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Last Resorts

In the 1976 presidential race, Governor Carter reportedly took the position that in solving our energy problems he would rate nuclear energy as a last resort. Some weeks ago, when the Carter Administration was found to be cutting red tape to speed the licensing of nuclear power plants, one of his retinue explained the apparent change of heart by saying, "Now we are down to last resorts."

Political rhetoric and rationalizations aside, this startling response gives us plenty to think about. It raises the question of how ready we are, as a people, to take the medicine that is implicit in a "last resorts" political economy. Perhaps it will not come to that, but it very well may.

Again and again, we look at the disarray in our national energy policies and at the absence of a national will to face the bleak facts. What is missing is the kind of resolution and action which marked the era of wartime mobilization, when private preferences were overridden by the common emergency. Obviously, it is futile to wish for a return of that sort of unity while we can indulge ourselves in rising imports of energy supplies and in the consolations of long-term research and development, which may help by the end of the century. The case could be quite different if the situation falls apart in five years or even ten. Perhaps an awakening to the meaning of a "last resorts" society can get us moving in the near term.

We have grown accustomed to having things turn out right, in general, and we expect it as a matter of course. To be sure, things have not gone exactly right for some groups in our society, and there is still that bill to be paid. But on the whole, our situation compares graphically with that of most of the rest of the world. In this country, especially, affluence and consumer satisfaction have brought living standards and expectations to a state for which history offers no parallel.

What can happen to the emotional and social stability of a very rich, if not spoiled, society when it is confronted suddenly with an economy of last resorts? What can become of the decency that underlies behavior in a fortunate and civilized democracy? One thinks of Western societies with which we share historical and institutional beginnings, and whose material fortunes lately have gone sour. They are already close to their last resorts, yet they seem to have come to terms with misfortune. The difference, possibly, is that these societies have 2000 years or more of cultural development behind them and are able to draw upon the perspectives and resilience that are the fruits of their embattled pasts. It is a different case with the American experience, short and one-sided as it has been.

So the question remains troubling. Is our national character prepared for a reversal of our fortunes and our optimistic expectations if events transform the good society to a condition of last resorts? Will we take the same generous view of human and economic rights, and of our relations with other peoples and races, when there is not enough to go around—much less enough to assure us the lion's share?

We are taking a lot for granted. We do not seem to believe that the American experience, as we know it, can be altered drastically and unpleasantly. We seem to think that our luck will somehow hold out, and that a worst-case future cannot materialize. We refuse to examine the social and human implications of last resorts.

That is why the present condition of policy-making in energy is so alarming, and why it may presage other policy dilemmas which will arise as global issues sharpen in the next decade. A nation reduced to last resorts is one in trouble.—WILLIAM D. CAREY