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A Tough Week for Idealism

If the historians of a future age want to know why late 20th century Americans became cynical about their 200-year-old experiment in self-government, a few of the events in the city of Washington in the last week of February 1974 could tell them why.

The incidents have no common thread, except for the oft-repeated elements of official deception and corruption, of indifference to the interests of ordinary citizens, and the exploitation of advantages by selfish insiders.

On Feb. 21, it was revealed that officials of the District of Columbia welfare department had arbitrarily denied welfare aid to at least 150 families' welfare applications within the time required by law. The deadline had been set in order to assure prompt decisions on the eligibility of welfare applicants, but, in a wonderful Catch 22 application of logic, the bureaucrats decided that since they themselves could not meet the deadline, the applicants must be ineligible.

Feb. 22 brought news of two indictments—a former Johnson administration White House aide charged with perjury in an alleged payoff by milk producers to the Nixon administration and a member of Congress charged with extortion on an incinerator contract.

Feb. 23 was a relatively mild day—an airplane hijacking, an editor kidnaped, and the news that consumer prices had risen 1 per cent in the month, shoving the average worker's purchasing power 4 per cent below where it had been a year before.

The next day, Feb. 24, the nation's "energy czar" said he would authorize another 2-cents-per-gallon increase in gasoline prices.

On Feb. 25, the President's personal attorney pleaded guilty to a felony count of illegal, secret fund-raising for White House-backed congressional candidates and a lesser charge of peddling an ambassadorship for a \$100,000 contribution.

But that news was overshadowed in the papers of Feb. 26 by the President's disclosure that he had refused to heed the request from the Watergate grand jury that he come in and answer questions about his own role in that scandal.

Mr. Nixon also borrowed a line from the comic strip, "Doonesbury," and declared the energy crisis of —news which was particularly reassuring to those motorists who took the morning papers with them to read by the dawn's early light, as the block-long lines of cars crawled toward the gas stations that Tuesday morning.

On Feb. 27, the main headline said "East Coast Gas Crisis Worsens," and high unemployment was predicted by the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, who also said that the year's inflation rate might top 10 per cent.

The House Rules Committee, by a 9-to-4 vote, killed a land use bill which the President had been advocating as a "high priority" measure for three years. But after strong business lobbying and conservative pressure-reached him this month, he decided he no longer liked it.

Neither did the chairman of the Rules Committee, who comes from Gary, Ind., an example of the sort of blighted development the bill is designed to prevent in the cities of 21st century America. Two years of study had convinced a large majority of senators and of House Interior Committee members that land use planning was essential to balance the competing needs of industry and environment. But Rules Committee chairman Ray Madden said it was a "bon-doggle," a word he likes to use but cannot pronounce.

Madden is 82, a fact he no longer acknowledges in his official biography, and through the workings of the seniority system he and a handful of other congressional elders were able to kill a bill that could have meant a lot to the next generations of Americans.

The month ended with the House passing the energy bill the President had already promised to veto, adding yet another chapter to the long catalog of infighting between the branches of the sovereign government.

It was also revealed during a Washington conference on campaign reform that those clever lawmakers, with a knowing wink of approval from the President, had voted themselves a tiny little re-election insurance policy, just should the voters chance to become impatient with their non-performance. Just before Christmas, it turns out, they slipped through a little loophole guaranteeing that the money they spend to prepare and print the political propaganda they mail out, postage-free, under their congressional franking privilege, cannot be counted against any ceiling that may be imposed by federal, state or local governments on campaign spending.

It was luck, too, that led the black night watchman to notice the tape on the doors in the Watergate Office Building back in June 1972. And March opened with perhaps the most massive indictment of high government officials, for the cover-up of that case, in American history.

All of which, happening in one week, may explain why the beautiful dream of democracy now seems a fraud to many millions.