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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Surrender on Energy

AFTER FIVE MONTHS of struggling with energy taxes and the idea of a coherent energy policy, Congress has given up. It has settled for a barely visible increase of 4.3 cents a gallon on the gasoline tax. Once again Congress has been unwilling to push for conservation or to warn the country about its declining reserves of domestic oil.

Instead, a lot of senators have been loudly telling their constituents that they are the special victims of tax schemes that would burden them far more heavily than all those other people who live in other places and in different ways. It's been a rich display of one of the oldest and least attractive tactics in congressional politics. President Clinton's original proposal struck a good balance among the various regions' interests. But each state found something in it to hate, and the package quickly fell apart.

Sen. Max Baucus has been vehemently explaining to his state that a gasoline tax would be utterly unfair to it because westerners have to drive far more than those people in the East who keep trying to impose it on them. In fact, how much more? In 1991, the last year for which the government has published figures, Montanans used 9 percent more gasoline per capita than Virginians did. That's a difference, but not the big

difference that all the talk about big sky country might have led an unwary listener to suppose.

Sen. Herbert Kohl's Wisconsin used slightly less gasoline than the national average. Mr. Kohl adamantly opposes any gasoline tax increase beyond 4.3 cents on grounds that there should be no additional burdens on the middle class. Most Americans consider themselves middle class, and it's hard to go very far toward balancing either the federal budget deficit or the national energy deficit without their help. But when citizens begin to think of themselves primarily as the victims of everybody else, the prospect for sensible legislation fades.

Oil production in this country has been falling steadily since 1985, and imports so far this year are up about 10 percent over the same period last year. A gasoline tax of 4.3 cents a gallon will reduce consumption, according to an estimate by Resources for the Future, by almost 2 percent—just about the amount by which consumption has risen in the past year alone. As a way to reduce air pollution the tax is no more expensive than other methods, such as the elaborate automobile inspections that will soon be required here. That 4.3 cent tax increase will make a small improvement in the same level. Why wouldn't Congress go for a bigger improvement? Ask your senator,

The Vincent Foster Briefings

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE not to sympathize with the intense desire of the Clinton White House to protect the privacy of the family of the late Vincent Foster Jr., the White House deputy counsel who apparently committed suicide. There is, as White House officials have complained, something unseemly about the endless badgering that administration press aides have taken over what is, finally, a personal tragedy.

But unfortunately, the matter does not end there. The White House—presumably by inadvertence rather than design—has over the last week issued a series of contradictory statements on the circumstances surrounding Mr. Foster's death. These contradictions have only fed the agitation about an event that, strictly because of the aspects of public prominence and personal mystery in the case, was bound at the least to ignite widespread curiosity.

For example, Communications Director Mark Gearan insisted repeatedly that Mr. Foster "never said anything to indicate that anything was out of the ordinary to his colleagues." This is clearly not true if a whole series of reports from other White House officials is true. It now appears that many old friends were aware that Mr. Foster was depressed—even though this of course does not mean anyone suspected the depths of his despair.

Similarly, White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers told reporters on Tuesday that she had no knowledge that a handwritten list of three doctors, including two psychiatrists, had been found in Mr. Foster's wallet. But Bernard Nussbaum, White House counsel, said on Thursday he had heard about this list.

We don't think Mr. Gearan or Ms. Myers were trying to cover up anything. But it is not helpful—to the administration or to Mr. Foster's family—to send top aides out to give briefings when they have not been given much in the way of information. The contradictions so far only encourage the very sort of foolish and wild speculation with which the administration is legitimately impatient.

It is often useless, and sometimes damaging, to search for rational explanations for the act of suicide. And we do not underestimate the shock and dismay Mr. Foster's death has created inside the White House, especially for his longtime friends. This has no doubt made it harder for them to deal with the public side of this tragedy. But too much has been leaked, and the White House has shifted its ground too often to let matters sit where they now are. The administration needs to gather the facts and give an honest briefing about what it knows—and to be straightforward as well about what it may never be able to know.

By August 1, The Post was reporting a list was found with the names of three doctors and two of them were psychiatrists.

Reinventing Humility