WXPost

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Energy Policy: Blame the Crisis On Congress

An elite group of 32 businessmen invited to the White House last Wednesday for an advance peek at the new energy program also became witnesses to a momentary clash between President Nixon and his domestic counselor, Melvin R. Laird, which reveals much about both the administration's handling of the energy crisis and its general strategy.

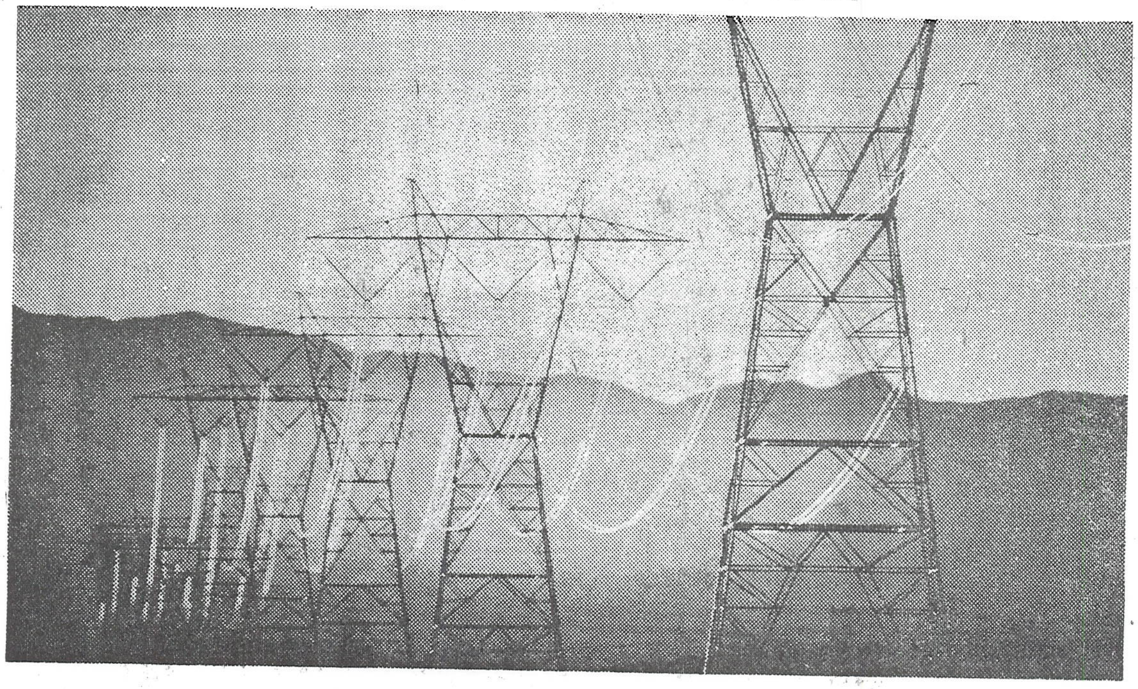
Laird was listing energy legislation now in the congressional pipeline when he was interrupted by an obviously irritated President. "But there's nothing on my desk now, is there?" Mr. Nixon asked his counselor. The impression given the businessmen: While Laird was trying to solve the fuel shortage in close cooperation with Congress, the President wanted to blame Congress for causing the crisis.

This contrast between the President and his counselor transcends the energy crisis. But in this case, the presidential attempt to lay blame on Congress particularly infuriates Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill who believe their early warnings about the energy crunch were ignored by the White House. In truth, key administration officials admit the President delayed until it was too late to prevent disaster. Even at this eleventh hour, the administration's handling of the crisis seems fuzzy and uncoordinated.

Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.),

NOV 12 1973

NOV 12 1973



chairman of the Senate Interior Committee, can claim to be the leading Cassandra. His June 13, 1972, letter to the President warning about U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil was ignored. So was Jackson's Dec. 10, 1972, call for Mr. Nixon to name an energy adviser.

One reason why Jackson's warnings went unheeded was that domestic policy chief John D. Ehrlichman then tightly controlled decisions on energy, as on everything except foreign affairs. Besides being spread thin by trying to monopolize domestic policy, Ehrlichman was busy attempting to keep from going down with the Watergate wreck when energy decisions were needed.

When Ehrlichman finally fell last April, the dominant administration voice in the energy field became Deputy Secretary of the Treasury William Simon. A Wall Street investment expert, Simon at first opposed mandatory fuel allocations but later was convinced by Jackson and other congressional leaders of their necessity.

But on June 29 Gov. John Love of Colorado was appointed energy adviser and quickly ruled against mandatory allocations, delaying for weeks what Democrats in Congress long had been urging. Meanwhile, Simon disappeared from the energy picture along with his valuable expertise. As the crisis deepened last week, Simon was in Nassau attending a Time, Inc., seminar.

Love, popular and well regarded as governor, has been an almost totally unrelieved disappointment here. Even administration officials admit he lacks the background, temperament and governmental powers to be energy adviser. In fact, he does not want the power. One proposal to consolidate the government's scattered energy policy-making functions under him was killed by Love.

There is, therefore, a one-word answer to the question of who is running the government's energy policy: nobody. The consequence is a sloppy, sluggish performance by the administration which scarcely supports Mr. Nixon's attempts to blame the crisis on Congress.

When Jackson on Oct. 17 unveiled his legislation for fuel self-sufficiency, Love's office replied it would soon send up its own bill. But one week later, Laird informed Jackson that the many government departments involved had not agreed on anything. That same day, Love told the Senate Interior Committee the administration had no contingency plans in case of an Arab oil cut-off.

Mr. Nixon might not have avoided the crunch even had he heeded Jackson's first warnings. In any event, it is too late now to avoid terribly painful economic consequences resulting from the Arab cut-off. ("It's going to be wild in a few weeks," predicts one consultant who advises the administration.)

Nevertheless, almost everybody concerned believes Mr. Nixon should belatedly put somebody in charge of the crisis to at least minimize the economic dislocation. In business circles, Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz is talked about as the best choice. But Shultz, overburdened now as Mr. Nixon's economic adviser, does not want the job and probably won't get it.

Besides, the White House seems more interested in goading Congress. Rep. Torbert Macdonald (D-Mass.), chairman of the House subcommittee handling energy legislation and a critic of the President's energy policies, was not invited to last Wednesday's briefing. Macdonald said nothing publicly but, in private, trumpeted his rage in unprintable language. Although the snub to Macdonald might well be the product of now familiar incompetency at the Nixon White House, it also coincided with Mr. Nixon's desire for a cold war with Congress while a fuel-short nation faces a freezing winter.