Symbolism, Sterility and Reorganization: The U. S. Experience in Administrative and Urban Consolidation

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AMERICANS are obsessed with change, perhaps because our traditions are undergoing such turbulence. Other nations also are undergoing significant stress, but Americans seem extremely self-conscious about change-oriented demands. We observe, comment and criticize change in our life, culture, and political institutions. Not content with observation, we also try to account for it, and often predict when and how it will occur.[1] Since our political and social heritage places emphasis on efficiency and reform, we also frequently *try* to cause institutional change in these directions, even though we are not quite sure how the changes we propose would improve the situation.

In our haste to expedite change through metropolitan consolidation and administrative reorganization, many reformers ask such questions as, "How can change be brought about?" or "Who will oppose the changes I propose?" or "What are the conditions which support change?"

The purpose of this short essay is to argue that the mossy amorphism "the more things change, the more they stay the same" is still the best single description of administrative and political centralization. When reorganization or consolidation does occur, whether at the regional or agency level, there often is little long-term effect on behavior within the organization or the region. We hear a great deal about "rationalizing" the region, or "straightening out" organizational patterns. Not much is heard about the actual results of these actions.

Reorganizations are usually referred to as "important developments," or "major reallocations of power," and public administration scholars take them seriously. So do practitioners (who ought to know better). The level of discussion all too often des-

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[1] Volumes have recently been written on this topic. See, for example, Jerald Hage and Michael Aiken, *Social Change in Complex Organizations* (New York: Random House, 1970); Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) for a best-selling layman's interpretation; Dwight Waldo (ed.), *Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence* (California: Chandler Publishing Company, 1971), particularly the article by Robert Biller, "Some Implications of Adaptation Capacity for Organizational and Political Development," pp. 93-120.

cends to a mere reportorial description of what has occurred, on paper, with little, if any, analysis of what changes took place. Let us place in evidence the February, 1973 *News and Views* newsletter of the American Society for Public Administration, under the title "State and Local P.S. in 1973." (I have excluded the comments on legislative reform.)

> Starting in 1965 and running through 1973, and possibly 1974, the states are going through the most intensive and productive period of executive reorganization in history. Between 1965 and 1972, at least 14 states underwent major executive restructuring (Michigan, Wisconsin, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Delaware, Maryland, Arkansas, Maine, Montana, North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Kentucky). In 1968, California created four superagencies, with Vermont following a similar pattern in 1971. Oregon and Washington also undertook partial reorganization. More limited changes were instituted in Iowa and Nebraska. In addition, studies of executive reorganization or management have been carried out in Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Lousiana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Tennessee.
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> Nineteen seventy-three will see continued activity in executive reorganization. Last November, South Dakota adopted a new constitution limiting the number of executive departments to 25. Responding to an earlier reorganization study, Idaho placed a similar limitation on the number of executive departments by constitutional amendment in 1972. Missouri also passed an amendment last year limiting the number of departments to 14, and implementing legislation is now under consideration by both houses of the state legislature. The 1945 Missouri Constitution contained a 10 department limit, but the executive agencies were never reorganized by the legislature. Kansas voters recently approved an amendment giving the governor power to reorganize the executive branch. To date he has not chosen to exercise this authority....
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> In recent years there has been renewed interest in city-county consolidation, with the successes in this effort largely concentrated in the South. Even in that region the failures have been more prevalent than the successes. At least two new city-county consolidations will be voted upon in 1973 — Wilmington and New Hanover County in North Carolina, and Charleston and Charleston County in South Carolina. Nevertheless, interest in city-county consolidation seems to be spreading outside the South and there may be other attempts in 1973.[2]

The limitations of the traditional view are easily seen here, although I do not wish to suggest that any other way of reporting the above facts to the American Public Administration fraternity would be better, or perhaps as good. The point is that we have allowed ourselves to be lulled into insensibility by reporting consolidations or reorganizations as if they, by the mere fact of occuring, mean anything to the individual citizen! An astute

[2] The essay was written by Ross Stephens and is found on pp. 9-12. On February 27, 1973, voters in Wilmington and New Hanover County, North Carolina, rejected the proposed merger. Other proposed plans were similarly voted down in South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia. However, the voters of Nansemond and Suffolk, Virginia, approved the consolidation of these two cities.

observer of the federal scene, Harold Seidman, noted that:

> Reorganization has become almost a religion in Washington. It has its symbol in the organization chart, old testament in the Hoover Commission reports, high priesthood in the Bureau of the Budget, and society for the propagation of the faith in sundry groups such as the Citizens Committee for the Hoover Report....
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> For the true believer, reorganization can produce miracles: eliminate waste and save billions of dollars; restore to health and economic vigor a chronically ill maritime industry; abate noise at airports; control crime in the streets, to name but a few. The myth persists that we can resolve deep-seated and intractable issues of substance by reorganization....[3]

