TAKING THE NATIONAL PULSE

A Review of The Work of The President's Commission on National Goals

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Taking the National Pulse

The chairman of the President’s Commission on National Goals of 1960 reviews five crucial years of American history and reports on how far we have traveled.

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There are times when it is necessary to take stock to see whether public policy has conscious purpose or mere momentum. A few years ago the astounding progress of science and technology seemed to be propelling us at great and accelerating speed but with inadequate control by moral and intellectual purpose. There arose a surge of doubt—to steal a phrase from Tom Paine—about whether we had abandoned good principles or, indeed, whether we had ever had any.

So it happened that in 1960 there were three separate efforts to determine where we were, where we were headed, and whether the direction was determined by rational choice or technological compulsion. Impressive studies under the auspices of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund were published under the title Prospect for America. There was a series of articles in Life on “The National Purpose,” and, finally, there was the President’s Commission on National Goals. The three were launched wholly independently of one another, though participants in each had some hand in one or both of the other two.

The Commission on National Goals, with which we are concerned here, was appointed by President Eisenhower but by his direction was left entirely to its own devices. It was privately financed, directed independently of the government, and its report was an expression of opinion by men no one of whom held official position at that time. The Commission operated as a single group expressing its opinion upon a wide range of national goals.

A strong central staff worked intimately with the Commission. At the first session the members set clear policy guidelines. Essays were prepared for the Commission’s consideration. The understanding was that the Commission would feel perfectly free to express its own views, even when they were radically different from those of the authors who had been commissioned to write.

The Commission members did not seek to assume the role of prophets foretelling the future. The suggestion that they should attempt to predict where the nation would be in 1976—the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence—was rejected as beyond their powers. As men seasoned by experience they were aware that prior efforts at prognostication had looked ridiculous even a few years after they were made.

Nor did they regard themselves as so singularly wise that their words were weighty enough to tip the balance in favor of one course of action rather than another. Nevertheless, considering that the Commission consisted of eleven men, the range of their experience and activities was extraordinary. Some had been in politics, one as a governor; several had educational experience, but none had confined his interest to that field; there were industrialists, but they were men whose extra-business activities were distinguished in music and outstanding in natural history; there were lawyers, one a jurist of outstanding reputation, who, though his health required him to retire before the report was completed, nevertheless exercised a decisive influence upon its course; there was diplomatic experience at the ambassadorial level; and a former presidential adviser on science, a civilian who had held high post in the Pentagon; a journalist of very wide experience and influence in the business world. Indeed, it would be hard to duplicate so small a group with such broad and catholic interests and activities.

Yet they felt no temptation to believe that wisdom would die with them. Their self-portrait was of a group of men who had lived long in the land, who had extraordinarily diverse experiences and sharply contrasting political outlooks and philosophies of life. They sought to make a sober analysis, stressing perspective; then they expressed reasoned opinions. They strove by lively discussion to reach as much consensus as possible. Each was encouraged to state his dissent; every member exercised that privilege at least once. A fundamental idea governed them: without some consensus there can be no progress; likewise, without critical deviation there is no progress.

With no derogation of its value, the authors of essays were not asked to undertake elaborate new research. Instead, those selected were familiar with research at first hand, and their obligations...
tion was to make use of the most advanced knowledge in a particular field. They were then to suggest the next steps that should be taken.

Each author had a panel of expert critics, several of whom might as well have been chosen as authors. Practically all panels included members of the Commission, though their names were not mentioned repeatedly in the several rosters.

From my own experience in writing a chapter and from participating in a number of panels, I can testify that criticisms were severe. Some of the very best chapters were completely rewritten as a consequence of long and lively debate. Nevertheless, when the discussion was concluded, each author retained full and final responsibility for the contents of his chapter.

The importance of the volume lay in its extraordinary total of over 225,000 copies. It showed the very great potential of the product became a handbook on American problems and suggestions for an approach to their solution. No work of like compass, written with so much authority and available at nominal cost, had ever before been prepared. To the American, it was manifest in widespread consideration of the book, which came to the end the Commission obeyed the mandate of the President not to let partisanship enter. The members did not know how each of the others voted, save in a few instances where a public stand had earlier been taken.

To one newspaper, the result seemed a program for Nixon if elected; the Manchester Guardian, on the other hand, called it a program for Kennedy. It was neither; its central purpose was to serve as a basis for widespread discussion. This was reflected in the circulation of the book, which came to the extraordinary total of over 225,000 copies. It was also manifested in widespread discussion.

