

## Commentary

# Planners and Politics: Reflections on Twenty-seven Years

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This is a time of great transition for our country. It is a time of great transition for Chapel Hill and for the region of which we are a part. And it is a time of great transition for the University. First, I will discuss the similarities in national politics between 1961, when I graduated from the Department of City and Regional Planning, and the present. In 1961, a young president had just succeeded a popular two-term incumbent. In 1988, we must decide upon a successor to a popular two-term incumbent.

In 1961, the Kennedy Administration was just beginning, with fresh ideas and, from a planner's point of view, a conviction that the national government could play a positive role in improving the lives of our country's citizens. From that conviction came national efforts in housing and community development, regional revitalization, urban mass transportation and, later, water and air quality. I left Chapel Hill, infused with that spirit, to go to Washington to work in what was then the Housing and Home Finance Agency, and later the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Activities such as these were thought to be appropriate areas of federal intervention and of federal expenditure. But what happened to all of that?

From my personal perspective, the most tragic thing that happened was that John F. Kennedy was unable to complete his term as President and instead came Lyndon Johnson, the Vietnam war, the conflict between guns and butter, and the seeds of the current federal deficit crisis.

In 1988, we must make a choice, though I am not going to predict its outcome. It does bring to mind, however, a passage from Wordsworth:

The times were big with ominous change, which, night by night, provoked keen struggles, and black clouds of passion raised; but memorable moments intervened, when wisdom, like the Goddess from Jove's brain, broke forth in armour of resplendent words, startling the Synod. Could a youth, and one in ancient story versed, whose breast had heaved under the weight of classic eloquence, sit, see, and hear, unthankful, uninspired?

I don't know that the campaign rhetoric that we now hear is "classic eloquence," but I do know that to govern is to make choices. The fundamental choice facing the newly elected administration in 1988 will be on what to spend the national resource.

The times are more complicated now than in 1961. The world economy is more interrelated. We have enhanced communication capability which has brought into our living rooms the horrors of Vietnam, the inequities of South Africa, the tension on the West Bank, and the trials and tribulations of the workers in Poland. The nuclear spectre remains over us and there is a kind of paralysis of government in the United States. These should be seen as opportunities for reform. As planners, we have a unique contribution to make to the solution of these national problems. What we offer is a world view from a community perspective. Surely we can improve the quality of decision-making and overcome governmental paralysis.

In 1961, the University was an institution with about 10,000 students. It had great tradition and enjoyed great respect in the region. But, except for a few distinguished programs, it was not a nationally-ranked institution.

The Research Triangle Park was just starting. It embraced the novel idea that corporate research and development and corporate headquarters could be linked to the universities to produce jobs for North Carolinians. It succeeded beyond its planners' wildest expectations.

In 1988, we face a different situation. On July 1, the new Chancellor, Paul Hardin from Drew University in New Jersey, will arrive in Chapel Hill. Soon after he comes, he must appoint a new provost, the chief academic officer of the University, and a vice chancellor for business and finance.

The University now has 22,000 students and aspires toward national and international greatness. In the medical school and in the sciences, we have seen spectacular growth over the last several years and we are attaining national prominence.

Similarly, the Research Triangle Park is at a crossroad. It faces the question of whether home-grown enterprise—those small businesses that tend to spin out of universities—have a place in the Park. It also faces many competitors and imitators, not only in this region, but across the country.

Don Bielman, the first head of the Microelectronics Center, and the man who led North Carolina's efforts to bring the Sematech project in semiconductor research to the Triangle, has noted several factors detracting from the region.

- our failure to produce great elementary and secondary education
- our difficulty in building roads
- our problems with environmental quality
- our problems in the universities

He stresses that the region's universities must achieve greatness if we are to compete with states such as Texas, California, and Massachusetts for high-tech development. He comments on how discouraging it is to realize when the competition is over that you were never even in the game. In his view, we in the Triangle were never competitive because we do not have the political representation in Washington necessary to compete effectively with Texas and California.

There is another dimension to determinants of the region's future. If we are to become a region that Royce Hanson calls a "command and control center" in the international economy, we must resolve the growing tension between two fundamentally opposing forces. Those whose goal is to move the university to greatness, diversify its enterprise, and make its activities more complex and significant, have combined with those who would provide continued expansion at the Research Triangle Park and in its surroundings to form one faction.

Opposing them are those who perceive that fulfilling these lofty aspirations will inevitably degrade the quality of life for those who are here and those who will come.

It is a classic confrontation over change, and governmental institutions, including the one of which I am a part, are ill-equipped to guide this change. Yet change will come.

My advice to the new Chancellor—and to the Provost and to the Vice Chancellor—as they seek to guide this institution on the path to greatness is to heed the voices of the community. They must recognize that, without consensus, even long in coming, nothing good can be achieved.

My participation in politics has been demanding, physically tiring, stimulating, exhilarating, depressing, rewarding, frustrating, never dull and always changing. There is room in planning for the full spectrum of participation in public affairs—from research to analysis to policy development to elected office.

Planners have unique perspectives to bring to the political process. They bring a broad view, a strategic approach, a value-based orientation, and a geographically-linked way of thinking. Since planning and politics mix well, I would urge those who are inclined in that direction not to rule out active participation in politics as part of their professional career. □

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