The energy crisis turns ugly

In the wind-swept snow on the Capitol's west face one night last week, the only footprints visible were those of a solitary policeman standing in the shelter of a column, waiting to be relieved. Immediately below, the snow was slowly obscuring decorations on the unlit Congressional Christmas tree, while stretching away along the Mall the nation's monuments stood in darkness. Americans had begun to feel the pinch of the energy crisis.

Despite shortages of fuel, lights burned late in Government offices as policy makers and bureaucrats alike tried to assess potential dangers and possible remedies. The first reports on voluntary energy conservation efforts were encouraging: gasoline consumption was down 15 percent; jet fuel, 28 percent; residual oil (the kind used to generate electricity), down 8 percent. By the beginning of the month, the overall demand for petroleum products had been reduced by 1.8 million barrels per day (B/D), more than enough to make up for the then current estimated shortages of 1.4 million B/D—out of a normal average consumption of 19 to 20 million B/D.

But the squeeze is only beginning. Current projections put shortages during the first quarter of next year at 3.3 million B/D, a 16 percent deficit. By then jet fuel will have a 32 percent shortfall and residual oil, 24 percent. That means jobs lost, and as this realization slowly sank into the nation's consciousness, unrest began to mount:

- Truckers, complaining of price gouging, blocked freeways and truckstops in protest. Airline pilots threatened holiday season walkouts because of layoffs from the estimated 25 percent reduction in airline schedules to take effect after New Year.
- Investors reacted to growing prospect of a recession by sending Wall Street into a $100 billion tailspin. Historically, recessions have been caused by drop in demand for goods and services, while the problem now is a drop in supplies. Economists freely admitted an inability to predict the outcome or the severity of a supply-induced recession.
- After months of hand-wringing, Congress failed to pass proposed energy legislation that would have given the President "the widest reach of executive power ever given in U.S. history," including the power to ration gasoline. The bill was axed by a wrangle over the provision of an excess-profits tax. Reportedly the White House had first said it wanted such a tax, but then lobbied strongly against it, inducing the Senate to cut it from the bill. By an overwhelming vote, the House refused to go along with the excision. Congressmen began asking sharp questions about mysteriously depleted Naval petroleum reserves and possible conflict of interest among Administration energy planners. The Elk Hills, Calif., Naval Petroleum Reserve was set aside some 35 years ago as an exclusive, vital defense stockpile. Why, they asked, had drilling by private companies been allowed just outside its gates, clearly tapping the same pool of oil? And why was Department of Defense energy policy being set in part by a man, William P. Clements, Jr., who reportedly owns $102 million of stock in an oil well drilling company, whose president is his son?

As energy became more and more mixed with politics, President Nixon repeatedly appeared before the press with his new energy czar, William Simon, who announced tougher conservation measures with each appearance. With Mideast peace talks about to start in Geneva and Congressmen about to encounter their shivering constituents during Christmas recess, the next few weeks hold critical decisions.

John H. Douglas

President Nixon and energy czar William Simon prepare for long, cold winter.

Wolf Vishniac 1922–1973

Tragedy struck the U.S. Antarctic research program on December 11. The noted biologist and space scientist Wolf Vishniac fell 500 feet to his death down a rugged slope of ice and rock above a mountain valley in Antarctica.

The accident occurred on the southern slope of the Upper Wright Valley, a few miles from the base camp where he and a colleague had been conducting field research on Antarctic microorganisms since November 8. The site is 73 miles northwest of McMurdo station, headquarters of the U.S. research program in Antarctica.

Vishniac, professor of biology at the University of Rochester, was active in the study of how microorganisms can exist in harsh environments in anticipation of experiments to go on board the U.S. Viking spacecraft scheduled to land on Mars in July 1976. This was his second season of research in Antarctica.

Vishniac's body was discovered at 6 a.m., December 11 by his research colleague, Zeddie Bowen, a University of Rochester geologist. Bowen began searching for Vishniac after he failed to return at the end of a planned 12-hour period of field study away from their temporary base camp at 7,000-foot elevation.

Vishniac had apparently been walking along a trail along the lip of an ice field and fell off the edge of the ice 500 feet down a steep rocky and ice-covered slope. Bowen returned to camp and radioed McMurdo, which sent a helicopter with a doctor and a recovery team. The doctor, Ed Wilgress, flight surgeon at McMurdo, found Vishniac dead of multiple injuries. Death had apparently been instantaneous. Wilgress told a group of visiting science reporters that he found Vishniac's log. The last entry was at 11 p.m., December 10, noting that the temperature was minus 16 degrees C. From the condition of the body, Wilgress estimated that the accident happened within a two-hour period following that entry.

Vishniac is the first U.S. scientist to die in Antarctica since Thomas E. Berg was killed in a helicopter crash on Mt. Newall in 1969.