

Preface

FOR NEARLY THREE years, we have jointly chaired a remarkable group of individuals - leaders from government, business, environmental, civil rights, labor, and Native American organizations - in an effort to overcome long years of conflict and agree on ways to achieve national environmental, economic, and social goals. President Clinton asked us to advise him on sustainable development, the idea that the quality of the country's future rests on integrating the economy, equity, and environment in national policy. This report is the expression of an agreement that has surprised us by its unanimity and its emphasis on values, consensus, and community. It is a beginning, the start of a national journey toward sustainability, but not a detailed roadmap.

Early in our work we were challenged by Vice President Gore to "look long, be creative, and think big." The mandate to be visionary was indispensable to our work. Long before we debated policies and action we agreed upon a vision, unifying beliefs, and a set of long-term national goals. It is important to decide where you are going before you argue about how to get there. Finding common values and shared goals is a better way to shape the future than endless reruns of the stale drama of confrontation.

We recognized that both communities and nations exist to secure for their individual citizens the benefits of collective action in response to common problems. This collective action must, at least in a democracy, be based upon agreements of common purpose. It has been our personal experience that American society has been having increasing difficulty reaching agreement about societal goals. This has been especially true for those issues that lie within the overlapping shadows of Americans' hopes for economic progress, environmental protection, and social equity. Policy debates in these areas have been characterized by confrontation and mistrust.

Most of the members brought experience with the contentiousness of these issues to the Council, and--even as environmental debates in the nation suddenly veered toward greater polarization--we spent many hours in many meetings searching for a path toward agreement. We did not resolve all of our differences, but we did find a common ground of values such that each member has chosen to sign this report. The two of us, and we think many of our colleagues on the Council, have come to believe that the current polarization is just the reason why our agreement is important. We were able to find common ground on goals and values, and sometimes, although not always, on ways to achieve our goals and practice our values. Above all, we agreed strongly about the value of the process we went through to search for and build consensus.

The politics of mistrust are the greatest obstacle to the process of innovation and change that we all believe is necessary to achieve the goals we share. We believe that consensus will move America forward both faster and farther than confrontation. Moreover, we believe that consensus is the public's job, not the government's. Government is important in implementing what people agree on, but we all need to do the hard work of listening, learning, and finding common ground.

Neither the Council nor the President alone can bring about change in the United States. Change will not and cannot come alone from Washington to the country, although Washington must provide leadership. The work of the Council will be important only if it ignites many debates; helps to inspire independent action; and encourages business, citizens, and government to invent new forms of dialogue and interaction.

The President's idea of appointing "industry" and "environmental" co-chairs for a Council that included members of his cabinet as well as leaders from many sectors of society presented us with an unusual challenge. We hardly knew each other when we started. The "environmentalist" had experience as a regulatory official, environmental litigator, and sharp critic of the company in which the "industrialist" has spent his professional life. Now we had to agree--and learn to trust each other--to be able to lead the Council.

Over the past three years we have given dozens of speeches together, held joint press conferences, met with hundreds of citizens - some of whom had harsh words and deep suspicion of one or the other of us because of our background. We have chaired scores of meetings and spent countless hours debating how to help the Council succeed. Through all this, we have developed a warm friendship and a capacity to find a genuine and productive congruence of views on most any issue. We have sometimes lost track of which of us was the executive and which the environmentalist, and, indeed, after one speech to a Rotary Club even our audience was confused.

The meetings of the Council have been public, and we have invited hundreds of people from dozens of communities to address us. Often, community leaders and local activists moved the Council ahead by voicing a cogent mix of vision and pragmatism, concern for the future, and conviction that people can find sensible solutions. We thank them. They helped us greatly. We hope our report helps them.

Finally, we want to offer our thanks and earnest appreciation to the Council's executive director, Molly Harriss Olson, and her bright, dedicated staff, and to express our great gratitude and admiration for the members of the Council. We have watched with deepening respect as the members set aside their preconceptions and approached hard issues with openness and honesty. We have been touched by their eloquence and conviction. We have enjoyed their humor and valued their forbearance. They confronted the question, "What are our hopes and how do we meet our responsibility to the future?" with courage, intelligence, and integrity. We thank them for having made it such a privilege to work with them.

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