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The
INTELLECTUAL
and the
MARKETPLACE

Enlarged Edition

George J. Stigler

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Preface

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My old friend Adam Smith has told me that a "disposition for mirth often takes away from the force of . . . orations . . . , and indeed is not at all fitted for raising any of the passions which are chiefly to be excited by oratory, viz. Compassion and indignation." I feebly pray that just this once he is half wrong, for I hope to excite your compassion for sundry causes, and yet employ the weapon of mirth.

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ONE

Mostly about Universities

1

An Academic Episode

I had been proposing a favorite thesis: that our universities are run in reverse. While a man is still young and energetic and curious, he is required to teach so many elementary courses and read so many examinations—and scrub so many floors at home—that he can do no research. Even his summers must be spent earning more money. When he gets older, his teaching load is cut in half and his paperwork is delegated to assistants—and his salary doubles. But by then he is usually beyond creative work, and develops his bridge game or gardening skills. Pinzio, the venerable head of Romance Languages, agreed that there was much truth in the indictment, but thought that any remedy would be worse than the disease. He related the following story.

About thirty years ago a young man named Segura became the rector of a university in a South American country in which his father had recently financed a suc-

I could vouch for the authenticity of this account.

cessful revolution. Seguira, who previously had been quite the gay young blade, surprised everyone when he immediately settled down to become a serious-minded reformer—a sort of Latin Hutchins. He began casting about for reform, of which—Pinzio said—the university could stand a good deal, and eventually hit upon the merit system. He soon issued the following regulations.

In June of each year any member of the faculty could challenge the person immediately above him a rank to a competitive examination. The examination was to be made up and graded by a group of impartial professors in the United States. (Seguira told Pinzio that this country had been chosen in order to make bribery more expensive.) If the challenger won, he would exchange position and salary with his former superior. Thus an able graduate student could in successive years become an instructor, an assistant professor, an associate professor, and a professor.

There was a terrible uproar, and some shrill glee, when this announcement came out. Some of the older men were very bitter, and emphasized the fact that the rectorship was not included in the competition. But most of the younger members of the faculty were delighted at the prospect, Pinzio among them.

The announcement was made in September, and some very desirable effects were observed during the first year. The physicist Antonio bought a new pair of spectacles so he could once again read small print. Cardan the economist, who had been spending most of his time running a noodle factory, engaged an assistant professor (who could not challenge him for two years) to tutor him in the developments that had occurred in the field of economics

during the previous fifteen years. The senior professor in chemistry announced in December, once he fully understood the plan, that for reasons of health he was retiring the next June, and several others followed him.

The library experienced an unprecedented rush. Learned journals—especially American—came out of dusty stacks, and hot disputes raged over the attempts of some men to draw out all of the modern treatises in a field. This, indeed, was the one clear disadvantage of the reform: men began to hoard knowledge. Few were willing to discuss their field except with better-informed people, and the exceptions were attributed to deceit as often as to arrogance. The graduate students suffered most: Filipo devoted his year course in the advanced theory of functions to a review of Euclid; Danto succeeded in getting many economics students to read Alfred instead of Adam Smith; and Ricard reviewed the Baconian theory, in painstaking detail, in his course on Shakespeare.

Yet the results of the competitions the following June were generally conceded to be beneficial. Several men began rapid, if overdue, movement toward retirement. Rumor had it that the unsuccessful and incompetent associate professor Jordan, whose wife was the daughter of the chairman of his department, was contemplating divorce. Pinzio became an associate professor.

Seguira in particular was delighted with the outcome. But he was worried by the tendency of teachers to devote their graduate courses to empty and irrelevant subjects; so he amended the regulations to grant five points (in a hundred) to a teacher for each of his students who won a challenge. This new rule led to careful calculation: would

five points outweigh a superior performance by the student in the examination? The general belief was that professors gained, and assistant professors lost, by careful instruction. The scheme led to some paradoxes the following year: Dourni was challenged by seven of his graduate students and all got higher grades in the examination, but his thirty-five point bonus kept his position for him.

By the next autumn another unanticipated result of the reform became apparent. There was a precipitous fall in enrollments of graduate students, and it was soon discovered that all who could afford it had gone to the United States for graduate work. Seguira shared the professor's indignation at this maneuver, and vowed to amend the regulations the following spring. But meanwhile a heavy gloom settled on the staff: Were not the migratory students virtually studying the examination questions?

