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National Urban Policy: Implications for Management

Address by
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In the mid 1960's the United States was blessed with a legislative explosion that occurs only occasionally in our history. In an assessment of this unique legislative period, James Sundquist, the Brookings Institution scholar, concluded:

The 1960's have been a decade of spectacular innovation in policy. What is needed now is a decade of innovation in administration that, while it perhaps can never be as spectacular, will be equally historic.

Although the Johnson Administration willed its successor rich, powerful and creative tools to deal with our society's social problems, the Nixon Administration had neither the will nor the capacity to handle the policy baton that was handed to it.

The Carter Administration, freed from the travail of an exhausting war, has focused its attention on a major societal problem — the health of its urban areas. The importance of this effort is obvious — most Americans currently live in urban areas, large and small. My purpose today is not to defend the necessity for an urban policy nor the specifics of the policies, although I could gladly do both. Nor is my purpose to chronicle the process by which the policy was formulated. That has already been done in detail by others. I am here to publicly speculate about the impending management dimensions of the Administration's Urban Policies. I speak as an observer, not as an active participant in planning what comes next.

It is my thesis that President Carter intuitively senses the essence of achieving major public purposes through effective direction of a total management process. I believe the President is making a major contribution to the advancement of public administration with the management approach he is taking with his Urban Policy.

Even a casual student of North American civilization easily discerns that a part of its success has been its approach to problems. Problems are challenges to be solved. The directness of this problem-solving approach has been incorporated in our governmental institutions since the 17th century. Our government has always been pragmatic. Problems exist or develop in society; and government, to the extent it is willing and capable, devises policies to solve or alleviate these problems. Thus policies are responses to problems in the society. In the best tradition of our most honored Presidents, President Carter has responded to a crisis with a well-articulated policy.

I need not elaborate which problems the Urban Policy proposes to address. A recent very large-scale poll conducted for HUD by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. concluded that:

The image of the large city that emerges from these data might suggest that of an economic, cultural-intellectual and recreational 'service center,' but not that of a desirable residential center.

In other words, the city is a nice place to visit, but one wouldn't want to live there. For the millions who must live in large cities because they have no other choice, image can be daily reality. For many this reality is grim, because life in some cities is grim. Other cities are showing signs of deterioration independent of size or regional placement. In other words, the Sunbelt, Frostbelt dichotomy is largely myth. Fortunately, however, urban life is vibrant and fulfilling for many people, and it can be made so for many more.

There are many causes of the affliction in urban areas. A remarkable aspect of the Carter Urban Policy statement is the explicit assertion that the federal government itself contributes to the urban problem. Despite the fact that the problem has many causes, the President is stepping forward forthrightly and asserting a policy that deals not only with the federal share of the problem, but mobilizes the other institutions that will be required to attack the totality of the urban problems that can be dealt with by government, voluntary associations, and the private sector.

It is important to put the President's role in perspective as it relates to urban policy. For decades presidential scholars have viewed the President through the analysis of roles. For instance, the President conducts foreign policy, commands the military, performs ceremonial roles and manages government programs. It is interesting that scholars have never really been comfortable with the role of the President as manager. Today I would like to look at the President in this perspective. I think that a primary role of the President is getting things done. This is not a very eloquent expression, but it is in effect the bottom line for the American public. The public doesn't really care for the policy formation and policy implementation jargon that we in the public administration and political science profession use. What the public is interested in is having its needs addressed, and simply things getting done.

I would contend that there are five essential elements in getting things done: enunciating policy, establishing objectives, setting performance standards, providing for a feedback system, and insuring that the consequences are applied to results to make sure that what is supposed to happen actually occurs. The important thing is that public goods or services are not delivered unless all of these elements are in fact operating. In the case of the urban policy, on two previous

decisions we have experienced attempts by the federal government to address a narrow range of urban problems, without providing for each and all of these elements. Both the Poverty Program and the Model Cities Program failed to clearly enunciate a policy which had scope and to assure that application produced desired results.

