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Dilemmas of Scale

The theatre of national politics currently features the long-playing struggle to control vast budgetary deficits without risk to political life and limb. At its best it exemplifies the robust properties of choice in the modern American experience. At its worst it suggests the approaching limits of consensual governance. Echoing from the past is a durable observation by Robert Lovett that straight-line policy-making has never been our forte because the Founding Fathers injected a "foul-up factor" into governance by designing the system to permit the play of group conflicts.

Not much is being said about it, but the 200th anniversary of the Constitution is only 5 years away. That calls for sober thought about the capacity to govern in the face of dilemmas of very large scale. They abound, and in the third century of constitutional government they are sure to multiply. The most conspicuous is the dismal state of conflict resolution where it concerns the potential for nuclear war. It is against that record of political futility on the part of the superpowers that public opinion has lined up with Ground Zero and the nuclear freeze.

Dilemmas of scale take on other shapes, as well. Barring a possible hard landing in the interim, the U.S. economy is likely in this decade to generate an aggregate gross national product approaching \$30 trillion in today's dollars. The sum is prodigious and, as usual, no thought is being given to surrounding this prospect with even a suggestive frame of strategies, intentions, objectives, or constraints. We will simply wing it, and the explanation lies with the foul-up factor and the likelihood that scale has outrun the growth in knowledge that ought to furnish the ground for such guidelines. There is no comfort in contemplating a pileup of dilemmas of scale in the face of disarray in the connections between knowledge and the national policy machinery. Sadder still is the diminishing value assigned by government to investments in education and the social sciences, as though there were no public stake in scaling scholarship to match the unknowns.

Despite the notable wide misses that have afflicted Soviet comprehensive planning, there can be no doubt that goals, frameworks, and strategies hold high ground in the Soviet version of policy management. Institutes for policy research line the streets of Moscow. They are staffed in depth and in quality, and they are more than mere cosmetic facing on an authoritarian state. They are occupied compulsively with charting political and economic navigation, and they are doing it with an alert eye to the likely turns in the affairs of other societies of all species. It is worth reflecting, in such a context, that notions of "superiority" perhaps should not be confined to comparing warheads and throw-weight. In the long run, brainware is likely to count for more than hardware, as John King Fairbank reminds us. And in that vein, it would be instructive to compare Soviet investments in area and language studies with the semistarved state of these fields in the United States.

Both science and technology figure in the emergence of dilemmas of scale, even as they offer something toward their management. Their roles in advancing military assets are well exercised, but their potential for building political assets and diminishing East-West tensions takes a backseat. Compelling in the short term as budgetary restraint may be, the winding down of space research and technology preempts initiatives that might go a long way toward providing a larger measure of global security than arming both sides to the teeth.

The approaching salute to the Constitution should go beyond showcasing inherited political assets. After all, assets rarely have static value. They grow or deplete as the case may be. If the bicentennial is to serve as more than a historical marker, we should prepare to look hard at the efficacy of our national policy machinery, and especially at its needs for a stronger capacity to meet dilemmas of scale with confidence.—WILLIAM D. CAREY