The gloom was justified by the fact. Of the sixty-one students who spent the year in the United States, forty-six won their challenge the following spring. Nor were the results so generally approved as the year before. It is true that several fossils continued their steady march to the museum, and several able young men moved up another rank (Pinzio among them). But Storeo, the brilliant young astronomer, was defeated by a mediocre graduate student who—with the examiner—had spent the year studying some obscure variable stars. And Birnii fell because his magisterial command of political theory did not extend to the details of the New England township.

Seguira was in a quandary. To rule out migration was to invite charges of provincialism and inbreeding; to permit it on the current scale was to destroy graduate study.

He finally devised a compromise: the examinations would be given by professors chosen at random from the United States, England, France, Sweden, and Germany. Now if a graduate student went abroad, four times out of five he would guess the wrong country. The amendment did stop the mass migration, but it had its own embarrassments: one sociologist had the same examination question, by chance, in two consecutive years, and each time gave the same answer. The first year he received an ignominious flunk (from Stockholm), and the second year he was offered a professorship (at Harvard).

And as the scheme entered its third year, a further effect could no longer be overlooked. Research had almost stopped. Once observed, of course, it was easy to explain. A man was likely to pass the examination with high marks if he knew what others were doing; it did not help his chances materially to do something himself. The faculty was becoming extremely well-read, and extremely unenterprising. The most prominent exceptions showed the advisability of the rule. Therespi had continued his careful researches on the fruit fly and lost in two challenges. Laboro had finished the seventh volume of his monumental history of South America, and flunked the question on the Crusades.

Another year and some serious faculty losses were required to arouse Seguira to the importance of this problem. Once persuaded, he issued still another amendment: a man was to receive two points for each article, and seven for each book. He wanted to restrict these bonuses only to current publications, but the opposition was too strong. Even the younger men, especially the successful younger men, were complaining of the baneful effects of

insecurity of tenure. And it was pointed out that definitive works required time—perhaps even two years. Seguira compromised by including all works published within the previous decade.

The calculations of the faculty now became even more complex. A book (seven points), or the training of a superior student (five points)? The writing of the book might require three years, but the points were received every year thereafter, whereas the student might eventually leave. The answers at which the faculty finally arrived were various. Cimoor, whose father owned a publishing house, succeeded in getting out two books within the first year, and so influential was his father that many of the reviews were neutral. The political scientist Broze withdrew a book already in page proof, and published the nineteen chapters as nineteen articles. This, however, occasioned less complaint than Cardan's publication of a book of readings. But still, research revived somewhat.

This sequence of felt difficulty and hopeful amendment, Pinzio said, might have gone on as long as the unstable political foundations of Seguira's position permitted, had not two developments come to pass. The first was the sudden dawning on Seguira that this patchwork of rules was gradually obliterating the whole purpose of his reforms. This was brought home during the next annual competition, when four professors came out of unwilling retirement and three, with the aid of their writings of previous years, began again to climb the academic ladder. This particular development, of course, could be dealt with through a new rule—but where was it leading?

The conjunction of the second event proved decisive.

Shortly after this awakening, Seguira received an invitation from the towering University of South America to become its rector. The regents wrote that his reputation for originality and enterprise was international, and that the success of his experiments indicated the need for a wider field of application. He accepted the new position, as much as a refuge as a promotion.

And what happened to Seguira? we demanded, and to the university? Seguira became as conservative as his reputation would allow, Pinzio assured us. And the merit system? Only one more amendment was added: a man could receive a permanent bonus of any number of points the department chairman deemed fit, when an offer was received from another university.

are still paying for) some of the shiny ornaments of our intellectual life—the institute that “cuts across conventional lines” and the interdisciplinary project.

It is my thesis that this worship of the cosmopolitan mind is romantic foolishness. As a gesture toward consistency, I shall illustrate my arguments in support of this position from the field of economics rather than attempt to glean a variety of examples from other disciplines of which I lack a thorough (specialized) knowledge. Out of consideration for noneconomists, however, I shall take my illustrations from “general” economics rather than from my own field of specialization (homogeneous oligopoly).