One other perspective is important before examining each of the five elements. As a long-time resident of Washington, D.C., and as a student of its governmental process, I have observed first hand the policy making process in Washington. I think it is safe to say that the process is a debilitating one. It is one that almost totally consumes people. The net result of it is that executives frequently drop in exhaustion at the end of the policy making process. Unfortunately, many decision makers believe that establishing a policy is the end of the process, when it is but the first step in actually carrying out the intent of the policy. To put it bluntly, policies don't mean a thing unless they are set into motion and completed through the management of a long sequence of technical and behavioral details. The end product, in most cases, is a product or a service that a citizen or group can recognize. However, if the management process fails, taxpayers say nothing happens — in other words, government doesn't work.

It is in this context that I review the first of the five elements that are essential for the articulation and ultimate delivery of programs to remedy our urban problems — policy making. In my judgment the Urban Policy principles hammered out during the process and shaped personally by the President present a framework for action that will endure for many years. The significance of a policy is that it drives the process by which programs are developed and delivered. Policy addresses the question, where do we want to go? The Urban Policy is thus guided by nine major recommendations, such that federal programs affecting urban areas will be coordinated to increase their effectiveness, or that the capacity of local governments will be strengthened to make them more capable of dealing with local problems.

Three important management themes are built into these broad directions. They are concepts dealing with streamlining, coordinating, and most importantly with *targeting*. Targeting resources in areas of greatest need is a very important policy statement by the federal government.

The Urban Policy statement deals also with the second vital step in getting things done. It established objectives in the form of programs that are clustered to carry out each major policy statement. People will differ over the mix of programs, but there is no denying that the 160 program recommendations provide a comprehensive and integrated approach to set the policy directions into motion. It may seem like a trivial matter to some, but having a set of specific goals that are actually related to policy directions is a necessary and significant step.

Objectives are the basis for the next element — that of setting performance standards. We have now moved beyond what the President articulated and the beginning of what management technologists are grappling with now. This element is the most overlooked and most technically difficult part of the process. The performance standard addresses the question, how do you know when your programs are succeeding or, conversely, when your programs are failing? The difficulty is making explicit what many of us know are implicit standards for performance. The President has provided the framework for performance and for feedback assessment through an Executive Order calling for urban impact analysis on both new and existing programs.

An example of where performance standards could be applied to a specific program is HUD's Section 312 Rehabilitation Program. A reasonable test, among others, might be the impact that the rehabilitation of single family houses or apartment buildings has on a neighborhood. Does the rehabilitation of individual units have a ripple effect that encourages other individuals to invest their own resources in sprucing up their own properties? Does such rehabilitation tend to stabilize neighborhoods? The answer to these questions would assist program managers and the public in making judgments about the effectiveness of this program. All programs need to have performance standards.

The fourth step is providing for a feedback system to, in fact, let you know whether program experience meets the performance standards. A feedback system itself can have enormous effects on program delivery, if in fact there is a consequence system in operation that reinforces desired results and provides negative consequences for failure. In my judgment the whole process withers if this final element is not in operation.

The interesting question now is, who is going to insure that performance standards, feedback systems, and consequences are applied to the actual implementation of the Urban Policies?

Can an interagency committee really provide some direction to a policy implementation process? There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that it can. What is essential is that the performance standards, feedback, and consequences processes be performed. Technologists can design performance standards and feedback processes, but the crucial question is, who will apply the consequences? If the process delivers data to the President that permits him to hand out hero medals for meeting objectives and if he is personally willing to chide, goad, or even ultimately remove an individual for unacceptable performance, policy will be implemented. Either the reward or the real or potential threat of disapproval is a powerful behavioral stimulant. No Cabinet officer or agency head wants a goat button from the President, publicly or privately. I believe that if the President plays

this role, and I don't see it as a time-consuming role if it is well staffed for him, the critical part of the process will work. If the policies are implemented and they make no difference in our urban areas, then the failure is a design failure rather than the typical implementation failure that we have to recognize in public programs. In my judgment these policies are well designed and the process for implementing them is well in place and will work.

In summary, things don't get done unless there is an integrated set of management processes; and I believe the most critical one is that one which is to come — the one which will see the President doing what he does naturally — managing through consequences.

The alternative to what I am suggesting is what we have seen too often in Washington after completion of the policy making process. That is policy implementation by faith. The needs of urban society are too crucial to leave it solely up to faith. We must significantly raise the odds that the promises of the policies will be delivered through the design and implementation of an effective management strategy. While not "spectacular," it will be "historic."