Planning in Government

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Shaping Programs That Succeed

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Introduction

An envious observer once remarked that God looks after drunks, little children, and the United States of America. Flanked by amiable Canadians and Mexicans, blessed by rich natural resources, and stocked with enterprising, resilient immigrants from around the world, for most of its existence America has fully justified this kind of optimism. The trouble is that there has come to be a general belief that good fortune is our natural inheritance and nothing much need be done by government to ensure a radiant future—except to get out of the way of private business. The optimists are rendered particularly ecstatic by visions of new technological wonders that will provide remedies for old problems and create new freedoms and opportunities.

There are three main threads in this rosy tapestry: (1) the unique promise of America, (2) the failure of government, and (3) faith in the private sector. With little elaboration this capsulizes the winning themes of the national campaigns of 1968 to 1984. The successful candidates ran against big government, which was pictured as meddling, overgrown, heartless, blundering and wasteful. What is more, this populist conservatism proved so successful in winning support that its practitioners continued to lambaste the government long after being elected to run it.

The notion that government is basically clownish and inept has seeped downward; states and municipalities have regularly been the target of similar attacks. Two modifiers are often added,

however. The first is that the local simpletons are not really to blame; they were seduced or bulldozed by federal Svengalis in various executive agencies who conceived and financed the federal bulldozer urban renewal program, self-destructive albeit well-meaning welfare policy, elitist environmental programs, and other misadventures. The lessons are clear: the market should be the sole arbiter; liberals have poked their noses into too many areas; and that contrary to bleeding hearts, evil and incapacity exist and that therefore some problems, such as crime and poverty, are insoluble and government social intervention makes things worse. A result of this approach is retreat and inaction, shrinking programs, and at bottom a peculiar form of movement-through-momentum, decision-making by drift. Abdicating a government role does not mean inertia. It simply means government and public acceptance of current trends as representing desirable outcomes or alternatively, as unalterable in the sense that they are too difficult or too expensive and too powerful to be tampered with.

Underlying the conservative ideology is an odd blend of optimism and pessimism. The rosy view of the future is linked to the glorification of America's past. Bad times have always gone away and like our forebears, we should be bullish on the future: all we have to do is hang on a little longer and the clouds will roll away and the sun will shine again. The pessimism is equally strong but selective: we are always going to need slums because we will always have poverty, criminals, drunks, and child abusers because that's the way some people are. Some of the victims are unlucky, but most are responsible for their own unhappy fate, and there is not much we can do about it except make sure (a) that they don't starve and (b) that they follow historic precedent by giving their unfortunate children a ladder to climb out of the misery created by their unfortunate or feckless parents.

In the midst of this atavistic reaction against government, the businessman's perennial distaste for public sector planning is being undermined by events. A growing sophistication has thinned the ranks of the private sector Neanderthals. A sizable number of political conservatives have become deeply involved in planning—at the corporate level. Strategic, long-range planning based on conscious choices among alternatives, choices among long-term and short-term benefits, analyses of the interactions between public and private sectors, in fact all of the economic, demographic, and

location studies once mostly confined to public agencies are now popular in business school curricula. At the same time, planners in city and state agencies have been busy learning about real estate economics, industry decison making on locational decisions, retail market areas, and job training and job placement. What this suggests is that there is a good chance that in coming years we can forego a good deal of fruitless ideologicial posturing and focus on common sense approaches to problems and solutions.

This implies two changes from the kind of nation that Tocqueville and other observers found in the nineteenth century and that has persisted to the present: America has traditionally been a politicized, active, building nation that too frequently builds badly and tears down the good in favor of worse replacements. It has been a nation ruled by the market, often mediocre in taste with a population given to less enjoyment and less pausing to enjoy the fruits of its labor than seems to be the case in poorer European and Latin nations.

The other strong American element is choice, partly expressed in government decisions, partly reflected in private sector market responses serving new tastes. Why can the U.S. pluck these old notions so freely? Partly because we can afford to do so: our income is high enough to support greater diffusion of expensive refinement. The U.S., unlike many ancient and contemporary civilizations, has not chosen to combine public magnificence with desperate squalor, to build monumental palaces, pyramids, and cathedrals on the backs of a starving population.

There is also another note first sounded in the early nineteenth century that has remained true to the present day. America is a nation given to cheerful plagiarism, enthusiastic borrowing, happy discoveries of new—to us—foods, furniture, architecture, and language. This did not come about by a lucky combination of private enterprise and the tooth fairy. As one of the world's vibrant cultures, America neither needs nor wants such barriers as language police—an academy to safeguard the language against foreign influence—or border police to keep out dangerous books, or censors to monitor art, movies, clothing, music, or haircuts. A major internal blockade —the idea that grime and ugliness is for American he-men and good architecture and parks are for leisured women, sissies, and nostalgic foreigners—is gone. No one can look back over the last generation without concluding that Americans have chosen to make sizable

inroads into planning their civic future.

