with a quotation from Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address. Now as in 1933, the nation does seek "leadership" and "action" in a deepening crisis. But Mr. Ford's program and approach are in striking—and unflattering—contrast to F.D.R.'s. Many of the specific recommendations in his 10-point program are indeed laudable, but the over-all impact of Mr. Ford's speech was weak, flaccid and generally disappointing.

The President signally failed to convey any sense of urgency. The public would have responded to a program involving sacrifices and a true change in the nation's wasteful style of life. But what Mr. Ford proposed in the way of sacrifice, such as the voluntary reduction in food consumption, were rather nuisances—cheese paring at the edges rather than a shifting of the center of gravity.

The approach to the core question of energy is seriously deficient. "Make no mistake: We do have a real energy problem," the President said. True enough; but from that point forward, it was all downhill.

A national energy board is more likely to be a cockpit for contending interests than a creator of unified national policy. Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton, amiable and easygoing, is not the man to lead such an effort. He simply lacks the conviction and the drive for such a job.

The goals set forth by the President, including a reduction of oil imports by 1 million barrels a day by the end of next year, are desirable. But are they obtainable without firm measures? There was no mention in the President's talk of the overriding importance of improved mass transit, nothing about taxes on the horsepower of automobile engines, and gasoline rationing was shunned. He did not even speak in really effective terms about the huge savings that could be obtained by the elimination of wasteful use of energy.

President Ford seemed to hint that the energy problem in large part could be met painlessly by sacrificing the environment through amendments to the Clean Air Act and through reliance on strip-mining. He and the nation will discover that is a delusive and dangerous approach.

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The President's attitude on taxes was remarkably cautious despite the proposed surtax on personal and corporate incomes. After all the talk in recent weeks about providing relief to low-income people who are hardest hit by inflation, the President endorsed no more tax relief than the meager help envisaged in the tax bill being drafted by the Ways and Means Committee. A good argument can be made for treating capital gains more gently, making preferred stock dividends fully deductible, and increasing the investment tax credit in order to increase the flow of capital investment into new plants and equipment; but this program would be better justified in terms of social equity if accompanied by substantial tax relief for the poor and by the closing of shockingly offensive tax loopholes. Here the President's tax program is seriously unbalanced. It is a travesty for President Ford to refer to the Ways and Means Bill as a "tax reform." It is nothing of the sort.

The President's program for assisting the victims of recession is commendable so far as it goes. Extended unemployment insurance benefits are a useful palliative. Short term work projects can also be useful but only if undertaken on a sufficient scale.

Several other recommendations in the President's program merit broad support. It is highly desirable to enact a comprehensive foreign trade bill; economic nationalism, as the President rightly warned, is no prescription for the world's economic malaise. Vigorous anti-trust enforcement, a genuine attack on restrictive practices by business, labor unions and Federal regulatory agencies and a firm resolve to keep this year's budget below \$300 billion are all worthwhile objectives—but most of them are long-range in nature.

The individual merits of the President's recommendations do not offset the central weakness of his program. While some of his measures are good and some are questionable, they in no sense add up to a program for an emergency. And it is an emergency that confronts the nation and the world.