

# States of the Union

## STRAINED MERCY OF THE TRULY RICH

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WASHINGTON

**A** FRIEND and I were standing in a parking-garage elevator at the basement level, waiting for the door to close, when a cheerful drunk joined us. "Down?" he inquired.

"Up," my friend corrected. "We've already bottomed out."

Liberals in this town may be entertaining similarly sober thoughts now that the Reagan Administration has flashed its budgetary ax and specified

much of its chopping list. "We've been suffering from a kind of anticipatory anxiety," a Democratic Congressman told me the other day. "It's a relief at last to know the worst."

As matters now stand, "the worst" turns out to be a shade better than many had feared. Not every social program, it appears, is to be discarded, not every pauper is to be abandoned. Indeed, Ronald Reagan has made sacred cows out of the New Deal's and even the Great Society's major welfare triumphs, namely Social Security and Medicare, and out of some of the minor ones to boot, e.g. Head Start, the school lunch and breakfast programs, and the annual summer jobs effort for young people. These and related programs, all now safely beyond the axman's reach, add up to more than 25 per cent of next year's national budget.

The mildly welcome news suggests that Ronald Reagan may understand us better than we understand ourselves. We Americans are resolutely suspicious of sweeping reforms, whatever their direction, our political nature abhors a vacuum cleaner. The quality of mercy emanating from Washington these days is judiciously strained. It droppeth like a gentle drizzle from Reagan.

By excepting the "truly needy" from

his fiscal hit list, the President has sought to allay any feelings of guilt that may, in the still of some northern Virginia night, happen to afflict a sleeping Congressman with a wide-awake constituency. He has also sought to put to rest a growing suspicion among the citizenry that this Administration, which has promised miracles, may resemble the Wizard of Oz less than it does the Tin Man—that is to say, it may be missing a heart.

Reagan's decision not to dismantle the *entire* welfare system will doubtless save lives and perhaps a few Republican souls as well. Nevertheless, it seems a melancholy sign of the times that liberals are expressing gratitude to a President so generous as to have announced he will not deprive the blind, the handicapped and the elderly poor of the few Federal scraps they have grown accustomed to. Only in the tawdriest of times could such a declaration be counted a victory for progressives.

Of course, the notion that there is such a category as the "truly needy" permits the President to be righteously capricious in his selection of targets, both in the kindness he confers and in the meanness he displays. Reagan's magic ax, we are assured, will fall only on fake victims, people who merely pretend to be poor, while mercifully sparing authentic sufferers. Thus David Stockman, from his computer room at the Office of Management and Budget, has proposed to "put a cap on food stamps," not in order to starve the poor (perish the thought!) but in order to thwart the affluent, i.e. those naughty college students who are said to use food stamps for the purchase of gourmet delights.

Stockman's standards come very close to being a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because no one in advance of welfare legislation has ever agreed upon a satisfactory definition of the "truly needy," it may become possible for the Reagan Administration to define it *ex post facto*. In that event, a truly needy person would be anyone who survived the cuts in the President's budget. All others would be shams, frauds and, in the case of those students, cheater-eaters. One

thing you can say for the neoconservatives. Their ideas aren't overly complicated.

If the President knows something about the truly needy, everyone who attended his Inaugural knows a great deal about the truly rich. I missed the event myself—I wasn't invited—but people here are still oooing and ahhhhing about it, recalling with reverence or anger the parade of minks and Mercedes that passed before their eyes, not to mention the squadrons of private jets that touched down for a week at National Airport. It was, by all accounts, quite a show—a sort of social antonym to Andrew Jackson's first Inaugural, when a muddy-booted mob of well-wishers and job-seekers swarmed into the White House, forcing the President and his family to make a getaway out the back door. Daniel Webster observed dryly, "People have come 500 miles to see General Jackson, and they really seem to think that the country has been rescued from some dreadful danger."

Surely those who attended the latest Inaugural, many of whom had come considerably farther than 500 miles to see Ronald Reagan, must have felt similarly rescued. Indeed, any doubts as to Reagan's intentions toward privilege should have been washed away in the flood of affection shown him that day by the truly rich, the deserving rich.

