

Ford's 'New Direction'

ESSAY

By William Safire

We have a slogan. On his television teaser Monday night, President Ford spoke of his "new direction"; he repeated it twice in his State of the Union address yesterday; in his transmittal messages for the budget and economic reports in coming weeks, the "new direction" will flutter like a banner over the fine print.

Cartoonists will at long last have a symbol: Arrows and signposts will proliferate, weathervanes and directors' chairs will sprout on editorial pages, and the story of Wrong-way Corrigan will be exhumed.

We have a new slogan, but do we have a new direction? By evoking the ghosts of F.D.R. and Harry Truman in his address, Mr. Ford has indicated whose beckoning he follows.

On economic policy, Mr. Ford has evidently concluded that inflation is no longer a problem—its reduction is not even listed among the five goals of the New Direction—and he has proposed to inundate recession in a sea of red ink. The profession of economics is in a state of palsied disarray at the moment, as punchy and puzzled as the polling industry after the 1948 election; privately, even Administration economists admit that nobody can confidently say whether the direction pointed out by the consensus is right or wrong.

On energy policy, the President has urged steps both dramatic and conservative. He has taken the price route to discourage oil imports and to put a floor under the price of domestic supply: This should induce all consumers of oil, not just motorists, to conserve, and should stimulate internal production. Many of the ways he suggests pumping these tax receipts back into the economy make sense.

Overriding both the energy and economic proposals, however, is this question: How well has Gerald Ford done in this, his real debut week; as President—and how well has Congress shown that two branches of our Government can work together on energy and the economy?

The answer: not well at all.

The President's State of the Union Message is the single most important communication between the executive and legislative branches mandated in the Constitution. Over two centuries, it has come to be treated by Presidents as a benchmark in their stewardship; in this century, it has often been presented in person by the President to his co-equal branch, and has been received—if not always in admiration—at least always in respect and dignity by the House and Senate in joint session.

Consider what has happened this week. The Democratic leadership of the Congress, in a lust to grab the credit for recommending a popular tax cut, upstaged the President on

Monday with a program all its own. Substantively, it was an insult to the voter's intelligence, with its dire finger-wagging at high interest rates while it proposed enormous deficits that insure high interest rates; institutionally, it was an insult to the executive branch, which — this week — it owes the courtesy of an interested reception of proposals.

And how did the new President react? Tipped off to the planned upstaging, and eager to dominate the headlines as the savior who proposed a tax cut, Mr. Ford followed the panicky advice of his closest aides to present a prime-time television pitch Monday night, calling upon all Americans to make the sacrifice of accepting a tax rebate.

The next day, Tuesday, with his program presented lopsidedly, the President's press secretary put out a great many of the answers to questions raised in the President's teaser. The media, as they are geared to do, followed the President's lead, concentrating on his program for a second day, downplaying the Congressional reaction to the teaser speech, cross-plugging the next day's show.

That anticlimactic show was Wednesday's afternoon presentation of the details of the program previously hinted out, designed to provide filmed highlights for Wednesday night TV network news. That third bite at the apple, effectively overwhelming the Congressional ploy at gaining voter credit for the tax cut, was what we used to call "the President's annual State of the Union Message."

Certainly the strategy succeeded in feeding the story out over a full week. But what did it tell us about the state of the relations between the Congress and the President, and about the way Mr. Ford views his office?

Congress, we now see, stands ready to one-up the President at any opportunity, tradition and good taste be damned. Piously proclaiming no "politics as usual" at a time of national difficulty, the Congress has shown it intends to play politics with unusual intensity, to the extent of disguising agreement in the cloak of controversy.

The President, we have seen this week, is a Truman-style scrapper: Like his hero, he is a man of the Congress thrust into the Presidency unexpectedly, who knows the ploys that Congressmen play. When "the boys" tried to finesse Mr. Ford, he gave them the old media one-two-three.

But a President is the President. He ought to act with deliberation and dignity. He need not be personally stiff or programatically rigid, but he ought to have some sense of decorum and concern for history.

When he finally came around to delivering his heavily leaked address, Mr. Ford did well to confess that the State of the Union was "not good"; one way to help it get better is for the President to conduct himself with the high seriousness expected of a man charting a "new direction."