The Division of Labor

One man working alone can make perhaps twenty pins in a day. If the task is divided among ten men, each of whom specializes in doing a part of the work, they can make 48,000 pins each day, or 4,800 pins per man. With this famous example, Adam Smith put the division of labor among the great organizing principles of social activity, and for two centuries or more men have prospered by pushing the principle into every nook of economic life and also into every nook of intellectual life. It is essential for the young scholar to specialize: only in this way can he acquire more knowledge than his older and more experienced colleagues. Indeed, for both the young and the old scholar there are only two defenses against the accumulation of knowledge: generalization and specialization, and of these the latter is more efficient.

For example, Wesley C. Mitchell specialized in the

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Specialism: A Dissenting Opinion

One subject on which almost all academic specialists agree is the evils of specialism. My university and many others impose courses in contemporary civilization or general science on the students to give them a well-rounded view of the universe. The view certainly will not have many edges when economics is taught by historians, and psychology is taught by economists. My university and many others contrive interdepartmental seminars to integrate the allied sciences and to explore some subject to its ultimate reaches. Some of these research teams have pushed so far that rescue parties will soon be necessary.

Specialism (like its cousin, the younger generation) would probably be mostly something to be deplored when one is in a nostalgic mood, were it not for the educational foundations. For the priests of these foundations, “the integration of knowledge” is the cry to perpetual battle with the sinning specialists. To them we owe (and

This is the only brave piece in the volume: defense of specialism in academic life ranks just above defense of racial prejudice.

study of business cycles and extended our knowledge much beyond that of his predecessors; now many specialists are studying the cycles in particular industries or economic processes, and are adding greatly to the knowledge Mitchell accumulated. Again, thirty years ago men began to estimate national income. The precision and detail of these estimates have increased continuously as men specialized in estimating particular components of the national income, such as incomes of independent professional men and incomes of financial institutions.

This is as trite as water: specialism is the royal road to efficiency in intellectual as in economic life. The widely trained individual simply cannot hold his own in any field with the individual of equal ability and energy who specializes in that field. Indeed, the individual who now attempts to survey a whole science or discipline is viewed as a popularizer ("journalist") or even as a charlatan, but definitely not as a creative scholar. It is notorious that when a man combines two diverse specialties, the members of each specialty acknowledge the man's eminence only in the specialty with which they are unfamiliar.

What Division Points?

Every specialist will admit the advantages of the division of labor. Since the modern specialist is equal in capacity to the less specialized scholar of former days, and only slightly more neurotic, it follows that the former knows more about that in which he specializes. *But*, it is said, many problems cross the boundaries that separate specialties, and they cannot be dealt with satisfactorily

unless the specialist follows them, and this he is not able to do. In a more radical version, it is said that most problems of importance must be treated as wholes—the sum is more than the parts—and true understanding cannot be reached by any number of specialists.

Such remarks almost always rest on one or both of two propositions. First, that most real problems cross the boundaries of the specialties—in other words, the specialties are wrongly defined. Second, that all specialists of a given genre have the same knowledge and competence. Both of these propositions are wholly wrong.

The border "lines" of specialties are really zones, but let us ignore this for a moment. It should be obvious that the lines of division between specialties arose out of experience. No congress of academicians drew up the present lines of division. Instead, these lines of division developed pragmatically because they proved tenable and useful limits at which the investigation of considerable sets of important problems could be dropped without vitiating the results.

Economists, for example, rid themselves of psychology because they found that they could construct a body of theory that could deal with a wide set of important problems, and yield useful predictions, without building on a complicated theory of individual behavior. They rid themselves, at least for a time, of political science, because in the contemporary private-enterprise economy they were analyzing, the state played a relatively minor and unperceptive role.

Nor are these lines of division among specialists immutably fixed. They react to changes in the phenomena to be studied in the social sciences, and they react to

changes in the state of knowledge in all sciences. Specialists are continually experimenting with new ranges of analysis to see if they can reach better understanding of their problems. It is a tribute to the significance of the current boundaries that most of these experiments are failures.

For example: each decade, for nine or ten decades, economists have read widely in the then-current psychological literature. These explorers have published their findings, and others in the field have found them wanting—wanting in useful hypotheses about economic behavior. Perhaps the next effort will be successful, and then economists shall quickly establish a new specialty, *psychonomics*.

