THE CHALLENGE OF VOLUNTARY ACTION*

by

A. WRIGHT ELLIOTT
Member, President's Task Force on Voluntary Action

Representing the President's Task Force on Voluntary Action, it is a real honor and privilege, and a welcomed opportunity, to be with you today. As you know, many exciting things happened this week including the appointment of Max Fisher to chair the President's program for Voluntary Action.

Few beliefs receive so warm a reception, and such universal agreement, in America, as the very basic premise that people—individually—and in groups—should participate in making as many decisions as possible, concerning their own lives. Paradoxically, however, there seems to be a universal doubt within our society that grass roots, voluntary action is really possible on a meaningful scale, particularly when we look at the myriad of complex problems confronting us.

But, in spite of this doubt, in recent months we have witnessed a phenomenal resurgence of thought, not only that voluntary action is once again possible; but even more important, a resurgence of belief that voluntary action holds the very key to the solution of many of our pressing social ills. These sentiments have been echoed by the President himself; by several Cabinet officials; and by leading private citizens across the country.

Let us set aside, for a moment, then, the nagging doubts that so many have already expressed, as to the viability of voluntary action; and simply state that this resurgence of thought, in itself, could lead to a basic reorientation in national thinking, in national policy. One parenthetical comment, by the way of introduction, before moving into the three major areas, that I wish to discuss this morning.

Briefly, I am deeply concerned about those "prophets of doom" who are, even before the race has begun, already declaring "voluntary action" the loser. I believe that many of these statements, a large number of which have already been made through the national media, are being made out of a spirit of defensiveness—being made by people whose ideologies, indeed, even whose institutions, are severely threatened by the very prospect of testing the voluntary sector's ability, to impact upon the grave societal problems confronting us.

Admittedly, the very notion of revitalizing our instinctive historical

---

*A Keynote Address presented at the Massachusetts Assembly on Volunteer Services, May 9, 1969, sponsored by The Center for Continuing Education, Northeastern University.

response to problem solving—voluntary individual action—may sound implausible, anachronistic and even quixotic, particularly in a society where technological development has advanced so rapidly and where change is not the exception, but the norm.

But, let me say, and say imperatively, in this regard: that the task before us is too great; and the stakes involved too high, for any responsible citizen to prejudge, and even condemn, an effort—whose impact may be great—for reasons that might well be less than objective.

Now, to the three major points that I would like to cover this morning: First, a look at the problem of defining voluntary action. Second, a discussion of some of the specific recommendations that emerged from President Nixon's Task Force on Voluntary Action. Third, some projections as to what future developments might emerge in this critical area.

1.   To the first point, and an admittedly difficult one, i.e., that of definition. What do we really mean by "voluntary action"?

This is not to discuss definition, for the sake of definition. This would not only be pointless, but would, worse, be a waste of your valuable time.   But, as the 16 members of the President's Task Force—split almost evenly between the three sectors of our society—wrestled with defining our terms, we felt that we gained general understanding, and many specific insights.

Perhaps the simplest way for me to attempt to do this, is to discuss in rather traditional terms, the three sectors in our society.

It is admittedly oversimplistic to discuss these three sectors—(1) governmental, (2) non-profit, and (3) for-profit—as if they were totally separate and independent. For it is quite obvious that, in fact, they are very much interrelated; and inextricably so.

But, in a quest for definitional clarity, let me purposely oversimplify, and discuss them as three separate entities.

First, the public, or governmental sector:

It is quite clear that the public, or governmental sector, until the last two or three years, has been assigned, by the majority of our citizenry, as that sector whose task it was to solve our serious social problems. One only need read closely both the literature, and the speeches made, by public officials, for the past several decades, to see that there was truly little real mention, little real expression of faith in either the non-profit, or the "for-profit" sectors, as potential social problem-solvers.

But, somehow, in the past three or four years, a substantial change has occurred. Traditional critics of public sector programs, have now been

23

joined by many others, who also insist that the public sector, acting singularly, is incapable of solving such problems. Peter Drucker, in his truly remarkable recent book, *The Age of Discontinuity*, suggests that the key role for the governmental sector—under a new division of responsibilities—would be that of planning what should be done, while leaving the "doing" to non-governmental institutions. Drucker's analogy would have government, performing the role of the orchestra-conductor, assisting and guiding all of the instruments as they play in concert, but, playing none itself.

There are, quite obviously, many people, both within the governmental sector, and without, who would quarrel with this concept. But let me suggest that, the mere demand for non-governmental action, because it is now supported both by leading liberals and conservatives, has had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on national policy-formulation.

Now, on moving to the second, to the non-profit sector. I would personally insist that a rather clear distinction be made between the non-profit, and the for-profit institutions. They cannot, I would argue, because of the different basic rationales underlying each, be lumped together as one, as "private"; or "non-governmental."

For, the non-profit institutions are unique because they are a third force between the governmental and the commercial sectors. These institutions are most familiar to those of you in this room and to identify only a few: the private, social service, health and welfare agencies; foundations; professional organizations; youth organizations; fraternal, and religious organizations.