This book represents the author's attempt to develop some useful guidelines for planning taken from past experience. It consists of four parts. The first draws some cautionary lessons from an examination of Rexford Tugwell's career, with particular attention to the greenbelt program. The second chapter considers the urban renewal and model cities programs and identifies some of the conclusions that we might make from these major efforts.

A third chapter analyzes fair share housing programs in the context of past, present, and probable future patterns and trends with attention to black and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic populations. The final chapter examines the need for government intervention in addressing the problems of slum populations and discusses an alternative job-oriented approach as a more powerful supplement to the tinkering with land use and housing regulations that has concerned a substantial fraction of the planning profession in the past.

Conclusions and reflections represent a summing up, with occasional excursions into historical precedent, using military and civilian examples to illustrate points, underscore morals, and validate findings. Some of the book's themes have already been mentioned: I would hope that we can call a halt to the ridiculous attacks on American government as some sort of extraterrestrial elitist alien bent on humiliation, bungling, and persecuting loyal, hard-working subjects. We have had a generation of microscopic examination of government failure and, relatively speaking, much less stringent and rigorous biopsies of the private sector. The book takes up, once again, some of our old disasters but suggests that we have downgraded some of our successes.

Another issue addressed in the concluding section is phony elitism, the notion that bureaucrats, the Eastern establishment, and misguided liberals with advanced degrees are trying to foist subjective standards and services on a reluctant public that prefers game shows to PBS. The notion that taste is subjective, that enlightened leadership is inherently snobbish and subversive to a democracy, and that the market should rule all is a continuing troublesome and thoroughly misguided issue. Planners have been, are, and will continue to be public educators conducting seminars for selected audiences. That is what we do best.

In the real world as compared to the false images that blend

nostalgia, cynicism, and blind faith in America's irresistible destiny, the implications are clear. The book suggests, in fact insists, that planning based on informed choice is the answer; that the future lies in combining government decisions with a vigorous private sector, building on individual energies and aspirations, not on unbalanced drift, leaving the nation's destiny and reputation to be buffeted by economic and technological change and international upheaval. One American president whose reputation has suffered from a terminal case of sleaziness put the matter clearly in a memorable phrase: America without the will to use its power is no more than a "pitiful, helpless giant." While these words were applied to foreign policy, it is much more true of domestic affairs. We have consistently been hamstrung by a misplaced reliance on the private sector market and on technology as the bedrock of progress, by a nagging belief that government is not really us but rather a bunch of stupid, arrogant clowns incapable of efficiency and weak in resolution, intelligence, and the ability to follow through. A result is the creation of exactly the condition that Richard M. Nixon depicted: a nation deeply worried about its ability to create and sustain a better life for its population but unsure of its ability to do so, partly because it distrusts its own instrument, the government. This book is aimed at countering this defeatist abdication in the face of some of the most profound challenges the nation has ever faced. It is dedicated to planning and to planners, past, present, and future.

CHAPTER

1

Two Generations of Planning

Analysis of the difficult problems associated with government intervention in land use and housing as these relate to class and race distribution leads to a simple question: What is it that we planners have been doing wrong in the past two generations and what is it we have been doing right? The query takes on particular cogency in the light of Robert Ellickson's grim portrayal of sixty years of planning history.

> The landscape of urban policy in the United States is littered with the wreckage of bad ideas. Well-intended programs often go wrong.
>
> The script is familiar. Urban reformers propose a new government policy to help remedy a perceived (and usually real) social problem. Elected officials then adopt and implement the policy. After a few years, commentators—often members of the next generation of reformers—conclude that the previous generation's policies have, in fact, aggravated urban woes. Thus, zoning of residential areas, a darling of urban reformers of the 1920s, had become by the 1980s the arch enemy of the Center for Metropolitan Action. Massive public housing projects, the 1940s solution to perceived housing problems, by the 1960s were being regarded as nothing short of an urban calamity. Bulldozer-style urban renewal, the 1950s route to upgrading the cities, had few friends remaining two decades later.
>
> This dismal record cautions policy makers to look carefully before embracing the latest fashion in urban policy. Interventions into housing markets often have unanticipated and harmful side effects.[1]

This damning indictment of most of the period of active planning efforts in the U.S. might be forthrightly dismissed as just another emanation from a sorehead, the angry comments of a left or right wing ideologue complaining that we have done too much or too little. But two critical factors have to be taken into account.

1. Ellickson is a pukka planner whose strictures were accepted and published in the profession's readable, major circulation publication.

