Faults cross boulders on Potomac palisades.

Moving the System

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What can students and others concerned about environmental problems do about them? For one thing, they can demand that the government do something. For those interested in such endeavors, there are a number of variables I think are important to bear in mind. My observations are based on a study I made recently on how water and air pollution problems were placed on the policy agenda.

Those demanding pollution control may do well to ponder the relationship between these variables. The first variable is knowledge concern leadership time prospect high + high + aggressive + short = good low + indifferent + long = poor

At the outset, it may be well to remember two pervasive characteristics of political decision-making in our time: pluralism and incrementalism. The latter is a consequence of the former. There are so many interests with considerable political power in our country. Many of them can and have on various occasions exercised what John C. Calhoun termed a "concurrent veto." Our constitutional separation of powers and checks and balances are certainly in harmony with such pluralist forces. Their effect is such that policy evolves only as quickly and with as many modifications as is dictated by the necessity to piece together tensory majorities coalitions.

This state of affairs must be intrinsically depressing to students. And, indeed, before many of you were born Congress passed (in 1948) the initial legislation that was the forerunner of our present air pollution control policies. In 1955, the first federal air pollution control legislation was enacted. Despite landmark legislation in water pollution control in 1956, 1965, and 1969, and in air pollution control in 1963, 1965, and 1967, I do not have to tell you that the problems are far from being solved. At the present rate of progress, children may still be trying to cope with pollution.

Things could be worse. Our knowledge of the causes and effects of pollution has increased enormously in the past 20 years. And much legislative legislation has been the result of aggressive leadership and a high degree of concern by many interested citizens, thus shortening the time needed to get action and enhancing the prospect that something would be done. Then again, things could be better. Too often leaders have been indifferent, relevant scientific data have not been pursued zealously, and pollution control has been relegated to a low priority. Under such conditions, prospects for action remained poor for long periods. Here are some examples of what I mean. In 1960 the Clean Air Act directed the Secretary of HEW to determine the relationship between pollutant concentrations and the incidence of harmful effects, and publish those findings. But scientific evidence was nonexistent, and it was not until 1965 that vehicle emission criteria were promulgated (and then under a rather cavalier rationalism) and 1967 that sulfur oxide criteria were announced. Other criteria are presumably still in the making. Our total lack of technical knowledge about pollution data are quite complex, somewhat literally exotic, hinging on statistical correlations between such variables as parts per million, "the urban factor," thermal inversion coatings, and economic costs and benefits.

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Cries and dramatic incidents have always led to the hope that public attention focused on a problem something will be done. And there is reason to believe that the Air Quality Act of 1967 was enacted at least partly in response to a series of bad winter (1966) thermal inversions in London and New York. The key figure in the enactment of the 1963 Clean Air Act, then Congressman Ken Roberts, confessed that such events were significant enough to cause him to want to fade quickly (as is their nature). Despite a host of "oil spils," Senate-House differences during the last three sessions of Congress have prevented the enactment of serious pollution control legislation. The most disappointing incident was perhaps the publication in 1961 of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." Despite a wealth of attention, including extensive media coverage and congressional hearings, no significant pollution controls emerged. Partly because there were not enough Miss Carson's data were subject to a variety of interpretations, but mostly because public attention shifted eventually to other matters. You often, public attention spans are insufficient to sustain a high priority for any particular issue.

The attitude of key policymakers are often crucial President Eisenhower felt that pollution control was a "local" matter. Although he reluctantly approved a small federal grant program in 1956, his resistance stiffened, and in 1960 he vetoed an increase in that program. President Kennedy's successor struggled just to remind him that he should press for control legislation; his mind was usually on matters of foreign policy. But President Johnson was conservation-oriented, and urged enlarged control programs. And certainly the Secretary of Interior between 1960 and 1968, Stewart Udall, was aggressive (so, surprisingly, is his successor, Walter Hickl). Pollution control champion in Congress is Senator Edmund Muskie, who has partly due to his expertise in out of expertise in pollution problem areas. It was but only due to his death in 1963 of his former committee chairman, Robert Kerr, a skeptic of federal pollution control, that the creation of the Portage pollution subcommittee was possible. In short, action is contingent on strategically located individuals who want to do something.

These examples, as brief as they must be, are meant to illustrate my argument. Generally speaking, you can see that the top row is meant to indicate the conditions necessary for significant policy action, and the bottom row the opposite. The question that arises is whether or not students can contribute anything substantial enough to help maximize the conditions in the top row.

There is no simple answer to the question of whether or not action within "the system" can be sufficiently rewarding. Hopefully, some of you will commit themselves to an intense effort to help understand and change conditions in that system. Perhaps other young men and women will want to get more directly involved in what they believe hereofore have been thought possible or desirable. I hope they will not let the frustrations I have discussed debilitate.

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Continued from Page 3

Electoral politics is preposterous threat to the absurd. Consider this: Between 1960 and 1970, the nation has been through a series of bad winter (1966) thermal inversions, our history. Yet we ended the decade with two tired souls for our history. Yet we ended 'the decade with two tired souls for our history. Yet we ended 'the decade with two tired souls for...