

By William Safire

## ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Nov. 11—The imminence of gasoline rationing provides political figures with a golden opportunity: to shuck off some of the antidemocratic luxuries that encrust and demean the seats of power.

When the President summoned up the spirit of self-sacrifice and voluntary belt-tightening in his energy speech last week, he sought to set an example by placing speed restrictions on a half-million Federal vehicles.

A question arises: what is the Federal Government doing with a half-million vehicles, anyway? Further research shows that the Fed fleet drives three billion miles a year, slurping up 300 million gallons of gasoline and costing, exclusive of original purchase, \$359 million every year.

There are 238,000 civilian cars in the Fed fleet; the 12,500 buses do not bother me, and I will grant the need for 33,000 ambulances, but what is the need for 76,000 sedans, and 800 "heavier-type" cars—the euphemism for limousines?

To a Federal official, the sweetness of life is reflected in being transported by chauffeured car "from domicile to place of employment," as one of the delicious exceptions to the "no unofficial employment purposes" strictures of the trampled-upon Administrative Expenses Act of 1946.

The Defense Department, which is permitted by the Office of Management and Budget to be by far the worst violator of the act, permits an Assistant Secretary of the Army to be carted back and forth like the Nizam of Hyderabad at an annual cost I estimate at \$30,000 a year (nobody at O.M.B. or the Defense Department is going to get caught making that estimate). Such an after-tax expense would give a millionaire pause; no single act of waste more offends the ordinary man than the automotive pampering of officialdom.

And for what purpose? Valuable time is not saved, nor is safety a factor: when the Government gets out of the taxicab business, the taxpayer will save money, the nation will conserve fuel, and—most important—the debilitating lordliness will be removed from the upper echelons of bureaucracy.

Ordinarily, railings like these would go unnoticed, but under the changed circumstances of a fuel shortage, perhaps a trend could be set in motion that would help reduce the "insolence of office," and a conservation of power could be used to cut down the arrogance of power. The examples could come from the top, at all levels:

New York City's new Mayor, Abe Beame, could announce plans to travel

from Gracie Mansion to City Hall every morning on the Lexington Avenue Express. The choice of subway over limousine, of course, is a publicity stunt permitted only at a time when symbolic actions to inspire public conservation are needed—but it would cost the new Mayor no time, exposure to the public twenty minutes a day might even prove beneficial, and the cost of lengthening one subway strap would be minimal.

Governor Rockefeller, in that spirit, could dispense with New York State's limousine fleet. If the Governor started using a small car and even drove it himself, the pressure on other state officials to follow suit would be irresistible.

And President Nixon, in a grand gesture of fuel frugality, could mothball Air Force One for the duration of the shortage, with the exception of overseas visits. Can you imagine the President traveling to San Clemente this winter on a regularly-scheduled, commercial jet? The Secret Service could handle it, and it would do the President and the country good. (No coach seats, though—Presidents should ride first class).

Sounds ridiculous, right? But it only sounds ridiculous because we now surround the citizens we elect with royal trappings, against all propriety and American tradition. In the fell clutch of pomp and circumstance, we turn their heads and then wonder why they lose touch with "the people."

Only if we use the fuel shortage to our advantage can we awaken the spirit of the newly-inaugurated Jefferson waiting for his place at table. The President need feel no awkwardness at "showboating," since symbolism of sacrifice at the top is expected when the reality of sacrifice at the bottom is asked.

If the Commander in Chief ostentatiously saves fuel, the message might even get through to the Pentagon. The other day, New York Times reporter John Finney noticed the arrival at the Pentagon helipad of Brig. Gen. Jessie M. Allen, the tactical air command's Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans.

General Allen had spurned the use of a waiting car at Andrews Air Force Base, preferring to use the waiting helicopter instead, which used about 30 gallons of jet fuel on the round trip to the Pentagon, saving the busy general twenty minutes each way.

The reason for the general's trip to Washington, the urgent need for the helicopter? You guessed it—he hurried here to confer about the Air Force's plans to conserve energy.