Nor will it do to argue that the whole Phillistine circus was simply an aberration, not a portent. An inauguration is a new President's *entrance*, the most symbolically significant moment in the whole drama, and Ronald Reagan, an old Hollywood pro, wrote the book on entrances. What I fear we witnessed on January 20 was not a ceremonial accident but an intentional scenario, a ritual that expressed the new Administration's deepest instincts. Just as Lopakhin, in *The Cherry Orchard*, betrayed his allegiance to bourgeois efficiency with his opening speech—"The train got in. What time is it?"—so Ronald Reagan betrayed his allegiance to corporate wealth and power with his opening celebration.

Moreover, since the President and his staff "hit the ground running"—an

oddly macho metaphor that suggests attacking paratroopers—we have already been made privy to part of the plot. The instant deregulation of oil prices was an early warning, if we needed one, that Exxon's profits would mean more to this Administration than people's pocketbooks. Similarly, the unseemly haste in the Departments of Commerce and Labor to rewrite rules governing food labeling and the commercial use of chemicals implies that consumers will soon be eating a lot of neopreservatives.

IT IS HARD to be a liberal in Washington these days, and harder still to find one. On Capitol Hill the Democrats seem stunned and atomized. "Where Are the Democrats?" asked the *New York Times* in a recent editorial headline, and then went on to note "Barely 90 days ago many Democrats were clamoring for a New Liberal Agenda. Now, when it counts, they can't even get together on the old one."

It may be true that Democrats are wary of each other, but certainly they are a good deal wrier of Ronald Reagan. There are Democrats who want no part of the President's version of the American future, but neither do they want to stand in his path, where they could get trampled. Bob Bergland, who before becoming Carter's Secretary of Agriculture was himself a representative from Minnesota, has been urging his fellow Democrats in Congress to vote neither yea nor nay on Administration budget-cutting proposals. "Simply vote present," he recommends. "Let the Republicans take full responsibility for their misguided policies." Yet even that small expedient—being consistently noncommittal—may take a greater resolve than most Democrats can muster.

Most of my friends in Civil Service, meanwhile, are hunkering down for a long winter, hibernation being a suitable response to the "freeze" on grants and contracts that the President imposed his first hours in office. The other day I happened to run into an acquaintance from California, the founder of a cooperative there, who said he was hav-

ing no luck getting his Federal contract renewed. "My old friends are either gone or in hiding," he told me, "and the new people won't talk to me."

The Carter political appointees for the most part are already cleaned out. Quite a few have sent me little engraved notices announcing they have set up consulting firms in Washington, usually in partnership with one or two other quondam Carterites. Several have even asked me out to lunch, an overture that hardly ever occurred to them when they were in office. I'm not bitter, by and large, they are pleasant lunch-mates. It's not their fault that they happened to be in the way of Reagan's new broom, the one that's been sweeping the government clean of Democrats.

Still, one wishes that they had fought a little harder when they had the chance for those 35 million citizens who are truly needy by any standards, including David Stockman's. We have had so few opportunities since the Tonkin Gulf resolution to get it together for the poor. Carter squandered his, which is one of the many reasons we now have Ronald Reagan, an opportunity in reverse.

I mention the Tonkin resolution because it seems to me that our current inflation problems began at the moment we committed ourselves to an enormously expensive conflict without simultaneously committing ourselves to enduring a few economic restrictions on the homefront. It was an unpopular war, one that did not inspire sacrifices, so Lyndon Johnson tried to persuade us that we could have both guns and butter, a great war and also a Great Society.

We are still paying—literally, in dollar value—for our acceptance of that convenient lie, and under Ronald Reagan we are likely to continue paying. True, he has no war to contend with and no great vision to conjure with. But his firm intention to increase military spending while sharply reducing taxes seems a fair approximation of Johnson's guns-and-butter fallacy. What we are in danger of getting from Reagan is a missile-and-margarine approach—an inflated Pentagon without war, and an inflated dollar without social progress.