

# Ships Passing In the Night

By James Reston

In his State of the Union speech, President Nixon told the American people that things are going fairly well—no war, no military draft, more jobs and more real spendable income than ever before. He added that while we still have some problems with inflation, prices and energy, he has policies to deal with all this and "there will be no recession in the United States of America."

Still, there is a puzzle; for if all this is true, the American people should feel pretty good, but they don't. So something is wrong here: Either the people are asking the wrong questions or the President is giving the wrong answers. In any event, the reaction to the address was not as reassuring as the President's promises.

Part of the trouble is that the language, like the dollar, has been devalued. The people have been bombarded with inflated words and prices for so long that they tend to be skeptical when they are told that what they can buy with their income, even after allowing for taxes and inflation, has increased by 16 per cent in the last five years.

A deeper part of the difficulty is that the President did not concentrate on the questions the people are asking. They are asking for integrity, and he gave them statistics. They are asking about the purpose of their Government, whom they can trust, and where they are going, and the President promised them more gas, meat, jobs and things.

In a way, this was an old-fashioned political speech, emphasizing peace and prosperity, reassuring the country that it never had it so good, but would soon have it better. Mr. Nixon was confronted with a crisis of the American spirit that could break our hearts if unresolved, but he offered us more goodies, told us to be of good cheer and that we could count on his leadership for three more years. He tried to

## WASHINGTON

reach the people, but it was like ships passing in the night.

One could not help admire his capacity to go through the ordeal of such a speech before the Congress and the nation under such circumstances. It is not only what he knows but what he doesn't know of the past and future that must wake him with a start in the night.

Also, while there is something very good in trying to define the State of the Union at the beginning of the New Year, there is also something unfair that the burden should fall on the Presidency alone, and that the other institutions of the nation—the Congress, the universities, the church and the press, etc.—should be relieved of this admirable responsibility.

The Congress seemed to sense the injustice of Mr. Nixon's lonely task, and was generous in its applause. And yet somehow, though he is a superb tactician, in his handling of men and of philosophic questions, his sensitivity and judgment never seem to be equal to his courage. He emphasized that we were at peace with all the nations of the world, and forgot that we were at war with ourselves.

For as Walter Lippmann once remarked and still insists upon now in his ailing years, the great issues of life and politics in a prosperous nation are not material but spiritual.

In another time, he wrote: "Those in high places are more than the administrators of government bureaus. They are more than the writers of laws. They are the custodians of the nation's ideals, of the beliefs it cherishes, of its permanent hopes, of the faith which makes a nation out of a mere aggregation of individuals. They are unfaithful to that trust when by word and example they promote a spirit that is complacent, evasive and acquisitive. . . ."

"[The people] are looking for . . . men who are truthful, and resolute and eloquent in the conviction that the American destiny is to be free and magnanimous . . . who will talk to the people about their duty, and about the sacrifices they must make, and about the discipline they must impose upon themselves . . . about all those things which make a people self-respecting, serene, and confident." Here, possibly, was the dilemma between Mr. Nixon and his vast troubled audience.

Well, it is asking a lot, especially from a President in distress, but it may be that nothing less will restore the confidence the President seeks. It cannot be done with economic promises and political slogans. The President can say "one year of Watergate is enough," but this only provokes the opposition slogan that "five years of Nixon are too many." The problem before the President is deeper than this, and he didn't really deal with it as effectively as many of his supporters hoped.

1974, he said at the end, could be a year of unprecedented progress toward our goal of building a structure of lasting peace in the world and a new prosperity without war in the United States, but this, he conceded, would require the cooperation of the Congress and the support of the American people, which in turn require confidence in the President, and this is still the hitch.