

The Ghetto Plight at Cabinet Level

Should the urban Negro ghettos be rebuilt or should their residents be scattered to the white suburbs?



MEANS

The struggle among high administration officials for an answer to that question has been intense since a heated argument erupted in the White House office of Joe Califano many weeks ago.

Bureau of the Budget Director Charles Shultze set off the tense exchange when he began discussing the urban crisis before nearly a dozen cabinet and sub-cabinet members assembled beneath Califano's stark black and grey abstract paintings. Shultze presented a list of 15 suggestions for improving condition in the cities.

SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS in that high-powered session were chagrined that Shultze failed to include a proposal tackling what they consider the biggest urban problem of all — unemployment. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz observed testily that the problem of the cities is centered upon the plight of the poverty-stricken Negro. Ghettos. He pointed out that the unemployment rate among Negroes is twice that of whites, and stressed he believes providing jobs in the ghettos is the key to helping the cities.

Then-Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach and then-Assistant Secretary of Commerce Eugene Foley (Katzenbach is now in the State Department, Foley has gone into private life) echoed Secretary Wirtz. They added their own pleas for new programs to attract industry and job-producing projects into the ghettos.

One official present, however, interjected that he opposed such efforts to rebuild the slums until conditions were improved for the poor, uneducated Negroes of the rural south. He said he preferred trying to resettle slum Negroes. "If you make the urban ghetto livable all you'll have is the Mississippi Negro moving North and reducing the area to a slum again," he said.

"You've got to face the fact that the ghetto

is here to stay and make it a decent place to live," Foley protested.

The meeting, as often happens in government, didn't settle anything. It is, however, a dramatic illustration of the painful but secret process now going on inside the White House as the administration prepares for 1967.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON has long been concerned about the problems of the urban centers, where 70 percent of the population lives, and has repeatedly indicated that city problems will make up a large share of his 1967 legislative program. In addition, his interest in the cities must certainly have been reinforced by the warning of this month's election, in which the GOP demonstrated impressive gains in the normally Democratic big city vote.

(Although that same election seemed to indicate a national atmosphere of entrenchment which foreshadows difficulty for the administration in Congress if its programs for the cities are deemed too expensive or too visionary).

Without much fanfare and largely without public notice the White House has set about in several ways to work on the problems of the cities. Passage last season of the Demonstration Cities Bill, was of course, a small but important beginning. A special task force has been assigned to produce new ideas for the cities which could be included in administration measures.

AND THAT CABINET-LEVEL group, which meets weekly in Califano's office, acts as a watchdog over the presently existing programs in an effort to see they are fully utilized.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department is planning shortly to conduct a landlord-tenant conference in the capital. The conference will bring together state and local officials and lawyers from across the country to discuss procedures which might be adopted to protect slum tenants.

A major slum problem is the failure of landlords to make essential repairs upon their dwellings. Tenants, who often cannot read nor write, seldom know the identity of their landlord and have no way of pressing him into action.

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