

Fighting inflation

It's much more than a do-it-yourself job

By SIDNEY MARGOLIUS

One suggestion that President Ford immediately seized on during the "summit meeting" on inflation was the plea by a newspaper columnist to answer the "unspoken cry of what can I do" among American families. Gratified by the notion of a do-it-yourself inflation program, the President immediately urged Americans to think up ten ways to fight inflation and pass the list among neighbors.

He even publicized a list sent in by one family which included suggestions like giving the cat just ten seconds to get out of the house before closing the door.

But most families are aware themselves of such heat-savers. The real "unspoken cry" is for the government to make more serious plans to fight inflation. The public already knows more about buying day-old bread and mixing soy granules into meat loaf than do the government advisers who pass out such platitudes under the pretense of doing their job.

Since President Ford wants a list of ten suggestions passed around, we suggest this one.

1 Write to the President and say you'll try again this winter, to conserve commodities and services in short supply, whether the shortages are real or artificial. But you also want the government to try harder to attack the roots of inflation as listed in our other suggestions, and not just pass the buck to the public.

2 We realize that high costs of energy, including fuel oil, electricity, gasoline, etc. are a major cause of the current inflation. We will go over our homes again to see where more caulking, insulation and more-efficient burners can reduce use of fuel. We

also will conserve hot water with more cold-water laundering, larger loads, and other measures.

But we feel defeated by the additional increases for fuel this winter on top of last year's big hikes. In just one year, the price of fuel oil has jumped 70 percent on a national average basis, and in some regions much more. It's hard to believe the claims of Treasury Secretary William Simon, whom you've appointed to head your anti-inflation "program," that the oil industry's profits are really not as great as they seem when we know they have jumped 76 percent this year.

3 We'll use our appliances with moderation, and turn out lights. But your Administration seems to believe only in rationing by price. When we do use less electricity, the utility companies then ask for rate increases to compensate for their reduced sales, and your Mr. Simon then urges state utility commissions to approve such increases.

4 We're willing to drive less. But we want the government to consider limiting the weight of cars to eliminate the gas guzzlers, or put an extra tax on weight and horsepower.

5 We'll try to select the more economical appliances. But, except for air conditioners, we don't really have data on comparative energy consumption of various models. Congress can help by enacting proposed legislation requiring that appliances be labeled with facts on comparative energy consumption.

6 Medical costs have been going up in recent months at a rate 36 percent greater than the overall cost of living. Further, your own experts have warned that hospital charges are rising at an annual rate of 18

percent and doctors' fees seem likely to go up 19 percent by next spring. We can't do much to fight this form of inflation except avoid using hospitals unnecessarily and usually that's really not our decision. We also can, where available, try to arrange for full-service hospital and doctor-bill insurance instead of indemnity insurance which reimburses only stipulated amounts. But the real need is for your leadership in encouraging economies in the delivery of health care. Available methods include HMO's (Health Maintenance Organizations), group care facilities, more para-professional personnel.

7 We recognize that finance charges for car loans and other needs are the highest in our generation. We will cut down on borrowing, both to restrain our own living costs and to help alleviate the general pressure on interest rates. But we also know that only the government can moderate the general level of interest rates.

8 We'll look for all the cheap foods we can. But it's becoming harder and harder to find lower-cost alternatives. Higher tags on grain and plant foods have become a problem of their own. Other meat substitutes and extenders such as beans, spaghetti and bread also have jumped.

We have to pass the buck back to you and ask at the least that the government regulate exports, as you have just done with sales of corn, to avoid undue pressures on domestic prices. We also think the government should start a public investigation of the inordinate price jumps on some commodities such as sugar.

9 We've demonstrated our willingness to cut down on meat. But it would help for you to encourage the Agriculture Department to revise its present grading system to encourage production of more grass-fed rather than grain-fed cattle.

10 Exorbitant mortgage rates of 9-10 percent have become a serious problem affecting renters as well as home-buyers. Landlords must pass on these costs. No self-help ideas from ordinary families can solve this problem. We ask that credit be allocated for home mortgages, rather than less-urgent commercial and recreational enterprises and that the Veterans Administration be directed to use its insurance reserves to provide direct loans for veterans.

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