

... And Still No Policy at Home

WHATEVER LONG-TERM diplomatic benefits may accrue from the President's policy in the Mideast, they will not alter the hard fact here at home: the United States still has no coherent national policy for fuel and energy. Perhaps we are going to have to learn to get along without one. Policy means making hard choices, and there is not much taste in the White House just now for that. As for Congress, it continues to pursue hotly the long inconclusive argument over whether to roll back oil taxes (an extremely bad idea) or to raise oil companies taxes (an extremely good one.) So far the most sensible and useful response to the fuel squeeze has come, not from the federal government, but from citizens in the conduct of their daily lives and businesses.

The great gasoline shortage of February is now three months past. The average citizen has responded to that highly unpleasant experience with a good deal more realism than, for example, the administration. There is an altogether new caution among drivers and homeowners that, if maintained, will serve the country well in a time of deteriorating national leadership.

The wise citizen will not look for any very vigorous and vigilant assistance from the White House in the next few months. In his recent radio speech on the economy, President Nixon suggested that "the effects of the recent oil shortage have passed." They have passed everywhere, you might say, but at the cash register where it is highly noticeable that the price of gasoline is up nearly 50 per cent over a year ago. As things are working out, it is just as well that the price is going up since the administration does not seem to have any other plans for enforcing conservation.

In the same unfortunate speech, Mr. Nixon made another reference to Project Independence, the "\$10 billion program" for achieving American self-sufficiency in energy by 1980. The National Academy of Engineering, in its report last month, suggested that the true cost of self-sufficiency by 1980 might be \$600 billion. Adding a point that not only engineers have made, the Academy noted that zero imports might be highly undesirable for international reasons, tearing the web of trade and investments that now ties the world together.

While the immediate danger of a renewed Arab oil embargo is clearly diminished, it is necessary to remember that Arab imports alone do not solve our fuel troubles. We began running into shortages of fuel oil in late 1972, a full year before the embargo began, and there were spot shortages of gasoline in many parts

of the country last summer. We were outrunning our ability to refine oil, and to substitute other fuels for it.

Last year at this time, national consumption of gasoline was rising at a rate of 6 per cent a year and, in the late summer, the automobile industry put on the market a generation of cars with the lowest gas mileage in its history. But instead of soaring, the use of gasoline appears to have levelled off. The latest figures run up to the middle of May, and they are only tentative. But even with the weather getting warmer and the memory of February fading, these figures nonetheless show that demand is a shade lower than it was a year ago. People are, in fact being careful.

The government's chief contribution to this welcome turnaround is the national speed limit of 55 miles an hour. It is not only saving gasoline but, along with the reduction in auto use, it is helping to save lives as well. In the first four months of 1973, 16,500 people were killed on the highways. In the first four months of this year, according to the National Safety Council, 12,480 were killed—an astonishing reduction of 24 per cent. Along with all the harassments and higher prices, the fuel shortages have also brought us two clear benefits: a new attention to conservation, and much safer roads.

The same caution can be seen in the figures for electric power consumption. The pattern of steady increase suddenly broke last fall, when the Arab oil embargo began. Instead of following the trend of rising at a rate of 5 or 10 per cent a year, power consumption currently is at almost exactly the same level as it was last spring.

The public response, in the recent months, has in sum been both sensible and heartening. It is partly a response to higher prices, but it goes beyond that. It is also recognition that waste is not only a private matter. There is an urgent national interest here. Even a strong government could do little, in the short run, to expand our energy supplies. For the next several years we shall continue to be vulnerable, in one degree or another, to embargoes. Our chief defense is going to have to lie in our own care and concern in holding down the rate at which we burn fuel. Regardless of occasional bursts of empty optimism in high places, we are going to have to be continuously thrifty with our oil and power. The citizens of this country are now having to work out a national policy of conservation for themselves. On present showing, it's coming along pretty well.