This is not to gainsay the occasional advantages to administrative centralization, organizational clarity or regional rationalization. They exist, (although I wish I were surer of just how they can be demonstrated). But they exist only if behavior of human beings is modified thereby. This requires analysis of the impact of reorganizations and consolidations in general and of any one in particular. Until this is demonstrated, reorganization should be regarded as politically sterile, since it can show no behavioral change. At best, it could be considered politically symbolic since the end result is a shining new or renovated edifice for reformers to marvel at while bureaucrats and/or local officials continue to scuttle about, unaffected, in the shadows.

On occasion, studies have been made of the actual impact of reorganization. When this occurs, one finds less change than might have been expected. Steven Erie, *et. al.*, in the book *Reform of Metropolitan Governments*, indicate that in many ways little significant change occurs after reorganization:

> 1. They indicate that reformed institutions do not, in the short run, alter the distribution of power, but merely aid the "circulation of elites."
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> 2. They do not generally realize "economies of scale," except in the most routine kinds of services.
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> 3. They do not provide services more equitably, nor redistribute wealth.
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> 4. They have little effect on citizen interest in or satisfaction with area-wide institutions, and, in fact, are associated with lower citizen participation in metropolitan politics.[4]

There were, to be sure, some benefits from reformed institutions. They increased the influence of professionals on policy-making, increased fiscal capacity, increased the flow of information, and sometimes improved service levels when local services became regional. However, citizens were no more willing to tax themselves.

[3] Harold Seidman, *Politics, Position and Power: The Dynamics of Federal Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 3-4.

[4] Steven Erie, John Kirlin, Francine Rabinovitz, Lance Liebman and Charles Haar, *Reform of Metropolitan Governments* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), part of a series for "Resources for the Future," London Wingo, series editor, pp. 22-38.

Given the sketchy nature of this study and the fact that some of the conclusions are drawn from only one reorganization, one should not be terribly confident in these conclusions. Even so, somewhat more positive results surely could have been hoped for.

The record of evaluating agency reorganizations is just as dismal. There is simply no proof of, or even much investigation into the fact that reorganizations have the desired results. The best work is *Mosher's Government Reorganizations: Cases and Commentaries.* In his elaborate analysis, only six of the twelve cases were rated generally effective, and only two of these were "efficient" in terms of a cost-effectiveness ratio.[5]

Given the general lack of proof that reorganization has positive results, why the turmoil and strain to centralize and consolidate? The reasons are purely political. Any reorganization is an attempt to rationalize a government structure—the implicit, if not explicit, assumption being that those who are opposed are "irrational" or at best self-interested. Any reorganization (with rare exceptions) is an attempt to centralize, opponents being deemed "inefficient," since central control is equated with efficiency.[6] If opponents of urban consolidation claim the sanctity of "local autonomy," reformers justify centralization on equally hallowed grounds of "growth" and "progress." These grand phrases are used because it is not practical to admit that change is desired primarily to increase the power and influence of some groups or individuals at the expense of others. We sugarcoat power with euphemisms of "increased efficiency" or "more effective performance of services."[7]

Here are some typical arguments used for reorganization and consolidation:

Urban Consolidation

Align responsibilities for urban programs with broader and more appropriate jurisdictional boundaries.

More effectively provide area-wide services.

Eliminate duplication by combining fragmental governments.

Reduce governmental costs through economies of scale.

[5] Frederick Mosher, *Government Reorganizations: Cases and Commentary* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), pp. 512-514. Even in the successful reorganizations, the benefits are at best intangible, based on the judgments of observers who are likely to be somewhat "pro-reorganization."

[6] Some of the recent work in American public administration challenges this assumption. Vincent Ostrom, in *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1972), argues that decentralized structures competing for funds and favors, each representing specialized interests, maximizes efficiency through an economic market concept.

[7] It may be argued that the difficulties in reorganization lie in failures to implement rather than the idea or aim itself. This may be true, but I do not agree that centralization, at least in the United States, is always the best strategy. Implementing a misguided strategy would only worsen the problem or create other difficulties.

Administrative Reorganization

Improve top-level coordination of programs.

Assure more effective policy implementation.

Increase efficiency.

Reduce governmental costs by reducing overlapping responsibilities, review levels, etc.

