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Statement by

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before the

Joint Economic Committee

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I am pleased to meet with the Joint Economic Committee once again to present the views of the Board of Governors on the condition of the national economy.

Our nation today is suffering from a serious economic recession. It is also in the midst of an inflation that is threatening the very fabric of our society.

Public policy is thus confronted with a grave and profoundly difficult problem. There is an immediate need for measures to cushion the recession. Yet, we cannot ignore the longer-run implications of our actions for the rate of inflation or for the other adverse trends that in recent years have hampered the nation's economic performance.

Let me turn, first, to the immediate economic situation and then move to some of our longer-range economic problems.

Since last fall, general business activity has deteriorated. The decline in the real gross national product in the fourth quarter was unusually large. Reductions in production and employment over recent months have been about as rapid as at any time in the postwar period. Cutbacks in activity have been especially sharp in the auto industry, but they have been substantial also in the production of other consumer goods, business equipment, construction products, and industrial materials.

Total employment increased during the first ten months of 1974; but there has been a marked decline in recent months, and unemployment has risen sharply. Overtime work has also been reduced and an increasing number of workers have been able to find only part-time employment.

As so often happens in a recession, consumer demands for autos, furniture, household appliances, and other durable goods have declined sharply. Sales of domestic-type autos in January -- although up from December -- were at an annual rate of only 6.6 million units, nearly one-fourth below last summer's pace. Weakness in consumer demand has extended also to clothing and other nondurable goods. Total retail sales expressed in current dollars fell more than 3 per cent from the third to the fourth quarter of last year, and the decline in real terms was even larger. Actually, the physical volume of retail trade has been moving on a downward trend since the spring of 1973.

Residential construction was notably weak throughout 1974. New housing starts in December were at an annual rate of only 870,000 units, the lowest rate since 1966. However, conditions in the mortgage credit markets are rapidly improving, and there has been some tendency for new building permits to stabilize recently. Thus, we may reasonably expect some upturn in home-building before very long.

Business capital spending, on the other hand, will probably decline this year in real terms -- although dollar outlays may be rising moderately further. Of late, business firms have been cancelling or postponing plans for construction of new facilities and for the purchase of new machinery and equipment. This has resulted in a drop of new orders for capital equipment, and of contracts for commercial and industrial construction.

The decline in final sales during recent months has been unusually large -- when we allow for the advance in prices -- so that inventories continued to pile up despite substantial cutbacks in production. However, business firms are working strenuously to cut back excess stocks -- through further curtailments of output, special promotions, and price concessions -- and it appears that we are now moving into a period of inventory liquidation. This adjustment of inventories will have a temporary depressing effect on production and employment, but it is an essential precondition for an upturn in business activity later on.

As the economy weakened during the course of 1974, the behavior of prices began to reflect it. Sensitive prices of industrial raw materials started to decline in the spring of last year. Last fall, the effects of declining business activity began to show up in wholesale prices of intermediate materials, supplies, and components, and later on in prices of finished goods. In December, wholesale prices of industrial commodities were unchanged, agricultural prices declined, and the over-all wholesale price index turned down.

The rise in consumer prices has also slowed, partly because the run-up in prices of energy items associated with the rise in the cost of imported crude oil has been tapering off. There have also been substantial price concessions by automobile dealers and other retailers to help stimulate sales and thus bring inventories down.

It would be premature to conclude, however, that the menace of inflation is, or soon will be, behind us. Agricultural products are still in short supply, in large part because of a series of disappointing crop harvests both here and abroad. Also, in some sectors of the economy, such as the service area, prices are continuing to respond to past increases in costs.

A major source of inflationary pressure now is the run-up of wage rates. Recent increases in wages greatly exceed the long-run growth trend of productivity. To make matters worse, productivity has declined substantially over the past year, and unit labor costs consequently rose by almost 15 per cent in 1974.

Other industrial countries have also been beset by the dual problem of recession and inflation. With the notable exception of Germany, the rate of inflation in other industrial nations has been about the same or higher than in the United States. Most major countries also experienced a leveling off or decline in employment and output last year, and these tendencies were increasingly apparent as the year progressed.