Nor are the specialists a set of experts cast in one mold. No two of the creative minds in a discipline have the same knowledge, techniques, or interests. Some economic theorists are interested in the formal structure of the science, and work in fields like the theory of games and dynamic systems. Other theorists are interested in the substantive elements of the science, and work in fields like input-output analysis and the statistical analysis of demand. Some men are learned in mathematics; others can understand income tax returns; still others are students of the history of the discipline.

It is a gross impertinence for an outsider to tell specialists that they do not know how to deal with the problems in which they specialize. It is almost equally impertinent, and no more helpful, to assert that the problems which are dealt with by specialists are less important than other problems. Of course the "lines of division" between specialties may be inefficient at a given time, but only by

employing successfully a new range of analysis will the inefficiency be demonstrated and located.

Teachers Are Different?

The hardy universalist may concede the greater efficiency of specialism and the fact that specialties are based upon reason, but he will nevertheless say that teaching is different. Specialism is good or at least a necessary evil in research, but in the classroom we need more widely trained individuals who can convey the essential unity of knowledge. I shall discuss this view only with respect to college education.

The good teacher is a mysterious person, and yet we must know his character before we can prescribe his training. In my view, the good teacher is not distinguished by the breadth of his knowledge, by the lucidity of his exposition, or by the immediate reactions of his students. His fundamental task is not to dispense information, for in this role he is incomparably inferior to the written word. His task is to fan the spark of genuine intellectual curiosity and to instill the conscience of a scholar—to communicate the enormous adventure and the knightly conduct in the quest for knowledge. (I realize that this view of the teacher's function will strike many as austere. They will emphasize the need for sympathetic development of the utmost in each individual, and turn teaching into coaching. I think they do a disservice to mediocre as well as to good minds.)

To this end, the fundamental requirements of the good teacher are competence (How can the incompetent be

other than slovenly?) and intellectual vitality (How can the sedentary excite us to bold adventure?).

These traits may be acquired by wide reading and deep reflection, without engaging in research and becoming a specialist. But it is an improbable event. It is improbable psychologically: it asks a man to have the energy to read widely and the intellectual power to think freshly, and yet to do no research. He is to acquire knowledge and construct ideas—and keep them a secret. It is improbable scientifically: it asks a man to be competent in his understanding of work that he has had no part in constructing. At least in economics, this is almost impossible. There is no book that states the consensus of the profession on the ideas that are changing—and these are naturally the most interesting ideas. Only the man who has tried to improve the ideas will know their strengths and weaknesses. Scholarship is not a spectator sport.

And so, according to my view of the good teacher, almost invariably he will engage in research, and if this research is to be professionally respectable, it must be specialized research. Then his standards of intellectual performance are maintained by the critical scrutiny of his fellow scholars. The teacher who does not publish must have the conscience of a saint if he is not to take things easy: to pontificate instead of to reason; to conjecture rather than to know. It is not good for a man to associate only with his inferiors, and students are vastly the teacher's inferior in prestige and status.

When the search for universalism goes so far that men teach outside their general area of competence, the results seem to me completely bad. The students are subjected to diffident reports on the reading of the teacher.

The teacher is compelled to spend a huge amount of time acquiring even the minimum knowledge necessary to last out the class hour. He tires of saying that he does not know the answers to reasonable questions, and acquires the habit of making up answers, and the students come to believe that a nodding acquaintance with many subjects is the earmark of the educated man.

The Last Stand

Even those who find the foregoing arguments convincing will refuse to welcome their message. Why do they cling to the goal of the universal mind?

Partly it is moon-reaching. It would indeed be fine to know many disciplines, I suppose, although heaven knows the ground shifts fast enough in debates even now. It would also be fine to have a salary of \$100,000 a year.

Partly too, it is a humble confession of every man that he has failed to learn many things he would now cherish, and feels that with a broader training these painful gaps in his knowledge would be smaller and (what is more doubtful) that he would still know all he does now of his speciality. Yet such gaps in knowledge are inevitable so long as men are free to change their interests and work, to say nothing of deficiencies of elementary and secondary education.

