THE EDUCATION OF LEADERS FOR A VIABLE DEMOCRACY

by Wallace E. Ogg

This presentation will attempt to establish the need in our times for research and education to supplement the traditional sources of information available to interested citizens. But first, to talk about education of leaders in democracy, a statement of democratic political faith is required. Democracy demands a faith in the inherent importance and dignity of the individual.

The highest morality for democracy is to preserve the opportunity for the individual to make decisions, to experience the consequences of those decisions and, given the consequences, to reconsider. Our society seeks to give him enough freedom to develop and cultivate his own personality, but limits his freedom by preventing him from denying this right to others. For practical realization of these ideals in group decisions for social action, representative government, with one vote per adult, is the essential tool.

With such a concept of democracy, a large, indifferent, apathetic mass of people, even a majority, may not seriously threaten democracy and its tool, representative government, so long as they do not rise up in a crisis and destroy the right to reconsider.

In practice, I hypothesize, this is just what we have in the United States. We have an indifferent majority who take very little interest in public decisions and policy so long as the apparent consequences are not too threatening. We have an interested minority who talk about public policy, who make tentative decisions and who actively support or oppose policy positions. Then there is a group of leaders (defined broadly to include informal lay leaders, formal organization leaders and administrative leaders in government) who formulate the specifics of policy and work closely with elected representatives in either developing and advocating or opposing a new policy, or in modifying and defending an old policy. Also, in practice, the elected representatives must, regardless of what the active leader group want and say, be sensitive and responsive to this interested public. The leaders may occasionally become insensitive

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to the interested public in their enthusiasm for or opposition to a specific policy, but the representatives cannot.

This concept of working democracy is very dynamic. The size of the indifferent apathetic group is variable depending on the intensity of the times and the consequences of former policy. If the times are threatening, the size of the indifferent apathetic group shrinks and the interested public grows. People who are members of the interested public on most issues may be leaders on specific issues. When policy crises pass, leaders on specific issues settle back to being part of the interested public.

Representative government, to be effective then, demands:

1. An informed interested citizenry who know in broad outline:
   a. What their goals for the general welfare are.
   b. What constitutes problems to attaining these goals.
   c. Some sense of the consequences of alternative policies.

2. Leaders who understand the above but who in addition are sufficiently well informed in detail on specific issues to develop realistic alternatives for policy to deal with identified problems.

3. A sufficiently firm consensus on the part of the majority to support action by leaders and representatives.

4. Elected representatives who are sensitive to the public consensus.

5. Leaders among elected representatives well enough informed on specific issues to help draft legislation and conduct the debate leading to compromise.

Democracy and representative government in the United States have been effective. They have involved considerable trial and error, but the errors have not been disastrous. The traditional tools on which we have relied for the enlightenment of the interested public, lay leaders and representatives are political debate, mass media news coverage and serious literature. For needed research we have depended on the imagination and creativity of physical and social scientists to anticipate the needed additional knowledge, with very little structuring between needs and research effort. This freedom for imagination and creativity should and will be preserved, but perhaps something more is needed.

In recent decades the gravity of the world situation and the leadership role of the United States have simultaneously increased. The world situation and United States foreign policy are closely related to the domestic scene. On the domestic scene, the rapid expansion of technology and the economic growth stemming from it have brought a
sharply increased rate of change. Adjustment to change creates tensions in individuals and communities. Policy responses may conflict with foreign policy. In this grave and dynamic environment, key political, editorial and educational leaders are questioning whether the traditional system for enlightening the interested public, leaders and elected representatives is completely adequate. Serious mistakes about the nature of problems or the consequences of policy might be disastrous. Perhaps a more deliberate structuring of research and educational efforts towards the critical public problem areas is needed.

Actually a substantial beginning is under way. In the land-grant system there is a long tradition of closely structuring research and educational programs to the felt needs of farmers for technological applications of science. To a much more limited extent the need for social science research and educational programs on public problems of farmers has been recognized and carried out. These beginnings lay a foundation for dealing with more general social problems, for a much wider audience and with more effective educational programs.

Administrators of our public educational institutions and especially of the land-grant system have been acknowledging this responsibility, which the institutions with their vast research and educational resources might accept. Policy statements to this effect have been issued frequently in the two decades since World War II. Exciting pilot efforts at team or task force research have demonstrated competence. Effective educational programs have been carried out on a state-wide basis in several states. Some of the programs have been sharply focused to meet the needs of particular leaders and some have been designed to reach up to 100,000 interested people through reading and small intense self-administered discussion groups. People who have been involved in these educational efforts express a new confidence that the individual can have an intelligent impact on policy formation in big democracy.

