

WXPost

FEB 1 1974

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The State of the Government

The mood of the new session of Congress is as sour as swill. Creeping paralysis afflicts most departments of the executive branch. The White House itself is both Watergate-weakened and Watergate-obsessed.

Such is the real state of the government to which president Nixon addressed his message on the state of the union. To an unprecedented degree, in fact, the state of the government is becoming the most important—and the most worrying—aspect of the state of the union.

Since President Franklin Roosevelt gave the U.S. government a larger role in the lives of everyone, Washington has gone through some pretty bad patches. Some of them were as phoney as three dollar bills. In 1952, for instance, all the Republicans, much of the press, and many of the academics were howling about "the mess in Washington." But that time, it was the howling that made the bad patch, rather than anything inherently wrong.

This time, however, there is nothing phoney about the mess in Washington. Above all, there is nothing in the least phoney in the menace of this mess to the country and its future. In the year 1974, it is simply not safe for all of political Washington to behave as though this were still 1868—which was the year of President Andrew Johnson's impeachment.

It is not economically safe, to begin with. The energy crisis, and the attendant enormous increase in crude oil costs, have brutally distorted and disturbed the national economies of most nations of the world. There are strong signs of the kind of international game

of devil-take-the-hindmost that led us into the great depression of the '30s.

Maybe we are not again likely to see decent people hungrily scrabbling on municipal garbage dumps for the scraps of a meal—as this reporter saw them in New York, the day he went to work in 1932! Yet worldwide games of devil-take-the-hindmost always end by impoverishing everyone concerned. The U.S. cannot totally escape these consequences.

It almost makes matters worse that in this critical area of energy, the U.S. is potentially far, far better off than any other Western nation. By determined action, in a quite reasonable space of time, this country has the great good fortune of being able to recapture self-sufficiency in energy. But this week, the Congress proved—and for the second time in two months—that it cannot even pass a reasonable energy bill.

The energy bill that was just returned to conference furthermore failed to cover all sorts of critical problems, such as the urgently needed authority to provide sites for new refineries, deep waterports, power plants and the like. In the area of energy, the highest congressional aim appears to be to wait until the Arab oil blackmail ends. After that we shall have the privilege of seeing the U.S. dollar going to hell in a hack, because of the greatly increased burden of paying for foreign oil.

Despite the brilliance of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, moreover, our foreign affairs are just as full of menace as our economic affairs. It is a truism, pounded home by repeated experience, that whenever this country

looks weak, the Soviet Union gets tough. In the whole long era since Franklin Roosevelt took office, the U.S. has never looked so weak as it does today.

We look weak militarily, because we are—at any rate, in relation to the Soviet Union. We look weak politically, because we are—as a direct result of the mess in Washington. These are fundamentals which the most astute policy-making and ablest negotiating cannot overcome. It is only prudent, therefore, to expect at least one really dangerous Soviet show of toughness before too long.

In sum, we are asking for trouble because of the mess in Washington. The mess in Washington of course flows rather directly from the Watergate mess, too. Here is the source of the sourness of the Congress, the governmental paralysis, the weakness of the White House. All might yet be well, if we could just get the Watergate mess out of the way, one way or the other.

That is what the country wisely wants, but here, again, we have no prospect of a good outcome. The House Judiciary Committee may take many months before reporting a bill of impeachment. As for now, there is a House majority of 50 against impeachment; but the House may well end by voting for impeachment after many months.

On present form, the Senate will also take many months to deal with the matter; yet there is no real prospect of a two-thirds majority for impeachment in the present Senate. So what, one wonders, is the object of the exercise?