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Curtailing Federal Growth

The average citizen is only dimly aware of the pervasive power and the dimensions of the federal government. The annual encounter with income tax forms provides only a tiny reminder. Many scientists having administrative responsibilities are exposed to a broader sample, but even they have comparatively little contact with a monster that continues to grow. Two examples may serve to outline its magnitude. The estimated annual cost of federally mandated paper work is \$40 billion. The latest catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance programs* lists 1024 different programs.

Government agencies print about 10 billion sheets of paper a year just to be filled out by U.S. businesses. The government spends \$15 billion a year just to process its own paper work, \$1 billion for forms, another \$1 billion for directives to accompany these forms and explain how to fill them out, and \$1.7 billion to file and store the forms.† Apparently the government's analysis of the flood of paper that it receives is spotty at best. A recent disquieting straw in the wind was a revelation that the Internal Revenue Service had not correlated information return slips with reported incomes.

The Federal Domestic Assistance programs are a prolific source of paper work and effort. Administration of the present-day 1024 assistance programs necessarily entails a very large federal establishment. In addition, the federal programs induce states and municipalities to create expanded bureaucracies. About 800 different programs are designed to give assistance to the states. Different sets of rules, procedures, and forms are applicable to these programs. It is as if scientists, in seeking funds, dealt with 800 different categories of grants that were provided by more than 100 different agencies. For a state to maintain full awareness of opportunities requires a large staff.

Recognition of the complexity of the structure of the federal government is not new. The 1968 Democratic party platform included a call for reform: "The executive branch of the Federal Government is the largest and most complicated enterprise in the world, with programs distributed among 150 separate departments, agencies, bureaus and boards. This massive operation contributes to and often results in duplication, administrative confusion, and delay."

But although Democrats subsequently controlled the Congress and President Nixon sought reorganization, little was done to simplify governmental organizations or procedures. Perhaps Mr. Carter will have more success.

But it will not be easy. There are too many entrenched special interests. Mr. Carter has stated that federal employees would not lose jobs as a result of reorganization. That is, the signs on the offices will be different, but the names will be the same. If Mr. Carter wants real attention and cooperation he must fire some people.

The real cure, however, is not a reshuffling. What needs to be done is to stop the cancerous proliferation at its origin—the Congress.

Each year more laws are passed, new agencies are created, and more regulations promulgated. Only rarely is a law repealed, an agency abolished, or a regulation canceled. What is needed is a reversal of the trend so that gradually the complexity might diminish. Thus Congress should adopt the procedure that before a new law could be enacted two existing ones must be repealed.

When Mr. Carter campaigned against Washington he touched on deep and well-founded resentments. Unless he and his party can find means of making the government more effective and less complex, they will bear the full burden of resentments on a later occasion.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*1976 Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1976). †A Federal Paperwork Commission is seeking to reduce the torrent of paper. Its efforts should be encouraged.