

States of the Union

A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

I will be the President of the black, brown, red, and white Americans, of old and young, of women's liberationists and male chauvinists of the poor and the rich, of native sons and new refugees

—GERALD R. FORD,
August 12, 1974

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT I heard your address to Congress last month and it convinced me along with everyone else that you are a decent, honest man. That's a relief. It's been no fun having a rascalion in the White House. Also, it is certainly pleasant to note that even "at this point in time" nice guys can finish first.

But your speech was terrible. It really frightened me. You talked a lot about fighting inflation and keeping the peace, and of course we all want you to do both. Yet how could you have failed to take notice of the two ugliest sights on our national landscape—poverty and segregation? The omission was more than serious, it was disastrous, be-

cause it instantly excommunicated a quarter of the population.

True, these have never been your kind of plagues. In the House you either voted against or worked hard to weaken every major piece of civil rights legislation offered since 1948. And no one has ever accused you of harping on the plight of the poor. Still, as you pointed out in your speech, "Good government requires that we tend to the economic problems facing our country in a spirit of equity to all our citizens."

So let's talk about equity. Have you heard that children and old people in Harlem are eating dog food because they can't afford hamburger meat? Have you seen the latest statistics on infant mortality in Los Angeles' Watts, in Appalachia and in Tupelo, Mississippi? Has your Secretary of Agriculture reminded you that 14 million rural Americans are destitute? Or your man in HUD that at least 6 million dwelling units—some in every state—are unfit for human habitation? Does it bother you that the richest 1 per cent in the United States

owns 35 per cent of the nation's wealth?

Let's face it, Mr. President, you can't ignore such facts and hope to be the leader of "all our citizens." Your predecessor didn't give a damn. For six years he systematically bilked the poor and stroked the rich. He impounded money that Congress had earmarked for hot school lunches, food stamps, free clinics, and low-cost housing, then gave away billions to Lockheed, Grumman and other contractors. He closed all but a musty corner of the Office of Economic Opportunity, the only agency in Washington that had ever tretched over the sufferings of poor people. For good measure he succeeded in crippling another exceptional Federal agency, the Civil Rights Commission, in its work against endemic segregation. Worse, this man took to the airwaves and spoke the word "busing" as if it were a curse, inviting us all to imitate him. No doubt about it. He was an uncaring person.

Mr. President, you said you care—and I believe you. Yet your speech was careless. It had a few neat, symmetrical turns of phrase, like the one about your wanting to be President of all Americans, including the poor and the rich. But the rich have had plenty of Presidents already. What do they need another one for?

Besides, what did you offer as reassurance to the poor man, much less the black, brown and red man? On the one hand, you called for tough-minded reductions in Federal spending, on the other, you inveighed "against unwarranted cuts in national defense." I ask you, what shall we cut if not the military budget? You know the answer: welfare, health, mass transit, consumer protection, legal aid, food stamps, housing, antipollution programs, and education. With your threat of a veto you have already persuaded Congress to emasculate the mass transit bill. What next?

I was heartened when you an-

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nounced you would sign the elementary and secondary education bill. Nonetheless, you marred the promise "In implementing the bill's provisions," you said, "I will oppose excessive funding." It is hard to see how you are going to do that without playing the same Constitutional shell game your predecessor played. Are you claiming the privilege of deciding what is excessive and what is not? It was the Congress, not you, who authorized and appropriated those funds. All you did was sign the bill. You are only the President of the United States—and all of us have learned what a humble, carefully confined position that is. Please, speak to me not of impoundment. Just obey the law.

YOU ARE A law-and-order man, and have talked a great deal in the past about the perils of permissiveness. In 1968 you thought you perceived "an imbalance" in society, "a mistaking of license for liberty and an overconcern for the rights of the accused at the expense of the injured." This imbalance, you assured us, won't be corrected by soft-headed liberals in Congress, but only by Republicans and others who recognize that law and order, with justice, must prevail in America.

Well, that kind of nonsense was fashionable then, no use crying over spilt rhetoric. But now, Mr. President, can't you see a different, and much more dangerous, kind of imbalance? Doesn't the nation's persistent racism scare the hell out of you?

It does me. Recently a friend of mine, a black man, bought a house on an all-white block in Bethel, Connecticut. Some of his neighbors did everything they could think of to get him out of there: phone calls at midnight, rocks through windows, the usual thing. Then someone tossed a bomb into his living room, leaving a hole in the wall big enough for an integrated school bus to drive

through. The police conducted an investigation. They concluded it was just a prank.

The same year you were deploring permissiveness, Congress passed a fair housing law that bans discrimination in virtually all of the nation's 65 million dwelling units. Again that year, the Supreme Court affirmed the old Civil Rights Act of 1866 forbidding discrimination in the sale or rental of all housing and land. "When racial discrimination herds men into ghettos and makes their ability to buy property turn on the color of their skin," declared the justices, "then it is a relic of slavery."

Those laws and rulings, Mr. President, along with so many others that came after them, are practically dead letters. Landlords and realtors flout them daily in myriad ways. In my suburban area we have a program that attempts to "place" black families in white neighborhoods. Can you imagine? It's 112 years after emancipation and we are still "placing" black families in white neighborhoods.

There are dozens of such organized efforts throughout the country, and all are marginal. How could they be otherwise when for six years the man in the White House pampered bigotry and allowed segregation to run rampant. The ultimate effect of the "Southern strategy" was to Wallace-ize the North. Consequently, Sir, you now preside over an America that is drifting day by day and block by block toward increased segregation, by both race and class.

So, Mr. President, I am waiting to learn what you mean by "equity to all our citizens." John Selden, the 18th-century English jurist, observed that "equity is according to the conscience of him that is Chancellor." Well, you are the Chancellor, and for at least the next 27 months you are going to be our conscience.

With all good wishes,
RICHARD J. MARGOLIS