GOVERNMENT AND WATER RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

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This symposium raises, and to some extent answers, the question of government’s capacity to formulate and implement water resources programs. It is concerned with one of the crucial areas of public policy. Unless recent trends are misleading, water is bound to play an increasingly strategic role in such diverse fields as national and regional industrial development, the raising of the standard of living, the growing of foods and fibers, transportation, public health, commercial fishing, public recreation, and the maintenance of great cities. It seems a reasonable expectation of the public that government should not be all thumbs in handling so important a lever of economic and social development. Unhappily, the contributors to this symposium have discovered only a rudimentary development of other digits.

II

These articles appear at a time of a wide-ranging reassessment of the Federal Government’s water resources policies and organization. The Hoover Commission’s report on the Department of the Interior and the Commission’s admirable task force report on natural resources, both published in 1949, are as yet largely unimplemented by the President and Congress. The recommendations for a review board in the President’s Office and for a Water Development and Use Service in the Department of the Interior, which would absorb the rivers and harbors and flood control work of the Army Corps of Engineers, remain on the agenda for future consideration. Policy, as well as organization, is being examined anew. On January 3, 1950, the President established by Executive Order No. 10095 the President’s Water Resources Policy Commission, which is to submit its final report by December 1, 1950. The report is to include recommendations with respect to “Federal responsibility for and participation in the development, utilization, and conservation of water resources, including related land uses and other public purposes to the extent that they are directly concerned with water resources.” The Commission is to give consideration in particular to “(a) the extent and character of Federal Government participation in major water-resources programs, (b) an appraisal of the priority of water-resources programs from the standpoint of economic and social need, (c) criteria and standards for evaluating the feasibility of water-resources projects, and (d) desirable legislation or changes in existing legislation relating to the development, utilization, and conservation of water resources.”

The articles that follow are designed to examine the effectiveness with which government is organized for its water resources responsibilities. At the same time, they throw light on more general issues of government—particularly the
legislative process, organization of the executive branch, field administration of Federal agencies, and Federal-state-local relations. Issues of this character often gain a new dimension by being viewed in relation to a specific area of public policy. In this instance, Professor Maass, using the navigation and flood control work of the Army Corps of Engineers as a case study, provides a devastating critique of the way that Congress discharges its share of responsibility for planning and development of water resources. Underlying that is an illuminating exploration of the alliances among Congressmen, pressure groups, and administrative agencies, and the bearing of these alliances on general concepts of the role of Congress and of the President. President White demonstrates the great lag in the adjustment of governmental institutions to such widely recognized needs as multiple-purpose projects and basin-wide planning. He and Professor McKinley point up the technical problems of water and land management that provide the inescapable premises for government organization at Washington and in the field, and Professor McKinley thoughtfully probes the problems in articulating regional and national programs. Professor Lepawsky directly ties the distribution of water resources functions between the Federal Government and the states to the practical test of the states’ demonstrated qualifications for water resources responsibilities. These questionings of existing and proposed governmental arrangements are specific and penetrating in a way that is possible only in the setting of a particular policy area. They advance, at the same time, our understanding of general issues of government organization and our sensitivity to the distinctive problems that arise in gearing government to its water resources responsibilities.

CONGRESS AND WATER RESOURCES *

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Should Twitch Cove, Maryland, be improved at Federal expense for the protection of the few crabbers who live near this Eastern Shore community? This past May, Congress decided yes; they confirmed a recommendation of the Chief of Engineers, U. S. Army. The United States Engineer Department, as the Corps of Engineers is called in the exercise of civil functions, recommended in favor of Twitch Cove after evaluating alternative plans of improvement and selecting that one which appeared to balance best the factors of "economic feasibility"—i.e., the ratio of benefits to costs, “engineering feasibility,” and the “desires of local interests.”

This last item is of interest for the moment. For any major improvement, even for Twitch Cove, there will be many groups of “local interests,” and their

* Documentation for parts of this paper is to be found in the author’s Water Resources Development (unpublished manuscript, 1949, Harvard University). This work will be published by the Harvard University Press in the near future. Sources are consequently cited in notes only where important documentation is not to be found in the manuscript.