

October 20, 1936

Dear Elliott:

I have given considerable thought to the questions raised in your memorandum of July 11, 1936, which was received at my office during my absence on vacation last summer. In commenting upon these questions, I shall confine myself largely to problems falling under the heading "Coordination within the Department or Agency", since it is on this type of problem that my own experience has centered. I am inclined to the belief, however, that the conclusions to which my experience in this regard have led me would be in considerable measure applicable to the over-all problem of government administration.

Since you have been kind enough to suggest that I approach the problem in my own way, I shall take the liberty of cutting across your outline.

I think that the most useful way to begin is to inquire into the causes of problems of coordination. I believe that such problems can conveniently be grouped under three principal heads: (1) Problems arising out of the inadequate definition of major policies; (2) Problems arising out of deficiencies in personnel; (3) Problems arising out of unavoidable overlapping of functions, and out of close relationships between different functions.

It has been my experience that the most numerous and by all odds the most difficult problems of coordination are those which fall within the first two categories. I should like to examine these in some detail before passing to a consideration of the third type of problem.

#### I. Problems Arising Out of Inadequate Definition of Policy

If the major policies and objectives of an agency are clearly defined, each division head will have a framework within which to examine the particular questions which press upon him for decision. Guided by this

framework he will not hesitate to make his own decisions, which, from the very fact of such guidance, will normally be consistent with the decisions of other division heads. In the absence of a clear definition of major policies and objectives, each large question presented to a division head for decision will appear to him to involve elements of fundamental gravity. He will, therefore, be inclined to regard the problem as beyond the scope of his own responsibilities and to submit it to the head of the organization for decision. The operation of the organization will then tend to become top-heavy, with an excessive number of decisions bottle-necked at the top. To the extent that the division heads do take responsibility for such decisions, their several actions, lacking a common premise, are quite apt to conflict with one another.

## II. Problems Arising Out of Deficiencies in Personnel

It is curious that problems of coordination which derive from failure of personnel frequently escape recognition for what they are. Again and again in my experience, situations have arisen which involved an apparent acute conflict between divisions, or an apparent confusion of activities. Approached as problems of coordination in the strict sense, such situations did not respond to the remedy applied. Upon further analysis, it would appear that the ultimate cause was the inadequacy of some particular individual. Upon the replacement of this individual, the problem of coordination would simply disappear.

It is the way in which these problems develop which leads to their being misinterpreted. In the press of day to day business, if X should fail to do his job, Y or Z may simply discharge those functions himself. It may be that five or six different persons are directly affected by X's failure, and that each of them will more or less unconsciously shoulder part of the responsibility. After a while, they will find themselves getting into one another's way. If a "Coordinating Committee" is set up to resolve the difficulty, it is quite likely merely to increase it by adding to the existing problems of adjustment new problems of adjustment between the existing factors and the new committee. And so the situation "jes' grows".

## III. Problems of Coordination Arising out of Unavoidable Overlapping and Inter-relationship of Functions

As I have already indicated, these problems are in my judgment the least serious. Yet it is to them that most

inquiries into the problem of coordination tend to be directed. Of course, these problems are not negligible. But I am convinced that in the absence of clearly defined policies and of intelligent and well-balanced personnel no plan of coordination will be anything but hopeless. And I believe that, given well-defined policies and sound personnel, most of the remaining problems of coordination will be solved almost in stride.

We have found it best to treat the task of coordination in this strict and narrow sense as a staff function, i.e., as a function of an officer attached to the head of the organization, the Executive Assistant to the Chairman. We have found that the division heads tend to resent an independent officer set up to "coordinate" them, but that they will accept the assistance of some one identified with the Chairman, who acts only by recommendation to the Chairman.

#### IV. General

In conclusion, I should like to emphasize a fact which I feel sure you fully understand, - that it is extremely difficult to consider these problems in the abstract. A government, and a department or agency of government, is an organic entity, with an organic growth and character almost like that of a human being. As such, it cannot be appraised in terms of abstract patterns as general rules of fixed application. Unless one's general principles are applied to particular cases shrewdly and flexibly, they are apt to take on an unreal quality, somewhat like the rules of conduct laid down in popular books which purport to set forth the principles by which a young girl should select a husband.

I hope that the foregoing observations will be of some use to you.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

James M. Landis  
Chairman

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