And partly, too, it is a recognition of the sad fact that the most consummate mastery of a speciality may not prevent a man from playing the fool in other areas. We hope that the lessons of logic and evidence are universal

in their applicability, but they seem to have a tendency to stick to their subject matter. At least, it is all too easy to name specialists whose logical ability and standards of evidence collapse when they step outside their specialties. But this is a defect of the man, not of his training and work. He lacks a general intelligence even if he has a partial genius. Specialism does not cause his deficiency; rather it tends to restrict him to the area where the deficiency is not present.

Are we, then, to become a race of guilds? Are we to converse easily and fruitfully with our fellow specialists but to be overcome by gauche silences in our association with other kinds of specialists? We can easily avoid this outcome. Let us all specialize a little in one field—it does not matter whether it is romantic music or interplanetary communication or the fruit fly or judicial review. Then we shall have a common meeting ground on which to have pleasant and profitable jousts of knowledge and wit, and on which we can form some estimate of the quality of a man. I leave to the specialists in social communication the selection of the precise field.

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The National Commission as an Instrument of Controlled Impartiality

Of the dozens upon dozens of governmental and private commissions, the most recent (as of December 1960) to report was the Commission on National Goals. Let us consider its membership:

Henry M. Wriston, former president of Brown University (chairman)

Frank Pace, Jr., former secretary of the Army, now of General Dynamics Corporation

Erwin D. Canham, editor, Christian Science Monitor

James B. Conant, former president of Harvard University

Colgate W. Darden, Jr., former governor of Virginia, president of the University of Virginia

Crawford H. Greenewalt, president, Dupont

Of all the objectionable methods of persuasion, the use of false authority seems to me the most immoral—more so even than physical coercion.

Alfred M. Gruenther, president, American Red Cross
 Clark Kerr, president, University of California
 James R. Killian, Jr., chairman, M.I.T.
 George Meany, president, AFL-CIO

It is at least a fair sample of the membership of national commissions: distinguished educators (possibly too many in this case), appropriately prominent businessmen and union officials, a representative or two of the huge nonprofit foundation industry, and a name or two from the fourth and other estates.

We might ask: Why did not each of these men write his own set of goals for America? And why did not each of the several members of the Randall Commission tell us how to conduct our foreign economic policy? Why does not each of the numerous members of the National Monetary Commission give us his own ideas on a good monetary system? And similarly for the thirty members of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which has touched upon every aspect of our life.

The question is childlike in its simplicity; I doubt that the answers would share this simplicity. It will in high probability be said that each man's personal statement would not have the breadth of vision, or rest upon the variety of knowledge, the diversity of viewpoint, that the group as a whole possesses. Quite true, no doubt. And yet what is the mysterious alchemy of committee proceedings that preserves each man's virtues, and weeds out each man's prejudices and blind spots?

There is such an alchemy in collaboration on technical matters: if a chemist and a lawyer collaborate on devising

a chemical patent, the work is better than either could do because they have skills that supplement each other. But in the more conventional task of telling the nation what to do, there is no such expertise—almost everything basic is a question of judgment and of the values one places on high.

And in devising policy, the commission seeks to do precisely the opposite of adding the special knowledge possessed by each member: it seeks the largest common denominator of all of their prejudices and interests. A very extensive set of dissents will destroy any impact the report of the commission might have—the reader will instinctively feel that if the commission cannot convince itself of the wisdom of its views, no outsider should take the report very seriously. Only a moderate amount of skilled dissent is tolerable.

There is one other inevitable force that helps a committee to get out a report: no man feels that it must represent exactly his own viewpoint. If he were so individualistic (and possibly egotistic) as to believe so, then he would never accept membership on a commission, except to sabotage it—and one such performance would be enough to take him off the eligible list.

I have made a very strong statement: *that a commission's report does not and cannot reflect the strengths of its individual members.* Let me illustrate it.

The Commission on National Goals is not very fair game because its task was inherently impossible. One example will suffice to reveal its stance. The commission included several experts on labor unions—practitioners such as George Meany and Crawford Greenewalt as well as a distinguished academic specialist, Clark Kerr. This is

the sum total of their (and the other seven's) wisdom on this troubled area:

Collective bargaining between representatives of workers and employers should continue as the nation's chief method for determining wages and working conditions.

Conferences among management, union leaders, and representatives of the public can contribute to mutual understanding of problems that affect the welfare of the economy as a whole.