Despite the weakening in economic activity around the world, our export markets held up well last year. Merchandise exports increased considerably, even after allowance for the rise in prices. Our trade balance would have improved, had it not been for the higher price of imported oil, which moved it into substantial deficit. And the exchange value of the dollar has slipped in recent months, due in some measure to capital flows caused by the sharper decline of market interest rates here than abroad.

Mainly because of higher oil prices, most oil-importing countries have had large current account deficits during the past year, and some have experienced difficulty in obtaining needed financing. For poorer countries, financing problems have become particularly acute. Recent international understandings to extend the oil facility of the International Monetary Fund, to increase Fund quotas, and to create a $25 billion safety net among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development will help to cope with the international financial problems of 1975. But new strains could develop in international financial markets. Private banking systems handled a huge volume of international financing last year, and it is unlikely that they can repeat this performance in 1975.

Both here and in other industrial countries, monetary policy has responded to the weakening in economic activity by encouraging easier conditions in financial markets. In the United States, that easing has proceeded somewhat faster than has generally been the case abroad. Federal Reserve open market operations began to be more accommodative last summer, and short-term market interest rates began to move down from the exceptionally high levels reached in July. As the year progressed, evidence accumulated that economic activity was weakening and that advances in commodity prices were beginning to moderate. Open market operations were, therefore, steadily directed towards a more ample provision of reserves to the banking system.

More recently, open market policy has been reinforced by other monetary instruments. The discount rate was reduced on three occasions -- in early December, early January, and again this week -- from 8 per cent to 6-3/4 per cent. Reductions in member bank reserve requirements were also ordered -- in September, November, and January, releasing a total of nearly $2-1/2 billion of reserves and thus helping to improve the liquidity position of the banking system.

Since last July, these policy actions -- together with weaker demands for credit by businesses and consumers -- have resulted in a sharp decline of short-term market interest rates. Downward movements have continued in recent weeks, even though Treasury financing needs have grown and market participants have begun to anticipate massive Federal deficits that, unhappily, are now in prospect.

Long-term interest rates have also declined, but much less than short-term rates. Lenders are still demanding a sizable inflationary premium to supply long-term funds. Moreover, corporations have issued in recent months exceptionally large amounts of long-term bonds -- in part reflecting their need to lengthen debt and thereby improve their liquidity position. Demands for long-term capital by State and local governments have also been well sustained.

The beneficial effects of easier conditions in financial markets are not all registered in the movement of interest rates. For example, member banks responded initially to the greater availability of reserves by repaying their borrowings from the Federal Reserve and by taking other steps that improved their liquidity. Banks became overextended during the 1971-74 credit expansion, and an improvement of their financial position was needed to lay the basis for subsequent expansion of lending. Reductions in the prime rate of interest, therefore, have lagged behind the decline in open-market rates, as banks encouraged businesses to meet their credit needs in the open market.

Growth of the monetary aggregates has reflected this cautious behavior on the part of banks. Despite a series of expansive monetary actions, the narrowly-defined money stock (M_1) grew at an annual rate of only 1-1/2 per cent in the third quarter of 1974 and 4-1/4 per cent in the fourth quarter. In January of this year, moreover, a decline occurred in M_1, probably because demands for bank credit were unusually weak during the month.

Broader measures of money have shown more strength than has M_1. With interest rates declining, net inflows of consumer-type time and savings deposits at banks and at nonbank thrift institutions have improved markedly. Growth in M_2 -- which includes consumer-type time and savings deposits at commercial banks -- rose at an annual rate of about 7 per cent in the fourth quarter, compared with a 4-1/2 per cent rate in the third. Expansion in M_3 -- a still broader measure of money that includes also deposits at nonbank thrift institutions -- showed similar acceleration. Furthermore, the volume of large denomination certificates of deposit and other liquid instruments bought by major investors has continued to increase at a brisk pace.

Enlarged inflows of deposits to savings and loan associations have permitted these suppliers of home mortgage funds to reduce their borrowing and to replenish liquid assets, thereby laying the base for renewed expansion in mortgage lending. The full benefits of these developments will not be felt for some time, but the improved deposit inflows have already had an effect on mortgage interest rates. Rates on new conventional home mortgages have declined by almost a full percentage point from the peaks of early autumn, and lenders are also more active now in seeking out borrowers.

