

OMAR BURLESON
17TH DISTRICT
TEXAS

MRS. JUDITH CURTIS
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

MEMBER
COMMITTEE ON
WAYS AND MEANS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

January 28, 1975

JAN 29 1975

file

Dear Colleague:

In case you missed the Washington Post editorial,
Sunday, the 26th, a copy is attached.

With kindest regards, I remain

Sincerely yours,

Omar
Omar Burleson

OB:C/a
Encl.

How to Ration Gasoline

1-26-75

LET US SUPPOSE, for a moment, that you are the person to whom President Ford assigns the job of designing a system to ration gasoline. The President thinks that rationing is a terrible idea and wants to cut consumption by raising prices and taxes instead. But a great many well-intentioned senators and congressmen think that rationing is much fairer. We are now going to suppose that they win the coming fight, a rationing law is enacted, and you are appointed to set up the operation. The basic program is clear. There remain only a few minor issues of policy that a sensible person like yourself should have no difficulty resolving quickly and—to repeat the key word—fairly.

The first question is to whom to give ration books, and your first inclination is to give them to every licensed driver. That brings you to the family in which both parents and all three teen-aged children have licenses. If they have five ration books, the kids can continue to drive to school. You think that they ought to take the school bus, and you revoke the kids' coupons. But then you learn that they all have part-time jobs—one of them plays the xylophone in a rock band—and they will be unemployed if they can't drive. You get a call from the White House telling you not to contribute to unemployment, which is rising. You give in, and return the kids' ration books. That gives the family five times as much gas as the widow across the street whose three children are all under 16.

Continuing the crusade for fairness, you take up the case of Family A, whose harassed father has to commute 30 miles to work every day, and Family B next door, whose father runs a mail order business out of his basement. Family B goes to the beach every weekend—very inexpensively because, as the congressmen made clear, the point of rationing is to avoid raising prices. Score another point for fairness and turn to the case of two suburban communities, a mile apart, one of which has bus service to and from central city and the other of which does not. Reasonably enough, you give less gas to people in the community with buses—until you discover that none of them works in the central city. They all seem to work in other suburbs, most of which have no public transportation. Your response, obviously, is to make everyone in the United States fill out a form showing where he works. Then you hire a computer firm to identify those who can get to their jobs by public transit in less than 90 minutes with no more than three transfers; they will get fewer coupons. There are certain difficulties in enforcing these rules, as you concede to several congressional committees, but you expect to be able to handle them with the expanded appropriations that you have requested to hire more federal gas investigators.

Now that you are beginning to get the hang of the thing, you will want to proceed to the case of the salesman who flies to an airport and rents a car. If you issue gas to the rent-a-car companies, the salesman might be tempted to use one of their cars to take his

family on a vacation. But the salesman's personal coupons won't cover company trips. Now you have to decide how much gasoline to give to companies, and which business trips are essential. You might turn that over to the staff that you set up to decide which delivery services are essential and how to prevent delivery trucks from being used for personal business.

By the way, you have to consider the rural poor—for example, the laborer who lives far out in the country. Some weeks he's employed far from home and commutes hundreds of miles. Some weeks he finds work nearby. Some weeks he's unemployed, particularly when the weather's bad. You post a prize for the formula to cover that one.

You are beginning to discover the great truth that simple rules are never fair, and the fairer the system gets the more complicated it has to become. Even in World War II, when there were only one-third as many cars and the national dependence on them was far less pronounced, it was necessary to set up boards of citizens in every community to rule on a flood of special requests, hardships, grievances and challenges. It is a method that requires, unfortunately, a massive invasion of personal privacy. Americans accepted it then as a temporary wartime expedient. But the present emergency is not temporary.

A year ago, when the Nixon administration was considering rationing, the planners suggested simply giving everyone the same number of coupons and letting people buy and sell them legally on a "white market," as they called it. But in a white market the laborer with the long trip to work would have to bid against the family that wants to drive its station wagon to Yosemite for its vacation. Under President Ford's price scheme, at least the country would know roughly what the increased price of fuel would be. In a white market, no one could say how high the bidding might go, or how widely it might fluctuate from one season to another.

Congress, and specifically the Democratic leadership, is behaving rather badly. Its committees have been exploring the economics and technology of energy with considerable skill for more than two years, and they understand the choices as well as the administration does. The Democratic leadership's cries for further delay now are hardly more than a plea merely to postpone unpleasant but urgent decisions. A year ago, when President Nixon asked for rationing authority, Congress said that rationing was unpopular; the law never passed. Now that President Ford proposes the other alternative, higher prices, congressmen cite polls to show that people would prefer rationing.

In the present state of general indecision, the most widely popular position is probably the one represented by Gov. Meldrim Thomson of New Hampshire. Gov. Thomson opposes both rationing and higher prices. He would prefer, evidently, simply returning to the halcyon days of 1972 before the energy squeeze took hold of us. It is a pleasant idea. But it is not, unfortunately, one of the real choices—not even for New Hampshire.