

Pre-Election Mood: 'There's No Time for Dreams'

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DETROIT — There was a time in his life when Dewey David Burton chased the American dream.

"I wanted to be somebody," he remembers. "It wasn't the money so much as that I just wanted to have some kind of recognition, you know, to be more tomorrow than I was yesterday, and that's what I was working for."

Today, however, the 28-year-old auto worker has all but given up on his dreams

Mood of the Voters

and given himself over almost entirely to matters of day-to-day economic survival.

"It's the money thing," he said one evening this week in his home on the fringes of this city. "It takes so much to just make it that there's no time for dreams and no energy for making them come true—and I'm not so sure any more that it's ever going to get any better."

It is with this rather essential pessimism that Mr. Burton, a Democrat, approaches the elections here next month, and it is a view echoed by a majority of Americans surveyed in a Gallup poll whose results were released today.

Dejected Conclusion

Whatever prognoses the various candidates may be offering in their campaigns here and elsewhere in the country, Mr. Burton and most of those consulted in the poll have already come to a decidedly dejected conclusion about America's economic future.

Like Mr. Burton, 7 out of 10 held little hope for any immediate improvements, and like him, more than half said that a severe depression seems altogether imminent.

That such a gloomy consensus should emerge from a national fabric shredded by inflation and unemployment is not surprising; but that Mr. Burton, a man of generally optimistic, almost joyful instincts, should concur seems especially significant.

If the press of the American economy has not raised his cost of living but lowered his long-term aspirations as well, it may be that politicians in and out of office are ignoring one of inflation's most debilitating and dangerous effects: the wounding of the human spirit.

"I think that's true," he agreed. "Something's happening to people like me—working stiffs, as they say—and it isn't just that we have to pay more for this or that or that we're having to do without this or make do with a little less of that."

Hopes Left Behind

"It's deeper, and harder to explain, but it's like more and more of us are sort of leaving all our hopes outside in the rain and coming into the house and just locking the door—you know, just turning the key and 'click,' that's it for what we always thought we could be."

This "despondency," as he described it later in the evening, translates politically into a kind of hopelessness about the processes and the system.

"Not that I've given up on it," Mr. Burton said, "it's just that I've come to understand it more, and I understand that not much is going to improve for me as a result of it."

Still, it has been the Republicans presiding over the



The New York Times/Andrew Sacks
Dewey David Burton, an auto worker, during interview

death of his dreams, and he seems inclined to vote Democratic this year—though not with any great enthusiasm.

Born in 1946 in Southern Illinois, Mr. Burton came here after graduating from high school seeking a place in Detroit's massive automobile industry.

He got a job with the Ford Motor Company, married and settled down. His son, David John, was born in 1967, the year after the Burtons bought a house and the year before Mr. Burton began to chip away at nights on the college degree that was to become an overriding passion in his life.

"He drove himself," his wife, Ilona, said. "He'd work all day and study all night and then take his books with him to work and read on his breaks."

In the spring of 1972, Mr. and Mrs. Burton were the subjects of two articles in The New York Times in which they were portrayed as people driven by the pressures of that electoral year to vote for George C. Wallace in the Michigan Presidential primary.

In the general election, however, they succumbed to their Democratic heritage and chose George McGovern over Richard M. Nixon as

"the lesser, but not much, of the evils."

By then, his wife had gone to work to improve and, eventually, to simply maintain their standard of living. She developed an ulcer, although she was only 24 years old, and he was plagued by arthritic gout, a condition aggravated by his long hours of standing on the assembly line as a spray-painter.

"But it was beginning to happen to me back then," Mr. Burton remembered. "It was a gradual thing, no big explosion. I realized I was killing myself and that there wasn't going to be any reward for my suicide."

He had been passed over for promotions at the plant, a small business he had formed on the side was losing money, and so, one day in 1973, he closed it and quit school.

"I realized that with prices going up the way they were, I was just getting farther behind all the time," he said. "The overtime, Ilona's earnings, all of it was being eaten away by taxes and inflation—and the days were flying by."

"I wouldn't see my boy for days and then I'd be so dead on the day off—when I got one—that it wouldn't be any fun for him anyway, so I decided one day to stop dreaming and just concentrate on today."

"I work just as hard now, but I'm relaxed. No more pushing, sweating and worrying. All I care about now is my family and my hobbies. I do my job only because it pays me enough money so that I can have a house and food."

"I guess you could say that's what inflation and all the rest has done to me."

He was staring at nothing by then, and he punctuated his monologue with a short sigh and a long drag on his unfiltered cigarette. Finally he spoke again.

"You can't blame it all on the politicians," he said, "but I wish just for once that one of them would say, 'now folks, I swear to God, if you'll elect me I won't do a damn thing.' That's the fellow I'd vote for. Somebody who'd just let us alone."