In short, financial conditions have eased in a variety of ways over recent months. The liquidity of banks and other thrift institutions has improved; short-term interest rates have dropped sharply; a large volume of long-term securities has been successfully marketed; uncertainties afflicting financial markets earlier last year have diminished, and stock prices of late have been rising again.

Despite this marked improvement in financial markets, some further decline in economic activity has to be expected. Consumer willingness to spend is likely to be held back by the effects of widespread unemployment on personal incomes; business spending for fixed capital and inventories will be adversely influenced by the deterioration in sales, profits, and internal cash flows; even residential construction activity may remain depressed for a short time in view of the continuing decline in housing starts.

Evidence is accumulating, however, that the corrective forces needed to lay the basis for economic recovery are already underway. Price rebates on autos and other products are helping to stimulate sales. Consumer incomes are being sustained by enlarged unemployment compensation as well as an expanded public service employment program. The adjustments in financial markets to which I have referred should be of major benefit in supplying funds for housing and for other purposes. And the upturn in the stock market is serving to improve the state of confidence.

For their part, businessmen have responded to declining sales and profits by making strenuous efforts to work off excessive inventories, by concentrating production in more efficient plants, and by economizing on labor and materials. In the manufacturing sector, productivity actually improved somewhat during the last quarter of 1974, despite a sharp decline in output. This is a most encouraging development.

Thus, while business activity is likely to slide off further in the months immediately ahead, there is reason to expect an upturn later this year. The stimulative fiscal actions proposed by the President would serve to increase the likelihood of a turnaround in the course of the economy. The personal tax rebate, if enacted promptly, should have a stimulative effect on spending by late spring or summer, and the effects on business capital expenditures of a liberalized investment tax credit should soon follow. The resulting expansion in investment would help to provide more jobs later this year, and would also contribute to moderating inflation over the longer-run by improving the capacity and efficiency of our industrial plant.

I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of measures to increase productivity at our nation's business enterprises. This is the first of several longer-range problems to which I want to direct the Committee's attention.

For some time now, the trend of productivity in the private non-farm economy has tended to flatten out. During the past decade, the average annual increase in output per manhour was less than 2 per cent, compared with nearly 3 per cent in the previous ten years. Within the past decade, the rate of improvement in productivity has diminished also. This development has a significant bearing on the living standards of our people, and also on the impact that rising wage rates have on costs of production and prices.

The unsatisfactory record of productivity improvement stems in large part from inadequate investment by business firms in new plant and equipment. Business profits have fallen increasingly short of the amounts needed to finance the growth and modernization of our nation's industrial plant. Environmental and safety regulations, while desirable in their own right, have often delayed fulfillment of capital spending plans and at times have forced adoption of less efficient methods of production. Productivity improvement has also been hampered by changes in the attitude of the labor force and some laxity in management. Workers nowadays are well trained, but many of them work with less energy than they should, and absenteeism has become a more serious problem.

These changed attitudes toward work are to some degree the outgrowth of a second disturbing trend in our economy -- namely, the fact that taxes have progressively reduced the rewards for working, while government at the same time has increased the share of national output going to persons who are not productively employed. Twenty-five years ago, a typical worker with three dependents gave up about 1 per cent of his gross weekly earnings in Federal income and social security taxes. Since then, that fraction has risen steadily and reached 13 per cent in 1974.

Any large increase in the absorption of private incomes by government poses a threat to individual incentives -- all the more so when taxes are levied on persons who work and produce, and the funds are then transferred to others who remain idle. Over the past twenty-five years, transfer payments by all governmental units -- in such forms as public welfare, social security benefits, unemployment insurance, and other public assistance -- have risen about twice as fast as total wages and salaries. These transfer payments now amount to almost one-fifth of the aggregate of wage and salary disbursements, and the fraction is steadily increasing. A society as affluent as ours can ill afford to neglect the poor, the elderly, the unemployed, or other disadvantaged persons. But neither can it afford to neglect the fundamental precept that there must be adequate rewards to stimulate individual effort.

