

A Fortress America?

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Dec. 2—A main theme in the rhetoric of the energy crisis is the need for American self-sufficiency. That is the goal of President Nixon's Project Independence—to insure, as he put it, that by 1980 "Americans will not have to rely on any source of energy beyond our own."

Self-reliance is generally an admirable trait. But in discussion of world resources and energy it can have disturbing overtones. It sounds a little too much like the economic nationalism of the nineteen-thirties, with its disastrous influence toward international tension and war.

If we think past the present concerns with scarce heating oil and closed gasoline stations, we recognize that the long-term energy problem poses a profound threat to our whole system of international relations, economic and political. It could break down the network of trade that has been one of the world's great postwar achievements and bring on atavistic attitudes of hoarding, plunder and economic warfare.

Stuart Hampshire, the Oxford philosopher, has put in a few words what it is we fear. The successive crises over wheat and oil, he said, suggest that "we are entering a period of intense, nervous competition for scarce resources among countries and alli-

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ances, a period in which every group of countries anticipates that the weak will be cut off from the diminishing resources necessary to survival. Each group therefore grabs: a Darwinian nightmare."

The Arabs' use of oil as a crude political weapon gives us a taste of the barbarous world we could find ourselves in. Some American intellectuals have now talked of withholding food and manufactured goods from Arab countries as a counter-weapon—a sad indication of how quickly economic discourse may be brutalized.

In terms of America's energy goals, "self-sufficiency" can imply two very different things. It can mean an inward-looking, selfish program designed to continue an extraordinarily wasteful style of life, regardless of international consequences. Or it can mean an attempt to adjust America's profligate use of energy and other resources to the realistic necessities of international peace and order.

President Nixon has made it clear that he sees restraint and conservation in the use of energy as only temporary requirements for Americans. By 1980, he said, "we will once again have those plentiful supplies of inexpensive energy which helped to build the greatest industrial nation."

It is hard to find any qualified expert who thinks the United States can recapture the age of cheap energy, by 1980 or any other foreseeable date. But even setting the goal would have large consequences.

It would be a commitment to continue the energy-intensive direction of our society, doubling our consumption of energy every 15 or 20 years. It would be a signal to ordinary citizens to go on expecting a life of limitless energy—and to create demands based on that expectation.

To follow that path would mean immense capital investment in new energy sources. It would mean accepting severe environmental damage and, in the short run, serious risks from proliferating nuclear fission generating plants.

But the more profound implications are for America's relations with the rest of the world. With 6 per cent of the world's population, we now use 30 per cent of its energy. To continue on that road in an age of declining resources and technological strain—to persist in the dream of two large cars in every garage when our friends fear paralysis of their societies—can only alienate us from the rest of mankind. Indeed, the vision must be of a Fortress America.

The idea of withdrawing into a fortress will always appeal to some. But it is not only wrong morally—because so much of the world, developed and underdeveloped, depends on economic relationships with the United States. It is also wrong as a matter of self-interest. We learned in the nineteen-thirties that no country can wall out the rest of the world's economic distress. And even the richest country may be endangered if distress sets loose violence.

There is one real alternative to the vision of limitless energy and luxury as our credo. That is the ethic of conservation: not saving by such marginal notions as turning down home thermostats but conservation through fundamental social choices, requiring changes in values.

The symbols of necessary change are at hand. To take just one, does it make sense for the United States to go on now with an enormous highway-building program?

Changing our attitudes toward energy use will be a long and complicated process, raising tough problems of how such decision should be made in a capitalist democracy. But there is only one way to begin: by leadership. That means politicians who do not give us empty promises of plenty but teach us the necessity of living a more frugal and more rational life, as part of a world community sharing its resources. That is the only way to dispel the Darwinian nightmare.