

Introduction

Whether institutions founded in crises are the fortuitous results of necessity or the unfortunate products of hasty improvisation is a question on which there must be considerable speculation. Studies of this theme have been hampered both by the deceptive vision of hindsight and by the selectivity of cases chosen by result rather than by predesign. These views of major participants in the work of the Federal Reconstruction and Development Planning Commission describe the origins of that institution and show us different facets of the Commission's creation and operation with a remarkable degree of candor and insight.

Those experienced in the ways of government have consistently praised the work of the Commission, which appears to have been a true act of creative federalism, as one of the participants suggests. From Howard Schnoor's account, we learn that it was not, however, the sudden creation of a weekend of bureaucratic consultation. Aspects of its role and function had been under consideration for several years before the earthquake. The interagency membership with a chairman from outside the agencies, the provision for a counterpart state agency, the principle of transitional grants and developmental aid for Alaska—all had been under study in relation to the need for federal assistance for Alaska. The work of the Commission is vividly described in the accounts by the Commission's Chairman, Senator Clinton P. Anderson, and its Executive Director, Dwight Ink.

The predicament of the State of Alaska, as it sought maximum federal support, is vividly portrayed by Robert Sharp of the governor's staff. The response of professional

scientists and engineers assigned to a task force is dealt with in the paper by Edwin B. Eckel and William E. Schaem, and the experience and lessons of the urban planning in the reconstruction period by Lidia Selkregg, Edwin B. Crittenden, and Norman Williams, Jr. The authors were either participants in the events they observed and reported, or interested outsiders who could evaluate and draw objective conclusions. In all these discussions, politics as the art of the possible takes meaning as they share with us their views of the possible while events unfold. There is some repetition; after all, the events described are the same; only the observation points change. In this picture, we not only observe the federal role with a degree of intimacy and reality not found in publicity handouts, but find as well, a serious alternative to our original speculation. The usefulness of crises in creating institutions may not be that of providing scope for bureaucratic genius, but of expanding or contracting the range of the possible. Where carefully considered proposals existed for federal-state planning or for further aid to Alaska, the earthquake made possible their rapid adoption and implementation. Where policies were muddled, as they were on government indemnification for private losses, the pressure of crisis seemed to narrow the possible and the compromises devised for Alaska have already led to further ill-conceived demands in subsequent disasters.

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