

A Vision of America

President's Ford Dreams for the Nation
Appear to Be Modest and Conservative

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 19—For weeks now, White House aides have been proclaiming that this year's State of the Union Message would display—for the first time—President Ford's vision of America. Last year, they said, Mr. Ford was struggling to take hold of a Government in crisis, but this year he has spent many hours thinking and planning in an effort to convey his own ideas of where the nation should be heading as the 20th century draws to a close.

If tonight's address does reflect Mr. Ford's vision of America, it is a very modest vision indeed, reflecting, perhaps, both the personal modesty of the man who now occupies the White House and his conservative view of the proper role of Government. In effect, he told the American people to modify their expectations of where the Government can lead them.

The President affirmed his belief in a basic article of American faith: "Life will be better here for my children than for me."

But at the same time he warned that America had overreached itself. "We became," he said, "overconfident of our abilities." The Government, he said, has become an "indulgent parent."

In other words, he seemed to be saying, we cannot make life that much better for our children, at least not through the Government.

Effects of Social Programs

Massive Federal social programs, he said, worsened the economy, "trampled" on the rights of individuals and compromised American military power.

The time has now come, he said, to recognize the nation's failures and to start putting things to rights. The way to do this, he explained, is to slow the growth of Government, particularly Government spending, and to start doing it now.

What he wants, one close aide explained, is to "start turning the leviathan around."

President Ford has said all this—or things very like it—before. But the State of the Union address is more than rhetoric, it is the program with which the President would like to govern the nation.

In a Presidential election year, of course, the State of the Union Message is also very much a political document. A White House aide said that it showed "guts" to recommend a slowdown in spending and no major new spending before an election. But the President obviously believes he is striking a chord to which the American people will respond.

Moderation Emphasized

However, the President also took care to represent himself as a cautious moderate who is not about to disrupt the economy and the social system in one traumatic stroke.

Some of his remarks could be taken as a pointed attack on the scheme of his rival for the Republican nomination, Ronald Reagan, to turn over to state and local governments responsibility for \$90 billion of Federal programs.

He would like to balance the budget in four years, he said. "But we cannot simply dump welfare into the laps of the 50 states, their local taxpayers or private charities, and just walk away from it. Nor is it the right time for massive and sweeping changes while we are still recovering from a recession."

Yet he also made it clear

that he shared with Mr. Reagan the relief that the presence of the Federal Government in the lives of Americans must be reduced. And if it cannot be reduced rapidly, there certainly should not be any massive new Government incursions into society.

National Health Insurance

"We cannot realistically afford federally dictated national health insurance coverage cans," he said. There cannot be any broad new public employment program to provide jobs for the unemployed—jobs must be created by the private sector. To be healthy, the economy must be free from "the petty tyranny of massive government regulation."

In other words, the Government must have more modest ambitions than it has had in the past. "We must be more honest with the American people, promising no more than we can deliver and delivering all that we promise." The time has come for a "new realism" and a "new balance in the relationship between the individual and the Government"—a balance that favors greater freedom and self-reliance by the individual and by state and local government.

The nation must be ruled, by "common sense," Mr. Ford said in one of several quotations in the speech drawn from the writings of Thomas Paine.

Some observers saw a certain irony in the fact that the President had drawn so heavily on Paine, one of the most radical of the American revolutionaries, in a speech that was essentially reactionary, seeking to reject the social history of recent decades and return to a simpler era.

Business Tax Incentives

Rather than suggesting new public employment programs, the President proposed to create jobs for the unemployed by giving tax incentives to employers. This approach used to be called the "trickle-down theory." It is likely to provoke an angry and controversial response in Congress and elsewhere. But it is not new.

One thing that is unchanged is Mr. Ford's insistence on a strong defense and a high military budget. Here, he is not turning back but continuing on the path followed by all of his predecessors in the White House since World War II.

The phrases the President used in describing the America he believes in such phrases as "common sense," "steadfastness" and "self-discipline"—seemed also to describe Mr. Ford's own image of his virtues as the nation's chief executive.

These things, not great plans to change society, are what you should expect from your President and your Government, Mr. Ford seemed to be telling Americans. It sounded a bit like the foundation of a campaign platform.



BICENTENNIAL FLAG is raised in Washington as Congress observes start of the Bicentennial year. Flag will fly over the Russell Senate Office Building, near Capitol.

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