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Who Will Plan the Future?

The increasing knowledge which is making it possible to plan the future to an extent quite unthinkable by any previous generation and, even more, the increasing need for long-range solutions to society's mounting problems give promise that the widening interest in future planning will continue. The establishment, in July, of a National Goals Staff in the Executive Office of the President is one of numerous signs. With much planning so strongly indicated, it is necessary to ask: Who should be responsible? The answer has two parts. In a pluralistic democracy, responsibility for initiating plans and for analyzing alternatives should be spread over all segments of society that can make useful contributions. Selection among alternatives should then be made in the public forums of legislatures and the market.

There is little current threat to the public processes of selection and decision. But there is danger that the initiating function will become unduly concentrated, for some of the institutions that should be involved are under strong attack.

Historically, some of the strongest influences on the future have resulted—although often not through deliberate planning—from private business catering to (and influencing) consumer preferences. The automobile, the elevator, the telephone, television, computers, pesticides, and the birth control pill have all had widely ramifying effects. Industry will go on innovating, but industry is under attack because pollution, noise, ecological damage, and some other effects of technology are harmful, and some extremists are attacking industry just for being private industry.

Universities have been the source of much of the knowledge that now makes planning more possible. But universities, despite the rarity of their acceptance of institutional responsibility for the ways in which new knowledge is used, are under attack for having any involvement with business and government, and, at the same time, are attacked for not being involved enough in local, social problems.

The private foundations have often been more farsighted than government or universities in identifying emerging problems and stimulating their study and analysis. But the House of Representatives has adopted legislation to prevent private foundations from sponsoring studies intended to influence public policy.

Each of these attacks has some justification. Industry has sometimes been callous and selfish. Universities have sometimes passively accepted conditions that should have been improved. There have been foundation abuses. These shortcomings should be corrected. But punitive restrictions on whole classes of institutions because of the shortcomings of some of their members will inevitably place more of the responsibility for planning in government hands.

Government agencies have to be involved: planning is part of their business, and some of the agencies have had substantial experience. The results have not been faultless, however, and in any event the processes of planning are too uncertain and the decisions too important to be entrusted to any one sector. No sector has a monopoly on wisdom, and participation by a variety of institutions is necessary to ensure that plans and decisions will be subject to continuous criticism, analysis, and possible revision. In deciding how faults of the past can be prevented in the future, it is therefore necessary to remember that the road marked by undue restrictions on the independence of private institutions is the road that leads toward control by government bureaucracy.

—DAEL WOLFE