Corporations and labor unions must limit the influence they exert on the private lives of their members. Unions must continue to develop adequate grievance procedures and greater opportunities for legitimate opposition.

These generalities do not have the merit of being goals (everything is machinery) or of being correct (collective bargaining is much less important than competition in fixing wages and working conditions).

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund somehow enticed twenty distinguished individuals—this time very heavily loaded with academicians, but chaired by Nelson Rockefeller—also to tell us where and how to go. Its report, *The Challenge to America: Its Economic and Social Aspects*, provides innumerable examples of commissionese. One could spend a long time on its specific recommendations, of which my favorite is: "The present double standard of regulation as between common carriers on the one hand and contract and private carriers on the other is basically unsound and a single standard of regulation should be developed where possible." This bold, nay, heroic, recommendation says we should extend or contract the regulation of motor trucking.

These examples could be multiplied, but not with profit. Committees are devices to keep individuals from

going very wrong, not devices to reach truth where the policy issues are seriously controversial or the analytical or factual questions are complex. No commission has ever solved a hard problem in any intellectual sense; at its rare best, a commission has split or overawed the opposition.

Why, then, form commissions? And if they are formed, why not have each member state his own beliefs clearly and emphatically—letting the reader make for himself the synthesis that the committee's deliberations now seek to achieve?

The most important answer, I am convinced, is that the commission is deemed an efficient instrument of propaganda. The many semi-unanimous voices will somehow sound louder in chorus than the sum of their individual efforts.

The whole art of commissionmanship is to select honorable and disinterested members who will mostly agree with the position that the creators of the commission desire. This is not so difficult as it may sound, because most honorable and disinterested men of distinction (1) have no very definite ideas on most specific questions (in this they are no different from the rest of us), but (2) have definite, known sentiments and inclinations; and hence are predictable.

No one can create an impressive commission which will recommend that Castro be given Florida, but it would be easy to construct equally distinguished and impartial groups to recommend that future exploitation of atomic energy for peaceful uses be primarily public, or, if one wishes, primarily private. It would be just as easy to make up a fine commission to support, or oppose, an im-

mensely expanded federal urban renewal program, or increased (or decreased) foreign aid, or, in fact, either side of any question that is really debatable in the near future. A good chairman and a good knowledge of the men who make up the slowly changing panel of eligible commission members are all that one needs.

Not all commissions are created primarily to propagate particular policy views. Some are created only to buy time: a commission will surely take at least six months or a year to report, and meanwhile the passions or crisis that called it into existence may have subsided. And there are politicians and foundation heads—the only two respectable sources of large funds for public commissions—who are so naive as to believe that the commission is an appropriate instrument for uncovering truth, or confirming it. I suspect that this is the origin of the Goals Commission, just as it was the origin of one (the Attorney General's National Committee for the Study of the Antitrust Laws—sixty-five members) of which I was a member.

If the commissions are primarily propaganda instruments, why do the distinguished citizens join them, attend the meetings, thumb the reams of staff papers, and sign a document that most imperfectly represents their individual views? Simply because they, too, are propagandists. They will have signed a report that moderately misrepresents their views on ten questions, but their strongly held eleventh position got in, or at least part way in. If they have no strong views, then they are simply propagandizing themselves—joining the public-spirited, enlightened leaders of the community, adding nice lines to their *Who's Who* entries.

Academics have another reason for joining: the desire to avoid displeasing the important persons—and, in particular, foundations—who push the commissions. The friendship of a foundation is second in importance only to a professor's professional reputation, and within considerable limits the friendship will be an adequate substitute for reputation.

I do not conclude that commissions would be excluded from the good society, and not only because this is so grave an issue that a commission should deal with it. Those commissions that buy time are often splendid social assets—they provide a cooling-off period for public passions, a function the United States Senate no longer fulfills so efficiently. Those that propagandize—that is, most of the other commissions—are finding that competition, the life of trade, can become the death of influence. Commission reports are now so numerous as to have become unimportant. Yet they will undoubtedly persist, unless displaced by some more dramatic innovation such as the summit conference, until a fateful day. That day, the theory of probability tells us, must eventually come: *two* distinguished and impartial commissions will simultaneously issue conflicting reports. Then the secret will be out: bringing twenty men together for eighty hours yields a weak formulation of somebody's ideas.