

NYTimes
 OCT 14 1975
Meddlers in God's Work

By Russell Baker

The Washington discussion of New York's financial trouble is taking a curious turn toward theology. This has been apparent lately in various suggestions from Washington that New York must undergo purification by suffering if it is to receive Federal absolution.

It is unfair to single out the Ford circle of hard-money Republicans as defenders of the uplift-through-agony preaching, for Congressional Democrats from suburbs, smaller towns and the Jimsonweed belt appeared to be equally devoted. Nevertheless, it is the Ford men, and principally Secretary Simon, who have led the discussion into the paths of righteousness.

Mr. Simon, a former Wall Street trader, which is to say a gambler with social cachet, has assumed the role of Torquemada, protecting the faith by applications of pain. Before an agreeable Congress, he urges that punitive weights be brought—still more taxes—to be pressed on a city already breaking on the rack of taxation.

His principal, President Ford, travels the country warning the faithful to shun New York's bond offerings until it has purged itself of sundry heresies and done penance through pain. Dr. Burns and Nelson Rockefeller appear here and there, bestowing their apostolic blessings on the Inquisitional labors of Messrs. Simon and Ford, and Congress concurs. New York must suffer.

An observable fact about the notion that suffering builds character and improves the moral fiber is that its most vigorous proponents are usually people who haven't missed a meal in ten years. Very often, these comfortable believers in misery are people who have experienced hardship in childhood, as in the case of the President.

Such people may sentimentalize hardship once time has cast a pleasant haze over its memory, account it the strengthening force that built what they assumed to be their splendid characters and, in truly bad cases prescribe it indiscriminately.

There is a certain churchly value in the attitude that suffering is a fine improver of man. Suffering is the human condition. In any philosophy of an organized, purposeful cosmos, suffering must therefore be justified, and in the Christian view that the cosmos is organized toward beneficent ends, it is commonly justified as an experience man must undergo to arrive at goodness.

Government, on the other hand, is not church. It is all very well for clergy to bring such spiritual ease as they can against suffering by emphasizing its potential for human development, but when we turn to

the Government it is for temporal easement, not spiritual.

Messrs. Ford and Simon preaching the virtues that will overcome New York through suffering are as remote from reality as a priest sermonizing about the economic benefits of raising the interest rate on Treasury notes.

We need not dwell on the sweet ironies of politicians instructing us in the art of building character and improving moral fiber. Nor is President Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon on the ground that he had suffered enough without being brought to trial particularly relevant.

Angry New Yorkers, not a pro-Nixon

OBSERVER

breed on the whole, accused the President of hypocrisy in declaring that Nixon had suffered enough, but that New York must suffer more. This is the muddled logic of rage, for since it implies that Mr. Ford should not have considered the relief of suffering in the Nixon case, it follows that he should not consider it in the case of New York either. On this logic, Mr. Ford's position is entirely reasonable.

In fact, both the Nixon case and New York's are political. Despite some pieties about ending Mr. Nixon's suffering, his pardon was political sagacious. Without it, the Administration would probably be under constant daily embarrassment as the Nixon case wound its tedious way through the courts well into the election year.

"New York must suffer" may be an engaging pulpit theme, but politically it is rotten economics at a time when Mr. Ford needs an economic break. Still higher taxes proposed by Mr. Simon will speed the passage of the taxpaying citizens to kinder climates, deepening the city's debt.

The 15-cent increase in bus and subway fares, seized upon last summer as a token of the city's willingness to accept the hair shirt, has had the predictable result of cutting mass transit use at a time when the Government's energy policy demands more mass transit.

The huge firings of city workers needed to produce the famous balanced budget will shift new masses of unemployed persons on to various Federal relief budgets at a time when Government policy is aimed at cutting these budgets.

The suffering of New York may, in the end, improve its moral fiber a jot or two, though it seems dubious, but in the process of doing spiritual good, Washington will have compounded its own temporal problems. Washington should get back to Caesar's work, and leave God's to the vicar.