

A Timid Question

By RUSSELL BAKER

Does anyone out there remember who it was several years back who notified the world, with some show of authority, that the prettiest word in the English language was "cellar door"?

We have been thinking about that pronouncement ever since President Nixon undertook his new economic policy, filling the press daily with yards of material about the economy. It would be interesting to call up the man who declared "cellar door" the prettiest word in the English language and ask him which word is the dullest.

The bet here is that he would reply, "economics," although since he is the sort who will let two words—"cellar door"—qualify as one, he might not; he might insist, with some justice, that "a fruitful exchange of views" is an even duller word than "economics."

There is nothing the least bit dull in the reality that is wrapped in the word "economics," although—let's be candid—those people who twinkle and cheer at an unexpected rise in gross national product or a burp in the balance-of-payments curve have always seemed to be forcing their enthusiasm just a bit. Heavy twinkling and loud cheers for news of a salary increase — that is understandable, though even a \$10 raise would probably seem slightly dull if we thought of it as "economics."

All this is by way of apology for mentioning "economics" in this space today, yet something must be said—or asked—about the subject. One asks with great diffidence in this arcane field, aware that it is a field mined with experts — "leading Government economists"—eager to mock the inquirer's ignorance.

Moreover, the public, the press and influential politicians of both parties have generally approved the President's new economic policy. Obviously, it is an unpropitious moment for public moping.

And yet, these moments of hearty public applause for dynamic Presidential actions are always a little scary. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which absent-mindedly empowered Presidents to fight at their heart's content in Asia, passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 416 to 0 and the Senate by 88 to 2. When everybody agrees with you, watch out!

Now, as then, the Congress, with the Democrats leading, has handed the Presidency a grant of power that seems likely to strengthen that office's tendency to become an autocracy. The justification for these Congressional conferrals of fresh statist powers on the President is invariably "national emergency," and it is foolish to quarrel with the President's experts about the existence of a "national emergency" simply because there are no bombs falling or stock markets collapsing.

The natural tendency is to take refuge in one's own ignorance, laugh about the dullness of the subject, let the experts have their way and give

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the President even more power. This, in fact, is about what most of us did on the subject of Vietnam in the early nineteen-sixties.

For the past several years, we have been told that Congress had learned its lesson about making these sweeping power grants to Presidents. But it now turns out, as many of us awoke to discover after the event, that Congress hasn't.

Here was a President assuming powers of economic regulation by decree similar to the powers exercised in the totalitarian states that we have been resisting for thirty years and more, frequently with blood. The power to do so had been given him in advance by Congress, with the proviso that he must first find a state of national emergency to justify himself.

Now, less than two weeks after the first decree, the President's men are gradually preparing us for the next announcement, which will state that it will be necessary to continue these extraordinary controls beyond the ninety-day period the President had first contemplated. Economic escalation? No light at the end of the tunnel by November, after all?

"American business and labor may have to get used to the idea of living within certain parameters," Secretary of the Treasury Connally said the other day. Mr. Connally is the protégé of Lyndon Johnson and is mentioned as a potential Vice-Presidential candidate on the next Republican ticket.

The question we would like to ask, very timidly, is, if the conservatives aren't worried about the increase of statism, why doesn't somebody wake up the doves?