

James Reston

President Ford Nibbles the Bullet

Washington

PRESIDENT FORD has now defined the economic crisis of the nation and proposed a catalogue of remedies. The question now is, whether the solutions he proposed are equal to the crisis he defined, and the fear here is that he didn't bite the bullet but nibbled it.

In these abnormal times, and especially a month before the off-year congressional elections, he put forward some unpopular and politically bold proposals, but the whole thrust of his speech to the Congress last week was that the nation was in mortal danger, and he asked that we mutually pledge to each other, not "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," but our comfort, our support, and five per cent of our gas and oil.

It would be hard to over-emphasize the relief in Washington to find a President stating, with the utmost sincerity, his belief about what had to be done in the interests of the Republic. And for the first time in years, to see a Congress that accepts him at his word, without doubting his motives.



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STILL, HIS proposals, honest and sensible as they were, scarcely measure up to the spectacular menace and danger he put before the Congress. Inflation was as bad as war, he suggested, while refusing to call for a declaration of war. "We have had enough early warnings," he said. "... The time to intercept (the enemy inflation) is almost gone." But he didn't intercept it.

"I say to you with all sincerity," Ford remarked in the peroration of his speech, "that inflation, our present public enemy, will — unless it is whipped — destroy our country, our homes, our liberties, our property, and finally our national pride — as surely as any well-armed wartime enemy."

Maybe it was wrong to define the question in military terms, and even to regret the absence of a Pearl Harbor to wake us up, but when he got down to his ten-point program of remedies, he was bold in his own framework as a conservative Republican leader, but scarcely bold in the framework of the world problem he now has to handle.

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THE INFLATION-recession problem is moving faster than he thought and the outlook now is that he is going to have to face seven per cent unemployment by mid-year of 1975. He made concessions, which must seem to him as almost radical, in offering public jobs to the unemployed and other breaks to the poor, but again his estimate is probably far short of the need.

Even most liberal economists agree that we don't need mandatory wage and price controls, but we do need much tougher controls over pattern-setting unions and businesses. Apparently, the President is convinced that he should start with appeals to patriotism, and voluntary controls that bark but don't bite. At least he has made a beginning.

In his speech to the Congress, he has told his colleagues in the Executive Branch, his old friends on Capitol Hill, and the American people what he wants them to do. It is early for him but late for the Congress, which is yearning to campaign for next month's election. If nothing else, he has clarified the problem for the average responsible family.

He has finally told them what he thinks they should do. We are in trouble, he has said. Whatever the President or the Congress decide, we can't make it unless you save gas, oil, and money, and help the country in an awkward time.

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THIS IS typical of Gerald Ford. He sees the world crisis and suggests laws to deal with it, but basically he believes that appealing to the American people for voluntary sacrifices will work — or at least must be tried before introducing compulsory legislation, and he may be right.

He proposed policies which he would obviously have opposed in his 25 years in the House of Representatives, but he has still not caught up with the radical national and world economic problem his advisers in the Cabinet are putting before him.

His instinct; and it is the center of his life, is that first you must go to the people — appeal to them, organize them, give them a chance — and only then, if they don't come through, pass laws to compel what the country needs. Washington admires but doubts that this will meet the national crisis he defined in such dramatic terms, but it likes him and believes in his sincerity, and his caution. At least he nibbled the bullet and this is probably about as much as the country is now prepared to swallow.

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