Besides weakening individual enterprise, massive increases in governmental expenditures -- for social welfare, defense, and whatnot -- have been a major cause of intensifying inflationary pressures. This is the third of the longer-run problems that our nation must confront. Inflation has been a problem in this country through most of the postwar period; however, the upward march of prices began to accelerate during the middle 1960's, when our Government embarked on a highly expansionary fiscal policy. Since 1965, total Federal expenditures have risen about 50 per cent faster than the gross national product; budget deficits have become chronic; interest rates have soared to unprecedented heights; expectations of rising prices have gotten built into wages and other contracts; and inflation has emerged as the most dangerous economic ailment of our time.

There can be little doubt that inflation is the principal cause of the decline in economic activity in which we now find ourselves. The havoc wrought in our economy by inflation, however, goes well beyond the immediate loss of production and employment. Because of its capricious incidence on income and wealth, inflation has caused disillusionment and discontent among our citizens. And because of its distorting effects on business decisions, inflation has brought into question the liquidity of some major business and financial institutions.

There is no easy way out of the inflationary morass into which we have allowed ourselves to sink. Unwinding from an inflationary process built up over a decade will take time, and will cause further hardships for our people. But defeat of inflationary forces must remain a major goal of public policy. We cannot realistically expect to regain lasting prosperity until businesses and consumers glimpse some end to the inflation that has been damaging our economy.

Lasting prosperity will also require steps to reverse the deterioration in corporate profits that has taken place over the past decade or more. This is another longer-run problem of major importance.

The condition of business profits is widely misunderstood. Profits are thought by some observers to be ample, or even overabundant. The fact is, however, that profit margins of non-financial businesses have been declining rather steadily for many years, and profits in the aggregate have been far too low in recent years to supply the financing needed for a vigorous expansion in capital investment.

The major source of confusion about the recent behavior of corporate profits is not hard to find. Last year, the estimated pre-tax profits of all nonfinancial corporations from their domestic operations were 16 per cent higher than in 1973 and 46 per cent higher than in 1972. The dominant factor in this rise, however, was an enormous increase in inventory profits -- an element of earnings that is illusory. It stems from the fact that the accounting practices of many corporations still do not allow for the fact that inventories used up in production must be replaced at higher prices during a period of inflation. As a consequence, costs of operation have been understated, and fictitious profits have been created that are being taxed by the Federal Government.

Excluding this illusory inventory profit, the after-tax domestic profits of nonfinancial corporations did not rise last year. On the contrary, they declined by 20 per cent, and were smaller than eight or ten years earlier -- when the dollar value of the output of these corporations was about half what it is today.

Last year, in fact, the after-tax profits of nonfinancial business corporations -- adjusted for inventory gains -- were no larger than the amount of dividends these firms paid to their stockholders. Worse still, when allowance is made for the fact that depreciation schedules for fixed capital are also based on historical costs -- rather than replacement costs -- and thus contribute yet another illusory element to book profits, these firms actually paid out more in dividends to their stockholders than they earned from current production.

As I noted earlier, this slump in corporate profits is a major reason why business capital investment has been impeded and why the rate of productivity improvement has been sluggish. But there has been another ominous consequence of deteriorating business profits -- namely, some decline in the financial strength of our nation's business firms. This is the fifth long-run problem to which this Committee's attention should be directed.

Years ago, when their profit positions were more adequate, our nation's major business corporations financed much of their capital investment from internal sources rather than from borrowed funds. However, dependence on borrowed funds has been rising steadily for more than a decade. In the past five years, funds borrowed in the money and capital markets by all nonfinancial corporations averaged nearly 70 per cent of the amount raised internally, and in 1974 their borrowings appear to have exceeded their internal funds.

This growing reliance on borrowed money has brought with it a steep rise in the amount of debt owed by business firms relative to their equity positions. In 1950, total liabilities of manufacturing corporations amounted to less than half of the book value of stockholders' equity. Today, the magnitudes of debt and equity for manufacturing corporations are almost equal. Moreover, a large part of the indebtedness piled up by business firms has been in the form of short-term debts, and these in turn have grown much more rapidly than holdings of current assets. The liquidity position of nonfinancial businesses has thus been weakened.