The democratic dialectic is an absolute necessity for effective government. It should not be confined to political campaigns or be aimed primarily at votes. Failure to make private and public debate a continuous process accounts, in part at least, for the unreasonable length of our Presidential campaigns. If public discussion of urgent questions were more nearly continuous, campaigns could be shorter and would not leave both electorate and candidates exhausted. Since widespread consideration of public questions was the first objective of the Commission, it was strikingly successful. The volume is still actively used as a basis for local sessions.

The second objective was to lay great stress on distributive leadership. There is constant complaint that the cities are being swallowed by the states and the states by the federal government. The chapter on the federal system proved to be one of the most enlightening in the volume. It showed the very great degree to which the functions of local, state, and federal activities have long been intermingled, and are increasingly so. It dramatized the need for wider distribution of initiative.

The American Assembly, which administered the discussion program, arranged thirteen regional assemblies across the country. They involved close to a thousand leaders of opinion. Local assemblies ran into the many hundreds and led thousands more to participate. Moreover, manuals were prepared, and a very large number of assemblies were held by colleges and high schools, by clubs, church groups, and many others. This saturation program of informed discussion was regarded as of primary significance by the Commission. Each assembly, however large or small, was encouraged to reach its own conclusions after studying the essays and the report. Each group was urged to set down its own proposals. The purpose was to stimulate thinking in concrete rather than vague terms.

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The press often gives the impression that all leadership comes—or should come—from the President. Unfortunately, the myth is not discouraged by the White House. The essence of political leadership is to watch a consensus develop, perhaps stimulate it, then, when the time is ripe, crystallize it in a concrete plan of action. Presidential leadership is partly real and partly a dramatization of forces already at work.

This can be demonstrated in a myriad of ways. One of the most dramatic was supplied by Franklin Roosevelt. In a Chicago speech he proposed the quarantine of aggressors. The proposition fell flat; it was put forward at the wrong place (the center of isolationist sentiment) and at the wrong time. Not all his popularity or charm could overcome
public unreadiness. Yet two years later the end he sought was attained with little difficulty.

If the leadership of the President were the whole reality, the democratic thesis would have been proved wrong. What applies to the role of the President is relevant, in different measure, to the Congress and the courts. A phrase occurs in the Goals essay on foreign affairs: "The United States is omnipresent but not omnipotent." It is so with the federal government; it is everywhere but not everywhere dominant. Not everything significant in public policy finds its expression, much less its origin, in the District of Columbia. Without wide distributive leadership the federal government itself would collapse. The most serious threats to personal liberty, reflected in critical issues before the Supreme Court, do not arise so much from federal action as from the states, and from localities and local agencies, such as school boards.

One Commission goal was the reduction in the number of school boards from 40,000 to about 10,000. This could not be a federal project; it should be stimulated by the states, but primary responsibility rests with local initiative. The reform, though vital, bore no dollar sign; therefore it gained no headlines—a reminder that the urgently important is not always dramatic and may not qualify as "news."

The black type stresses federal billions as though all problems were economic—a kind of unconscious obeisance to Karl Marx. Money alone might, indeed, make matters worse, for if "school aid" were to be distributed through 40,000 school boards, it would prove not only wasteful because of bureaucratic friction but also would pour money into channels unqualified for its wise expenditure. The process of consolidating school districts under better professional management and wiser citizen supervision has been proceeding apace, as the Commission hoped. Distributive leadership is slowly winning, not as rapidly as Utopians demand but not as slowly as pessimists predicted.

A concomitant need—also in process of being met—is a vast betterment of the departments of education in the fifty states. In many, the chief educational offices have been political plums distributed as patronage; in others the chief officer reached his post not on the basis of professional competence but by elections that were mere popularity contests. Progress in reform since the report of the Commission has been substantial—through distributive leadership.

The Commission called for distributive responsibility in rewriting state constitutions that had fallen sadly out of date. The press has given a great deal of attention to rural dominance. Much of the difficulty arose from failure of state legislatures to obey the stipulations of their own constitutions, which required periodic redistricting. Local initiative for reform was so scandalously laggard that the Supreme Court felt impelled to put in train redress of gross neglect in this matter. But the full realization of the doctrine of one man, one vote would take care of only one aspect of the modernization state governments require.

