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In The Nation: The Federal Mess

By TOM WICKER

The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations has issued a timely and eloquent warning that the deterioration of living conditions in the great American population centers is threatening their total domination by the National Government.

The commission's thesis is chilling in its logic. So paralyzing is the overlap, disarray, inertia, antiquity and poverty of state and local government in America that it cannot begin to cope with the swiftly changing circumstances and demands of the twentieth-century city. And as the city therefore spirals downward into blight, disorder and rioting, its residents increasingly demand that the powerful Federal Government accept responsibility for their security and well-being.

Jobs for All

On the same day this warning was issued, and as if to put an exclamation point after it, the Urban Coalition—a group of the most powerful and public-spirited private interests in the nation—called upon Congress to guarantee a job for everyone able to work but unable to find private employment.

The coalition's appeal echoed statements by President John-

son suggesting that the Government would have to provide jobs for those not employed privately. So far, his words have been translated only into a proposal for a \$2.1-billion job-training program, to be conducted in partnership with business. Unless this shows spectacular results—and it has not yet even been approved in Congress—there will be increasing pressure on Washington for the Federal Government to step in as an "employer of last resort."

To Fill the Gap

This step would not be taken in usurpation of someone else's powers and prerogatives but in simple desperation at the inability of private interests or of state and local government to provide either the energy or the means for reaching the hard-core, urban unemployed.

This process becomes most ominous as it operates in police affairs. Federal troops were needed to restore order, and keep it, in Detroit last summer; they probably would be needed in any city in the nation where outbreaks of such violence occurred. At some point, therefore, in the present cycle of outbreak and inadequate response, the reliance of the cities for physical security will fall more

heavily upon the Federal Government than even upon the state-controlled National Guard, much less the hopelessly inadequate and ill-trained police forces of most cities.

So far, the Administration's Federal crime legislation has wisely concentrated on means of improving local law enforcement—not merely giving it more muscle but improving the quality of its personnel and the degree of its understanding of the complex problems it faces. The roar of approval that went up in Congress when the President denounced "crime in the streets" in the State of the Union message was striking evidence of how easy it probably would be to get less enlightened, "strong-arm" legislation to deal with what too many people seem to see as a mere crime wave.

The Advisory Commission's particular emphasis is on a vital dimension of the urban crisis that has been missing from too many studies. In essence, the commission has asked the truly basic question whether American government today is organized and equipped to cope with the vast, complex, kaleidoscopic demands of an age of technology and affluence.

It is not the "Federal system" of competing and cooperating

national, state and local governments that is being questioned; it is rather the organization and operation of the institutions and jurisdictions of the Federal system "when measured against present and prospective needs and expectations" that are grossly inadequate. The fact is that many of the institutions of American government are outmoded, poorly manned, underfinanced, socially unresponsive, and politically exploited. They lie atop one another in an impenetrable tangle of wards, boroughs, districts, townships, cities and counties, within states that are themselves primarily historical accidents without real economic, social or sometimes even geographical coherence.

Operational Adequacy

The Urban Coalition is certainly on sound ground in urging immediate, emergency action to cope with the hard-core unemployed. For the longer run, however, only a Federal system reorganized and reinvigorated to cope with the twentieth century, and perhaps even the beginning of the twenty-first, is likely to preserve that "political diversity" which the Advisory Commission rightly sees as the guarantor of individual freedom.