Literally hundreds of thousands of such institutions exist today in this country, and it is my firm assertion to you that, in a negative sense, these institutions have been, until very recently, overwhelmed by massive governmental programming. In a positive sense, however, let me suggest that the "unfreezing," or the "freeing up," of these institutions, offer to us a potentially unique opportunity to bring hundreds of thousands of individual Americans into the fray in new and meaningful ways.

And now, to the third sector, the "for-profit" sector. There is no question in my mind (although I would admit there are serious questions being raised by many individuals in both the governmental and non-profit sectors) that profit-making institutions have, are currently, and will continue to play an accelerated role in social problem-solving, in the years ahead.

There is an unmistakable, growing sense of urgency that has aroused the deep concern of businessmen across this nation. Commitment, which was the first step, is now being translated into reality. And, in my

24

biased opinion, our ability as a nation, to achieve real progress, depends to a measurable extent on our ability to effectively mobilize both the economic and creative resources of the profit-making sector, on a totally unprecedented scale.

Finally, and still with regard to the for-profit sector, I strongly believe that profit-making institutions can and must be brought into this battle with a uniquely different rationale. Namely, I believe they must be brought in as profit-makers.

As radical as this may seem to many, I am convinced that real break-throughs are to be achieved, if we are only ingenious enough, to convert social problems into market opportunities. As an example, when we figure out ways to construct low-income housing, so as to truly be profitable for major corporations, then, and perhaps only then, will the houses that we so desperately need, be built within the time-frame required. (This, I think, parenthetically, is the basic assumption underlying Secretary Romney's announced plans in the field of housing.)

By way of summarizing, as to definition: effective voluntary action requires the participation, in different ways, of all three sectors. First, in a new set of important collaborative relationships, whereby they join together to conceptualize and program in cooperative ventures. In some of these cooperative efforts, one sector may be supportive, the other active. In other instances, these roles will most certainly be reversed. Flexibility must be paramount.

Second, and perhaps paradoxically, institutions within the three sectors will at times become vigorous competitors, attacking the same problems, but using different strategies, and different technologies. This does not bother me; indeed, I would welcome both patterns.

Let us actively seek collaboration where we can, and where there is mutuality with regard to goals.

But where the problems are most difficult, when it is desirable that we develop new models, on a competitive basis, let us not shy away from the heat of honest competition, for we shall all, I would assert, derive the benefits of such.

My last comment is simply this. Whether, at any given time, competi-tion, or collaboration, is the "name of the game," we must allow for— and build in—a respect for the autonomy of each sector, and the respective institutions therein. We cannot, must not, over-structure, or over-centralize. Unless we are to suffocate the freedom that must mark voluntary action.

II. Now, to the second section of my remarks, namely, to share with you the major recommendations of the President's Task Force on Vol-

untary Action. I will comment, moreover, as to which of these recommendations have already been acted upon.

Essentially, our recommendations called for three action phases, with a series of specific steps to be taken within each phase.

Phase One, first step: a Presidential letter to all executive agencies, asking each to submit to him, within six months, a report of what their agencies can and will do, as catalytic agents to stimulate voluntary action. Much of this is now being carried forth by the President's Urban Affairs Council, composed of key domestic Cabinet officers. Four of the six key agencies have already responded.

Second step: a recommendation that the President name an Assistant for Voluntary Action, and last week, Mr. Nixon designated Max Fisher of Detroit, head of the New Detroit Committee and a noted volunteer leader, as a Special Consultant, to the President, on Voluntary Action. Mr. Fisher's is a dual role, reporting both to the President and to Secretary Romney of HUD, the Cabinet official having been already assigned the primary responsibility for stimulating voluntary action.

The third step, and still part of the first phase of our report, called for the creation of a public committee on voluntary action, which is at this moment being organized by Mr. Fisher. Fourth, and finally, there was a recommendation for a White House Conference on Voluntary Action, which Mr. Fisher is currently in the process of designing.

Now to the second action phase: we recommended the creation of a National Foundation of Independent Service, two functions of which would be as follows: (1) to organize a nationwide, computer-based system, that would both collect and disseminate information to all interested organizations, as to voluntary programs that have actually worked, with specific descriptions of the methodologies used and under what conditions. A national, automatic "consulting service," in effect. The President has directed the establishment of such in the new Office of Voluntary Action to be located in HUD.

A second major function of the Foundation would be to conduct experiments of all types, the purpose being to legitimate non-governmental approaches and techniques, to problems traditionally relegated to public agencies.

The third action phase of the Task Force's recommendations, called for the creation of an Office of Independent Alternatives, to be located within the Bureau of the Budget. This office would require each Executive Agency to identify specific areas where it would literally legislate itself out of business, when and because non-governmental agencies had demonstrated proven capacities to more effectively solve specific problems. This is now under consideration by the Urban Affairs Council.