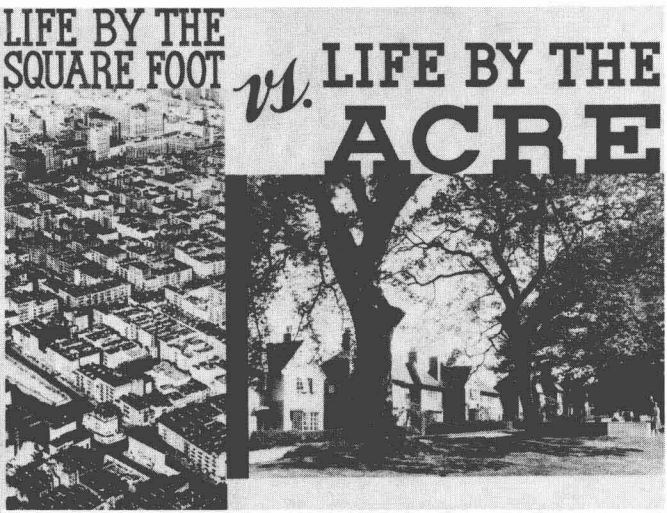
2. The distinguished panel of commentators who responded to these charges offered only the mildest of demurrals. For example, Michael Stegman countered by saying that the public housing program has been unfairly criticized and that it's not all that bad.[2]

The fact that a sweeping, root-and-branch attack on virtually every major program planners have adopted in the course of six decades should raise so small a ruckus suggests two conclusions. First, planners suffer from low morale in the belief that we really are the clods and villains that our internal and external critics say we are. And as this portion of the work will indicate, the charges are valid—in part. But there are also clear enough indications that we also suffer from a bum rap: not only have our intentions been good, but we also have some genuine successes to applaud. Second, while some of our failings can be attributable to *hubris*, many flow directly from democracy in action, from errors at the local level in which planners have played a minor role, and not from mistakes and dictatorial edicts from elitist planners in Washington. It is also unfair to elevate minor players to the status of major demons; we really haven't been all that important as a profession in shaping the face of the nation. If we could learn to blow our own horn more loudly, we might have less confusion and fewer disenchanted planners complaining that "nobody knows who we are or what we do." In this state of ignorance it is all too easy to blame the profession for the sins of omission and commission of others. What is odd is that planners freely accept the blame. It is not clear whether this is attributable to masochism, inarticulateness, or a sneaking pride in being labeled a star player even if a bit malign, instead of a walk-on extra.

Begin by examining the seven deadly sins. Gluttony (expanded to include alcoholism) is rare among planners. In the course of a fairly long career I have encountered a handful of fatsos and only two certifiable drunks. Lust is not as well advertised, but it does seem clear that planners beset by uncontrollable eroticism are so few

1-1. Hard times: the summer of 1932. In a vain attempt to get an advance on their benefits, an informal army of 20,000 unemployed World War I veterans camped out in Washington, D.C. At the end of July, at President Herbert Hoover's direction, federal troops forced the veterans from the city with bayonets and tear gas. Two years later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt shipped those who had remained behind to Rexford Tugwell as laborers on the Greenbelt, Maryland project. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

1-2. Rexford Tugwell, left, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. To planners, Tugwell is something of a flawed hero—an idealist who lacked political savvy. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.



1-3. Built during the depression, the three "greenbelt towns" represented the U.S. government's last hurrah as a peacetime community builder. In 1936, the government lost a federal court case on the issue of whether it could fund such housing directly. Its role ever since has been that of father of the bride because the federal government now is restricted to funding housing projects through state and local agencies. Shown here are exhibits on the greenbelt towns prepared by the U.S. Resettlement Administration. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

in number as to become legendary. Two colorful cases come to mind but compared with our professional brothers, the architects, we are dull dogs indeed; grand amours are much more common in a profession that features emotional star quality. One would be hard put to conceive of a macho planner counterpart to Ayn Rand's dynamiting architect hero of *The Fountainhead*. Whoever heard of a planner, appalled at the misuse of his zoning ordinance, setting fire to the official land use map?

Others of the catalog of sins are very much present but not particularly exciting. Envy there is, along with its companion malice. Covetousness is present, although the lack of opportunity leads most planners afflicted by greed to other, more lucrative activities. If few planners have been indicted for bribery, the explanation is that payoffs to city planners are not cost-effective; one's bribery dollar goes further when it is placed in the black bag connected to real power. Anger there is in large quantities. Frustrated rancor ranging from irritation to outright rage directed at one's supervisors, politicians, and developers is commonplace, but this is too mundane a characteristic in any occupation to deserve attention.

ARROGANCE AND INTELLIGENCE

The besetting sin that played so important a role among planning giants such as Rexford Tugwell was pride, laced by conceit, arrogance, rigidity, and self-righteousness and underpinned with contempt for one's opponents. This trait has proved a basis for recurrent disasters in many fields and surely in Rexford Guy Tugwell's career. His future was accurately foreshadowed in a Whitmanesque verse he penned in his youth:

I am strong
I am well made
I am muscled and lean and nervous
I am frank and sure and incisive.

I bend the forces Untameable;
I harness the power irresistible—
All this I do; but I shall do more.
I am sick of a nation's stenches,