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The National Goals Research Staff Report

In an increasingly complex society the federal government inevitably expands its jurisdiction over many aspects of human activity. Aside from the usual complaints of red tape, timidity, and bureaucracy, there is a serious danger in this trend. A government run by politicians is preoccupied with the hot crisis of the moment—it is not interested in dealing effectively with important long-range matters. Politicians usually cannot afford to look beyond the next election and are responsive to the public's mood of the moment. The public, in turn, is under the influence of the mass media, particularly television. To maintain interest, the mass media must have a succession of disasters and crises.

The government responds to public clamor with programs specifically designed to apply a soothing poultice to the inflamed portion of the body politic. Possible, far-reaching consequences of legislation are seldom considered, despite the fact that we have repeatedly found that well-intentioned programs often produce undesirable side effects.

In a much needed attempt to improve the national decision-making processes, President Nixon last July established a National Goals Research Staff. The role assigned to the Staff was to analyze social trends and to make projections about the kind of society that could result, if present trends continue, to forecast future developments, and to pose alternatives for the future domestic life of the nation.

The National Goals Research Staff addressed itself to population growth and distribution, the environment, education, basic natural science, technology assessment, and consumerism; its report* has just been released. For such an ambitious undertaking, the full-time staff was small, and the breadth of its expertise or that of its consultants inadequate. Chapters on population growth and distribution, education, and basic natural science are good. Those on technology assessment and consumerism are only fair. The discussion of the environment is poor. No goals are set forth. The report shows signs of being thrown together hurriedly.

A saving feature is an unusually gracefully written introduction by Daniel P. Moynihan. His essay demonstrates a keen grasp of the need for better analysis and long-range planning if government is to function well. Apparently, it was Moynihan who prevailed on President Nixon to establish the National Goals Research Staff and to issue a statement, which appears in the report, outlining the grand objectives of the venture. However, something in Moynihan's experiences of the past year has caused him to turn cautious. He writes, "The difficulty with national goals is that they too quickly become standards by which to judge not the future but the present. In a sense, they institutionalize the creation of discontent. The setting of future goals, no matter how distant, drains legitimacy from present conditions. Once it is established and agreed upon that the future will have to be very different from the present, it becomes absurd to be content with the present. The past is annihilated. The most extraordinary progress counts for little if it has brought society only to a middling point in an uncompleted journey."

It appears that the experimental attempt that began a year ago to bring more planning into government is being abandoned. In a press conference devoted to the report, Moynihan revealed that the Staff is now being dispersed. However, the need for long-range analysis and planning has not been met, nor will it disappear. The President has a responsibility in the matter which, if unfulfilled, is likely to become the province of Congress.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* "Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality," report of the National Goals Research Staff (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 4 July 1970).