These are disturbing trends. The balance sheets of many of our business corporations have become distorted by the need to finance capital investment from external sources. Moreover, the issuance of new stock has been inhibited by unreceptive markets and by tax considerations. The consequence has been that margins of equity have been significantly reduced, and many large businesses no longer have the resiliency they once had to resist economic and financial adversity.

The sixth longer-range problem of major concern to the nation is the foreign exchange value of the dollar. Actually, the dollar began weakening many years before its formal devaluation in 1971. Earlier, there had been an enormous rise in the dollar holdings of foreign central banks, because our balance of payments was in deficit for a prolonged period. Capital outflows -- some of them speculative -- were large, and they were not offset by surpluses in our current account because costs and prices in the U.S. were rising rapidly. The devaluation of 1971 and also that of 1973 were thus a consequence of trends that had been underway for many years.

Following the second devaluation in 1973, the foreign exchange value of the dollar has fluctuated fairly widely, but without much net change. Such fluctuations make it more difficult for foreign traders and investors to make rational plans for the future. We must bear this in mind, and also the fact that any appreciable decline in the external value of the dollar would add to our domestic inflationary problem. The Federal Reserve and other central banks can and occasionally do intervene to smooth out movements in exchange rates. But a substantially greater degree of exchange rate stability will not be achieved until underlying economic and financial conditions have been put in better order.

Let me now turn, in conclusion, to the implications for public policy of our immediate and longer-range economic difficulties. The most urgent need at the present time is for measures to cushion recessionary forces. But great care must be taken to avoid aggravating the underlying inflationary forces that have produced our present problems.

Action to reduce income taxes temporarily is an appropriate course at the present time. Because of inflation, many individuals have moved into higher tax brackets, even though their real incomes have declined or remained unchanged. Unless personal tax rates are reduced, that trend will continue, and the automatic budgetary stabilizers we normally count on to moderate recessionary tendencies will therefore not function effectively. Also, action is needed to reduce business taxes in view of the serious deterioration in corporate profits, and the taxing of illusory profits by the Federal Government.

The President's fiscal program recognizes the need to deal with the current recession and yet avoid releasing a new wave of inflation. Both the tax rebate to individuals and the increase in the investment tax credit will provide a temporary boost to aggregate demand without adding to Federal deficits over the longer run. Moreover, increases in Federal expenditures are to be limited in several ways -- by postponing new program initiatives apart from the energy area, by various rescissions and deferrals of spending for existing programs, and by ceilings on increases in social security benefits and on Federal pensions and salaries. Even so, Federal expenditures should be scrutinized with special care in an effort to hold spending well below the levels projected in the President's budget message. Such a step would improve the prospects for moderating the rate of inflation, and would also bolster the confidence of our people by indicating the clear intent of the Congress to stick to a course of fiscal prudence.

These same considerations must guide the course of monetary policy in the months ahead. The Federal Reserve intends to encourage recovery by providing for an adequate expansion in supplies of money and bank credit. Relatively soon, growth in the monetary aggregates -- including the narrowly-defined money supply -- should strengthen. Let me assure this Committee, however, that we have no intention of permitting an explosion in money and credit no matter how large private or public financing demands may become. Such a reckless course of action might hold short-term interest rates down for a time, but it would before long plunge our economy into deeper trouble.

This Committee would be well advised to focus a large part of its attention on the course of public policy needed to cope with the serious longer-range problems facing the nation. The issues at stake are large and complex, and solutions will not be readily found. Besides a major national program to deal with the critical problem of energy -- which I have not discussed -- it seems clear that efforts to gain a better measure of discipline in Federal finances have become a matter of great urgency. Ways must be found to curb the ever increasing share of the national income absorbed by governmental programs -- especially programs that transfer funds from persons who work to those who are not productively employed. Ways must be found also to strengthen business profits and the state of business finances, and to increase the incentives for expansion of productive capacity and for modernization of our nation's industrial plant.

Above all, ways must be found to bring an end to inflation, and thus lay the basis for a lasting prosperity at home and a strengthening of our position in international markets. Our people are weary of inflation; they are confused and disturbed by the huge budget deficits that are in the making this fiscal year and next; and they are anxiously awaiting evidence that their government can and will take the necessary steps to restore economic and financial stability.

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