26

Our Task Force also submitted, along with its major recommendations, a list of possible projects that we urged the President to support, but which ultimately called for action on the part of voluntary organizations. I will describe but a few.

(1) Voluntary organizations indigenous to the ghetto might pledge to capitalize and consult with the management of black-owned enterprises, that would produce and distribute goods and services used by ghetto residents;

(2) Church organizations might pledge to care for the pre-school children of disadvantaged parents; i.e., create their own private Head Start Program;

(3) A group of profit-making companies, each representing a specific area of expertise, might come together in a consortium, to design and implement a comprehensive and systematic program to upgrade all living conditions in a given area, to include: housing, education; medical care; employment; transportation; recreation; and information services;

(4) A women's organization might pledge to teach the poor how to manage their money; i.e., develop their own consumer-information effort;

(5) A group of the largest private foundations might pledge to invest a substantial amount of their resources in programs designed to make a major impact in the reduction of drug addiction among young people.

These are only a few, of a long list of ideas that were submitted, many of which might never work, and others of which might, but will never see the light of day. Nonetheless, we felt obligated to submit, if you will, a "laundry list" of potentially "doable projects," because each of us on the Task Force had one very firm conviction: that there were no "pat answers;" that every possible alternative had to be tried.

III. Now to my final comments. I would like to make some specific projections and passing comments as to the future of voluntary-action efforts.

1. I think first, there need be a national commitment to fail. At first glance, this seems rather absurd and is admittedly an over-statement, but what I mean to convey is simply this: I think the very highest of priorities must be assigned to innovation and experimentation. Old problems have simply not yielded to old solutions; and I would postulate that the future of this effort will not only require, but indeed, will demand, an innovative spirit.

27

However, there is a price that need be paid for innovation. If we are to successfully innovate; if we are truly to take the large risks that are required to succeed; if we are to truly encourage "social entrepreneurship" (and with high risks, come the concomitant high pay-offs); then, we must be prepared, and I say again, indeed, even committed, to tolerate a rather high degree of failure in some of our program efforts.

Let us be honest, at least, with each other. We simply cannot have it both ways. If we are truly seeking new programs—programs that will signify real breakthroughs, then it must be understood, and communicated honestly and forthrightly, that there will be failures, many of them perhaps miserable ones, along the way.

I am really leading to this. We must innovate, but at the same time, this demands a national climate of trust, surrounding these efforts—a climate that will enable us to accept these isolated failures that must inevitably occur, without pointing the partisan fingers of blame—without generating the useless, and moreover, extremely disruptive conflict, that can only inhibit our forward progress; conflict that would sacrifice the successful whole, on the altar of a few failures, for partisan gain.

   2. A second projection. I mentioned earlier in my remarks; namely, that the three sectors—governmental; non-profit; and for-profit—would hopefully collaborate much more closely than in the past. At least it is my firm hope and conviction that such collaboration will occur, while at the same time allowing a high degree of organizational autonomy.

But, I also suggested, indeed, even called for competition between the three sectors, and I think this will have serious, but healthy consequences for our respective institutions—yours and mine—and for that matter, for all of our established social and economic institutions.

For as I see it, the die is already cast. Established institutions must not only "get with it" but "stay with it," or suffer the consequences. Competition will most certainly demand high performance; demand that in critical times, such as these, organizations cannot simply sit by doing things the old way, and watch the world pass in review. For perhaps their very survival is at stake.

Competition demands new responses; new structures; new missions; and rewards those institutions that adapt to change. At the same time, it penalizes those who do not. This competitive element, in my opinion, not only will, but to repeat, should underlie a major part of our experimental efforts in the future.

   3 My third and last projection. I am convinced that future program efforts will see the introduction of new technology, on a massive scale. I speak not only of hardware, which in many areas will, of course, be significant; but equally important, of systems technology,

and the widescale introduction of behavioral concepts. We can ill afford not to use this new technology, this new knowledge. Indeed, we must use it, and force it to work in a strong drive to rehabilitate the citizenry's capacity for public service.

My concluding comments, then, are very brief.

I am personally encouraged, excited, and optimistic about the future. We hear far too much today from the "prophets of doom"; we seem to read only about, and to watch on the news, every night—only the despair, only the hate, and the violence; and almost never—the hope, the successes, the love, that does in fact permeate so much of our society.

I believe that voluntary action, which includes all of the three great sectors in our society, is on the brink of a great renaissance. It was, still can be, and hopefully will be, the most vital element in our national life.

I would close by paraphrasing a few words written by Dick Cornuelle, one of the leading figures in this effort, a man for whom I worked, and, most important, a true friend. I paraphrase:

> "I am tired of angry words about America, for I am hopeful. I do not, and will not say, that this country is going to hell. I am saying that, perhaps for the <u>first time in our history</u>, America can, indeed, must go, wherever she wants to go. And in the process of going, each citizen can find himself again—by contributing, in his own way, to the creation of the good society."

This challenge I leave with you—in the hope that each of you will accept it, and act vigorously upon it.