There are state constitutions that can only be described as utter abominations. Some are so old that they make modern state government virtually impossible. Others have been made so long and so detailed that they have been turned into by-laws rather than constitutions. California supplies an instance: at each election there is a long list of referenda proposing changes. The state needs a constitution that is a frame of government, leaving to the legislative process the details that now encumber, rather than facilitate, action. Between constitutions that have defaulted upon urgent change and others that are altered so rapidly that they defy consistent judicial interpretation, there is a happy mean.

So long as the Tenth Amendment is part of the Constitution, so long must the structure of state constitutions rest upon local initiative. Those who have cried aloud against the "encroachment" of the federal government upon the powers of the states have it within their own power and responsibility to shape adequate frames of government. That would reduce the need for federal action.

The demand for distributive responsibility was not limited to political matters. The report laid stress upon the necessity for better distribution of economic power. Once corporations had been dominant; there was a time, for example, when the railroads ruled New Hampshire. The novels of the American Winston Churchill were eloquent on the subject. The antitrust acts saved free enterprise in the United States. Now we have attained a balance, albeit very rough, between labor and management. The Commission called for further decentralization of power so that no one man, let us say Jimmy Hoffa, should be able to bring transportation virtually to a halt across the whole United States. That would be intolerable. There needs to be still further decentralization of authority over our economic life.

The call for distributive responsibility appears in what was said about pressure groups. The founders of our Constitution had no conception of the role of political parties. We do not have national political parties but a loose, once-in-four-years affiliation of an ill-assorted group of local parties gathered under two names. Governor Rockefeller actually admitted the day after the last election that there were fifty Republican parties. He could have said the same of the Democratic Party. The several elements within each party do not believe in the same things. In what used to be a one-party state like New Hampshire, there could simultaneously be one radical Republican like Tobey and a conservative like Styles Bridges.

Without national parties, the energy for specific solutions often comes from...
pressure groups. The term “pressure group” is sometimes properly used as a pejorative, for some represent narrow selfish interests that spend too much money. On the other hand, many pressure groups are wholly devoted to the public interest. One such sought the repeal of the Connolly Amendment. There was the Committee on the Present Danger and the Committee for the United Nations. The list is very long. If a citizen does not like a specific pressure group, he can organize another. It is that way constituents can be heard by Congressmen and public attention can be focused upon some vital issue.

In the first eleven sections of the report, “Goals at Home,” the attainment of practically every desired end required local and individual leadership. Federal participation is not adequate to achieve any of the domestic goals. This remains true even where the dollar sign was used. Not all expenditures are to be federal, nor should they be dominant. Take education, for example; the report called for an extra $33 billion in the Sixties. Of that amount, $7 billion was to come from private sources; it is in process of doing so. Most of the rest was to come from municipal, still more from state, and some from federal funds — more than in 1960, but not so much more relative to the Gross National Product.

Urban renewal offers another example. Too often it has been discussed as though federal responsibility were primary. But where something distinctive has been achieved, as in Pittsburgh, local initiative supplied the drive, though the federal government did indeed participate. In New Haven, local initiative and local money were essential; then the federal government came in. There are many places in the United States for which federal money is available but not enough local leadership to start the work. To discount local and individual responsibility and turn too frequently to Washington is the most terrible mistake we can make.

There was no temptation on the part of the Commission to underestimate either the need for, or the power of, Presidential leadership. There is clear proof of this in the recommendation that the President have effective control over a Senior Civil Service. It received no attention in the press, again because it did not involve a large appropriation of funds.

The Civil Service of the United States was designed for a necessary, but not a central, purpose. It is essentially a security-of-job service intended to keep patronage within limits. There is, however, no way by which the President can control his senior professional administrative officers. Congress has kept a tight grip upon the Civil Service. Therefore the Executive has tended to avoid the use of civil servants for high posts in administration.

If we wish stable administration of high caliber, there must be a professional Senior Civil Service. Its function should not be to form policy but to carry out administratively the policies determined by the political officers. We are now accustomed to this in the armed services. We used to have political generals; there are none today. Similarly, we have professional Foreign Service Officers who serve one administration after another without partisanship.

President Johnson has announced that he is going to appoint a new commission to establish realistic goals and set forth methods for their attainment in order to develop the Great Society. His action validates the decision of the earlier Commission on National Goals not to try to peer too far into the future. They realized that the swift progress of events would demand new programs.

