

Overview

Introduction: The Honorable William F. Winter

William F. Winter served as governor of Mississippi from 1980 to 1984. He is a longtime advocate of public education, racial reconciliation, and historic preservation. He served as chair of the National Commission on the State and Local Public Service, the Southern Regional Education Board, the Southern Growth Policies Board, the Commission on the Future of the South, the National Civic League, the Kettering Foundation, the Foundation for the Mid-South, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. He is also a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and recently received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award. An attorney in the firm of Watkins Ludlam Winter & Stennis in Jackson, Mississippi, he is a graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law.

More than 15 years ago, it was my good fortune to chair the National Commission on the State and Local Public Service. Based at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany, New York. The commission included 27 individuals with distinguished backgrounds as public officials, nonprofit leaders, journalists, and academicians. Though we came from disparate backgrounds and regions of the country, the commission was united in the view that making democracy work is what the state and local public service must be about. It is at these levels of government that so much of the actual delivery of basic and essential services takes place. We believed that public service at these levels was a noble and worthy calling that needed to be encouraged and revitalized.

The commission worked hard to build on the knowledge its members brought to the task. Leading experts produced research papers for our consideration. We conducted six hearings all across the country to hear the perspectives and insights of those on the firing lines of public service. After careful assessment of this information, much deliberation, and final drafting, we presented the commission's primary report, *Hard Truths/Tough Choices: An Agenda for State and Local Reform*, to President Bill Clinton at the White House in June 1993. In the years immediately following, we worked with public officials and others to encourage action on the commission's recommendations.

While I take pride in what the commission accomplished, the fact is that the context of state and local government has undergone profound transformation since we released our report. Some of these changes have to do with the revolution in information technology, shifting federal approaches to major policies, and an increasing emphasis on outsourcing public services to private firms and nonprofit groups, including faith-based organizations. Others have to do with watershed moments in American political life—September 11, Hurricane Katrina, and the voting debacle in Florida in 2000. My own personal percep-

tions have been particularly affected by the impact of Hurricane Katrina in my home state. Not only did its destructive effect create major personal problems for thousands of individual citizens who were in its path, but its political fallout continues to reverberate across the region and, indeed, across the country.

As this disaster occurred in the region where I live, I have been able to observe at close range the results in terms of intergovernmental relationships. As a member of an official state commission charged with helping to frame and assess the governmental response to the disaster, I have shared the concern of many other citizens over how much of the public administrative infrastructure was ill equipped to deal with a catastrophic event of this magnitude and how it may predict the response to other major disasters in the future. My sense is that the overlapping and often competitive nature of an administrative structure involving various federal and state agencies and an excessive number of local political entities makes it almost impossible to achieve the coordinated and unified response that a crisis of this kind requires. To put it in plain terms, old-fashioned turf protection frequently overrode the larger public interest and continues to impede the recovery process.

If there is a lesson here, it is that as we face the increasingly complex issues of the future that include not just the well-being but, indeed, the very survival of vast numbers of our citizens, we must somehow create the political will—which is to say, the *citizen-driven* will—to eliminate the stumbling blocks to more satisfactory governmental performance.

This certainly will mean, as *Hard Truths/Tough Choices* urged and as this special issue of *Public Administration Review* emphasizes, the aggressive revamping of our system for the more effective delivery of essential public services. Now, in the light of the unprecedented crises of recent years, that task becomes much more urgent. This may require not just the complete reorganization of some departments and agencies that have failed to

perform, but the actual consolidation or elimination of entire units of government at the county, district, and municipal levels. I am aware that these suggestions are political minefields, but it is going to require this kind of serious reform if we are to be prepared to meet even more challenging crises in the future.

Now, more than ever, we need a fresh look at the enduring and new challenges that state and local officials face and new thinking on how best to meet them. My hope and expectation is that this special issue will be an important step in that direction. The featured authors cast considerable light on developments since the release of the commission's report. They note which of the various recommendations embedded in *Hard Truths/Tough Choices* have taken root and which have not. They address the implications of Katrina and other new developments that the commission did not anticipate when we drafted our

report. In sum, they provide a knowledge base that, in the spirit of the original commission, can help inform those committed to a new reform agenda.

We are indebted to three organizations whose backing made this special issue possible. The Carnegie Corporation of New York, which helped support the work of the commission in the 1990s, took the lead in funding this initiative. The Stennis Center for Public Service, where I am privileged to serve on the board of trustees, also provided invaluable support. And, as with the original commission, the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government sustained a stimulating and nurturing home for the development and completion of this project. Finally, I wish to add my personal appreciation to Professor Frank Thompson for his tireless and inspirational leadership throughout the entire course of this undertaking.