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Mr. Nixon's Energy Program

The energy crisis presented the President with an opportunity for a political comeback. He could have told the truth about the problem, and summoned people to sacrifice in a way that might have rallied the country.

Instead, Mr. Nixon has defined an objective that, while rhetorically pleasing, does not make sense. He has not charted the way to achieve an objective which does make sense.

The goal Mr. Nixon has set is "independence." "Project Independence 1980," the modest name he has given his energy program, is supposed to insure that "by the end of this decade, Americans will not have to rely on any source of energy beyond our own."

Now all this has a pleasant ring. It evokes memories of sturdy old American virtues. But does it have anything to do with American needs now, or the needs of the rest of the world?

The one thing we clearly need is to be independent of Arab oil—now and even after a peace settlement in the Mideast. But that does not mean an isolationist policy of self-sufficiency. On the contrary, the need to cut loose from dependence on the Arab lands of the Mideast only reinforces the incentive for closer ties with other countries.

The non-Arab oil producing lands, first of all. Do we want to cut ourselves off from Canada? Or Venezuela? Or Indonesia? Or Nigeria? Or Iran? Absolutely not. We want them to cooperate with the United States and other friendly countries in maximizing production. But if we go in for self-sufficiency, those friendly countries will have an incentive not to cooperate.

Similarly with many of the oil consuming lands. In courting Arab oil, the Japanese and some Europeans have deliberately taken their distances from the United States. But that doesn't have to be, and shouldn't be, a permanent condition.

Our interest is to cooperate with the Europeans and Japanese as much as possible in the energy field—particularly in organizing joint research projects. But that also will be impossible if the United States goes for self-sufficiency.

Even assuming the more sensible goal of joint self-sufficiency with friendly countries, the program favored by Mr. Nixon seems unlikely to get us there. Research and development is to be raised from under \$1 billion annually to \$10 billion beginning next year. That's dandy. But it is very doubtful that any of the research projects—whether for gassifying coal or developing nuclear energy or using shale oil—will begin to pay off before 1980.

For the crunch period between now and 1980, Mr. Nixon suggests voluntary programs which emphasize cutbacks in the use of gasoline. With less gas being consumed, the oil companies would be under pressure to produce more of the

heating oils which are in such short supply as to threaten a possible recession.

But very few of the experts believe the voluntary program will work. Even if it does work, it means that the major oil companies do that rationing of gasoline. Which is fine for those of us who can easily slip a fiver to the friendly filling station owner, but hard on those who can't.

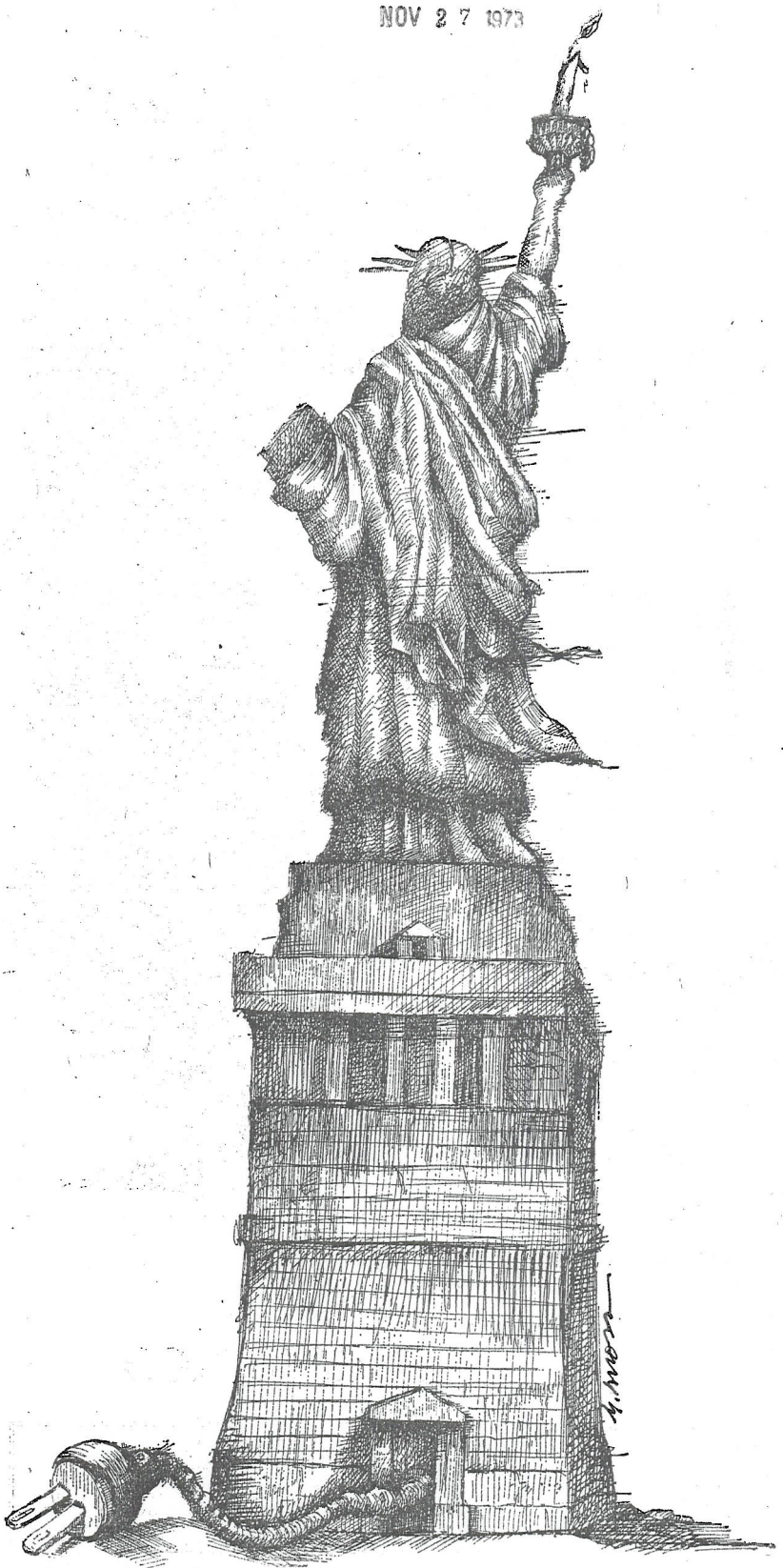
A truly serious approach would concentrate on changing the patterns of consumption in this country. It would put a damper on the big gasoline guzzlers coming out of Detroit. It would push hard for rail transit in and between major cities.

Most important of all it would force industries which derive power from oil and gas—a group which consumes some 20 per cent of the American

energy diet—to switch to coal. It would produce more coal not by despoiling West Virginia or the Rocky Mountain states, but from the abundant seams in southern Illinois and Kentucky. And since that coal is heavy in sulfur content, there would have to be mandatory provisions for keeping the air clean by smoke filters.

Maybe something like that will emerge from the group under John Sawhill in the Office of Management and Budget which is actually putting together the energy program. If so, it will be without the help of the President. Not for the first time, Mr. Nixon has mired himself so deep in phony rhetoric that he has lost the genuine benefits that might have flowed from a straight approach to a serious national problem.

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