One final question must be raised: how effective was the work of the Commission that functioned during 1960? If one looks at their fifteen recommendations in a statistical mood a case could be made that it was extremely effective. Since that time, the first goal, the status of the individual, has become a matter of prime public concern at many levels. Giant steps have been taken toward the second goal, which was a better quality of citizenship, and toward the third goal, which was to make the functioning of the democratic process more real at many levels.

The fourth goal was that “education at every level and in every discipline” should “be strengthened and its effectiveness enhanced.” The Commission demanded “greater resources—private, corporate, municipal, state, and federal” for that purpose. In the years since, individual and corporate giving and municipal, state, and federal appropriations have advanced at a rapid pace.

The fifth goal related to the arts and sciences. The sciences have continued to progress and the emphasis upon basic research has been strengthened. Now the humanities are in the process of having a federal foundation established for their promotion. As for the visual and performing arts, they also have had fresh resources and enormous energy, partly from foundations and individuals, but also from city, state, and federal activity.

The sixth goal was a more democratic economy, with “the centers of economic power . . . as diffused and as balanced as possible.” There has been some progress in this respect, but neither as great nor as intelligent as seems desirable. However, the barriers to the employment of women have certainly been lowered—although not as rapidly as is desirable. The Commission recognized that so sweeping a social change could not be attained overnight.

The seventh goal was economic growth. That has been achieved, along with “the avoidance of marked inflation.” There has been increasing investment in the public sector, as the Commission foresaw; taxes have been reduced, but the “overhaul of the tax system” has been laggard.

The eighth goal was technological change. It has continued its swift advance; adaptation to change has been significant, though not as effective as it could have been.

The ninth goal was concerned with agriculture. In this area the Congress has clung to policies and procedures that retard the goal of “a supply-demand equilibrium to permit the market, with a fair return to farmers, to determine the manpower and capital committed to this sector of the economy.” The Commission did not expect the early attainment of this ideal; it stated that “to avoid shock to the economy, this goal should be approached by gradual stages.” It can hardly be claimed that serious progress has been made.

The tenth goal referred to remedying slum conditions, reversing the process of deterioration and ending the necessity for low-income groups to concentrate in decaying areas. There has certainly been new awareness of the necessity for action. A great deal has been started; no one can put caliper upon progress and give a precise measure. While there has been market advance in some places, others have continued to deteriorate.

The eleventh goal had to do with health and welfare. In this sector enmous strides have been made, but much...
more in promises to pay medical costs than in providing enough doctors, nurses, hospitals, and other medical facilities to achieve the goal.

Turning to goals abroad, the first was to attain a healthy world economy by removing many restrictions on free trade. This required not only American action, but the cooperation of many others. Progress has been painfully slow, and the United States has not done as much as it should.

The Commission called for continuing aid to less developed nations; that has been done, and in the last five years we have also encouraged "large numbers of qualified Americans to live and work abroad" in industry, the Peace Corps, private philanthropy, and in many other activities.

The Soviet threat declined for a time but again is rising; the "blatant hostility" of Communist China continues. We have maintained our military alliances but they have shown evidences of decay, which we have not adequately combatted.

The limitation and control of nuclear weapons was set down as a goal. The test-ban treaty was an important step in that direction, but further progress will require the cooperation of other nations. The same is true of progress on the final goal, the development of the United Nations as "the chief instrument for building a genuine community of nations." The astounding growth in the membership of the United Nations has put strains upon its resources and upon the patience of everyone. The United States has clung to the objectives of the world organization under extremely difficult circumstances but not always with adequate wisdom or vigor.

On the basis of this inventory, it can be said that progress has been made in achieving the goals set forth. When, however, one asks how much influence the report of the Commission had in producing the results, the answer must be that there is no method of determining, nor would the members of the Commission have had it otherwise. They sought to make a contribution but did not expect miracles. To try to weigh in the balance all the intangibles involved in the record since 1960 would be a futile enterprise. In my judgment, the conclusion must be only that the effort was well worth while.

What we as a nation are attempting has never been assayed before—namely, a democracy of continental dimensions functioning as the major power in the world. This is something absolutely new; therefore the problems we face are enormously difficult. We must all hope that the new Commission appointed by President Johnson will similarly accept a modest role and participate in a still greater success.