We have sketched a simplified model of the process of policy formation and the possible need for more carefully structured research and citizen education.

Perhaps these abstract ideas can be communicated more clearly by a recent real life example. The 1962 Agricultural Act as it applied to feed grains provides such an example. The voluntary feed grain program had been developed by administration leaders in 1960 with the idea that it could be stop-gap legislation pending a more permanent program for feed grain. The administration's more permanent program proposal was presented to the 1962 Congress. Its objectives included improved aggregate farm income, reduced government feed grain stocks and reduced treasury costs for the program. The new tool was to be compulsory crop land reduction. Administration leaders conducted an intense effort to get the program through Congress. They were strongly supported by the Farmers Union. The American Farm Bureau Federation strongly opposed the administration's program and pressed very hard for a voluntary crop
land retirement program involving whole farms. Under these circum-
stances, what did Congress do? After a long, painful fight, it passed
a program for which no leadership group had asked. It extended the feed
grain program with very little change.

Evidence from two sources indicates that what Congress passed was
the strong favorite of a sizable majority of feed grain farmers. Sam Lubbell,
the well-known political analyst, surveying farmers at the time the bill
was being considered, found farmers strongly favored a continuation of
the feed grain program. Early last year sociologists conducted a survey of
a statistically representative sample of Iowa farmers on the farm problem
and farm policy. These data are in the process of being processed. In
two sets of questions involving choices of program, the choice most
nearly resembling the present feed grain program received the support of
a strong majority.

Before there is too much complacency about the effective working of
this representative government and thus the infallibility of the decision
making in democracy, a second look at the sociological research is re-
quired. Whereas farmers were quite firm in favoring the present feed
grain program as their choice of the program alternatives offered them,
their understanding about the nature of the farm problem, as indicated by
their responses, is disturbing.

As already evidenced at this conference, there is a strong concensus
among agricultural economists that there is a substantial excess capacity
to produce crops, especially wheat and feed grains on American farms.
This has resulted because supply has grown faster than demand. An im-
portant factor accounting for the rapid growth of supply has been the rapid
improvement in technology. Total food supply has grown rapidly. But
most of the growth has been contributed by commercial farms. Thus,
since many small farms have inadequate land and equipment relative to
labor for modern mechanized farming, adjustment to better opportunities
will mean continued migration of workers from farming.

But these representative farmers in the sociological study ranked
"Too many farmers" at the bottom out of 12 choices and "Surplus produc-
tion due to application of too much technology" ninth as causes of the
farm problem. At the top was "High cost of farm production inputs--", "High profits taken by processors and distributors..." and "Union prac-
tices in industry which are continually raising wages which are in turn
reflected in rising costs of agricultural outputs" in that order. These
are familiar scapegoats of long standing among farmers. Obviously
there is some basis in fact for their top choices. These answers deal
with immediate "causes" not underlying relationships. They do not

2Experiment Station Project 1493, George Beal and Joseph Bohlen.
indicate an understanding and acceptance of the world as it is. Such a level of enlightenment is discouraging to the prospect for policy consistent with long-run adjustments.

The strongly supported goal of growth in income per capita in the United States provides an excellent example of the need for research and an effective educational program. The interested nonfarm as well as farm leaders must understand the process of such economic growth if policy is to be relevant. Briefly sketched the process includes:

1. The applications of science to technology.

2. The new technology changes the economic environment. Often capital in the form of large machinery is substituted for labor. People have to learn new skills and change jobs.

3. If this adjustment takes place, both machines and human ingenuity are more effectively used, and output per person and income per person, rise.

This process is not easily understood, is highly rewarding to some and painful to others. Witness the closing of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

As indicated above a good beginning has been made towards committing some of the research and educational resources of our public institutions to research sharply focused on social problems and effective educational programs for leaders and the interested public. It is important to recognize the awesome responsibility which this involves. Objectivity and integrity are imperative. Objectivity and the limited time and effort which will be allocated to learning by adults pose hard decisions. Which problems and issues should be studied? Which leaders are to be educated? Out of research findings what information should be presented? What will be the most effective educational technique?

In spite of these difficulties the Center for Agricultural and Economic Development and the Farm Policy Institute have actively encouraged participation in this kind of research and educational activities.