The lyrics are slightly different but the tune is the same. Centralized rational and comprehensive structures are desirable, often only because they represent the values of efficiency and rationality in an idealized form, abstracted from reality. In most cases, however, they are sought as a means of benefiting one group at the expense of others (who benefit from the status quo), in terms of access to and power over political and/or administrative decision-makers. In the case of urban consolidation, advocates of reform are "a thin line" who include central city businessmen, league of women voters, metropolitan newspapermen, college professors and various other intellectuals. In the case of administrative reorganization, the reformers include spokesmen for the new administration, interest groups who desire better access, professors of public administration, and various other intellectuals or interested parties. The reformers are articulate, but nothing in the American political tradition blesses their preferences over and above those who do not want to be consolidated or reorganized.

The fact is that consolidations and reorganizations are favored by reformers and opposed by traditionalists for precisely the same reason: that any change modifies the balance of power in the organization or in the metropolitan area. Obviously, this alone can be no mandate for change. Furthermore, "parochial" or traditional views are not always dysfunctional. Consider the following list of advantages to the status quo, or decentralized system:

Serves as a source of social identification for individuals and groups

Reduce the scale of social experience, curbing feelings of anomie, alienation and apathy

Institutionally protects subgroups from those whose standards and life style is offensive

Provides institutional settings for the release of frustration through public catharsis

Allows a larger number of elites to exercise power

Expands opportunities for individual participation

Provides additional access pressure and control points for demands to be heard

Permits minorities to exercise government positions and power[8]

The list was developed to relate the advantages of keeping small cities viable in a metropolitan area. With a few modifications (which any reader can make), it also justifies small, independent organizations rather than rationalized leviathans. I have devel-

[8] Thomas Dye, "Metropolitan Integration by Bargaining Among Sub-Areas," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. V, No. 9 (May 1962), p. 11.

oped such a short list, which fervent "reorganizationists" must admit indicates some advantages of the status quo:

> Serves as a source of social status with little systemic cost
>
> Provides symbolic satisfaction to different interest groups
>
> Maximizes participation of individual elites
>
> Reduces social conflict resulting from proposed changes
>
> Preserves a multiplicity of information to decision-makers

Thus, there are social and psychological reasons for smallness and there are political advantages as well.

A major argument is that it is not worth the trouble. Centralizing trends are so strong in the United States that forms of administrative and urban consolidation will either change or atrophy. The federal government through strings on urban grants has forced the development of councils of government in every metropolitan area, and the sum-total of cooperation and coordination there far exceeds that of the few lonely consolidations. In the not-quite-so-clear case of administrative reorganizations, even successful ones often have not proven as helpful as anticipated. Low-level bureaucrats still maintain their ties with interest and professional groups and still initiate policy proposals. Short of the charismatic offect of a few men like Sargent Shriver or James Webb, these same bureaucrats still administer programs the same way, regardless of higher level machinations. And change in administrative life goes on constantly, through consolidation of staff services and information in places where the chief executive can use them. Reorganization, in formal terms, is often unnecessary. If the State Department cannot provide clear intelligence, there will usually be a Henry Kissinger to centralize this function in an information-gathering bureaucracy in the White House.[9]

When considering any reorganization, whether urban or administrative, several things stand out. First, political costs can be extremely high. Second, political and administrative advantages are often low, or at best indeterminate. Third, no one really knows the consequences of change. Finally, change is likely to come anyhow. These are several good political reasons for not "tilting with windmills" in the first place.

If we are not to emulate Don Quixote, however, what should our position be vis-a-vis unreorganized areas and organizations? First, I suggest we should recognize that conso-

[9] The issue of centralization vs. decentralization cannot be overextended here. Its discussion could lead to an endless discourse if we are to take Dwight Waldo's stand: "... neither centralization nor decentralization is right or wrong, but that both are right *and* wrong.... We need more centralization and more decentralization. We also need less of both." *Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence* (California: Chandler Publishing Company, 1971), p. 260.

lidation is often a symbolic victory. It is important to many people, "obvious" to others, but essentially symbolic rather than substantive.

Second, political costs should be weighed against likely benefits. Allegedly, this is always done, but there seems an almost instinctive urge to over-value benefits which later seem hard to qualify or even to isolate. Many proposals, again, are simply not worth the struggle.

Finally, administrators might consider more drastic changes, even "complete reorganization." Closer links to clients—taking some into policy-forming roles—may be one way of redirecting organizations. At the extreme, public administration scrip, for clients to buy service from deserving agencies who compete with each other, may cause dramatic changes. Other ways of changing organizational behavior include accelerating executive mobility by personnel "carrots and sticks," a "five year flush" of key personnel *a la* Peace Corps model, or assigning conflicting and competing duties to a recalcitrant bureau. Change might, thus, occur without major confrontations, in substantive rather than symbolic forms.