

The Skeptical,

By Douglas E. Kneeland
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On a crowded airliner a stewardess stops to chat and fret about her impending layoff. On the same flight a Midwestern sales manager gulps a double scotch and sadly wonders aloud how he is going to tell three good salesmen that they are to be dropped.

A Milwaukee cocktail waitress ruefully complains that she has had to cancel a long-planned Christmas camper trip to the south with her children. A Nebraska propane gas dealer worries about staying in business with his supply cut to 44 per cent of last year's. An elderly suburban Philadelphia widower sells his big

home to flee to an apartment in warmer Florida.

Slowly, Americans are beginning to believe that an energy shortage really does exist, but a lot of them are troubled, skeptical about the reasons for it, and confused about whom to blame.

And many wonder whether the shortage, real as it is to them, may not have been exaggerated by powerful interests for their own political or economic gain.

Assessing the seriousness and causes of the crisis, a butcher in Jenkintown, Pa., a prosperous borough of 5500 just north of Philadelphia, touched on something that seems to be bothering people across the land.

"No matter what they say, you can't believe anybody

any more," Noah Genter said bitterly as he dressed a fancy roast beef in his busy shop.

Echoes or intimations of that sense of doubt, and perhaps of a broader malaise, laced dozens of interviews on a cross-country tour as well as supplementary reports from correspondents of the New York Times in ten cities and suburbs in various parts of the nation.

They would like to blame someone, the informal survey showed, but there is no real agreement as to whom.

As an apparent legacy of Watergate, President Nixon and politicians and bureaucrats in general were the targets of a large share of criticism. But there were others — the oil companies,

Bitter U.S. Mood

big business as a whole, the ecologists, the Arab-Israeli war. And some people even blamed themselves and their neighbors for a profligacy that has drained the country's natural resources.

In West Allis, Wis., a grimy industrial suburb of Milwaukee, John Olm, the short, graying recording secretary of Local 248 of the United Automobile Workers, sat in a dingy office at the union's headquarters with other local leaders and voiced harsh words about Mr. Nixon.

"He's got to take the brunt of it," Olm declared. "He's the guy who came out a year ago and told us how good we had it."

Edward Merten, the local

president, said, "It's the little guy who's going to get it. I'd rather see them ration gas than raise the price so the little guy can't buy it."

Half a continent away, in New York City, June Pelkey, a black clerk-typist, was doubtful about the extent of the crisis but confident that she knew its cause.

"Frankly, I put the blame on Nixon," she said. "If I was his adviser I'd put people back to work and get with the people. There's plenty in this country for everyone. He's stopped so many things."

Others are more willing to divide the blame.

"I would blame the government first and Nixon second," said Joseph A. McNulty,

ly, a 43-year-old accountant with a one-man office in South San Francisco. "The oil companies claim they have been warning of a shortage and the government hasn't apparently done much about it. Maybe they believed the shortage wasn't real, too."

McNulty, like many of those interviewed, was not entirely convinced the shortage was as serious as it had been pictured by the government, the oil companies and others.

Declaring that he thought it could get worse in years to come, he said that he felt the present emphasis on the energy situation was designed to "pave the way for the Alaska pipeline and offshore drilling, to get people

grooved into a shortage coming."

In Houston, Clara Burke, a 29-year-old black grocery store checker, said that the energy crisis was "the biggest lie I've ever heard."

Much of the skepticism about the energy shortage seemed to come from the suddenness with which it began to dominate official pronouncements and the news.

J. Rand Thomas of Seattle, a 67-year-old retired sales manager who now works part-time in a ski shop in suburban North Bend, Wash., spoke for many of those interviewed when he said, "It seemed to happen overnight, which doesn't seem reasonable to me."