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Can Organizations Change?, D. Mazmanian and J. Nienaber

Terry D. Edgmon

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CAN ORGANIZATIONS CHANGE? ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS

By D. A. MAZMANIAN and J. NIENABER
Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1979. Pp. vii-220.

As the title suggests, this work concerns itself with our assessment of the environmental movement's impact upon the procedures, organizational structure, and objectives of the Corps of Engineers. The authors have selected four measures of organizational change—setting new goals, reorganization, changes in output, and open decision-making—as important factors in the assessment of bureaucratic change in the 1970s.

With these factors in mind, the authors provide five case studies of the Corps of Engineers project planning process, and a survey data analysis of the attitudes of citizens who took part in Corps public involvement activities. The methodology is innovative and sophisticated. The reader is allowed the richness of detail and insight that only case studies provide, and empirical generalizations derived from survey data analysis, upon which conclusions about the overall effectiveness of Corps planning strategies on citizen attitudes can be based. The conclusion? Not much change, either in citizen attitudes about the Corps, or the Agency's organizational accommodation to citizen demands through citizen participation.

The book, therefore, represents a missed opportunity. Instead of considering a wide scope of decision making in order to define the changing constellation of political support, opposition, and the Corps' organizational responses, the authors chose to focus on a rather minor component of decision making and public relations, the public involvement process. Thus, the work stands primarily as a technical analysis of citizen participation strategies, rather than a political study of the Corps of Engineers.

However, the book may be testimony enough to this agency's political strength. The environmental movement of the last decade gave us sweeping anti-pollution legislation, unprecedented federal authority to regulate many sectors of society, wholesale governmental reorganization, and billions for anti-pollution control technology. The authors admit that this social movement led only to what amounted to organizational fine tuning within the Corps: brief experimentation with open planning and decision making, a small increase in environmentally-oriented personnel, and the creation of environmental units in District Planning and Engineering Divisions. These modifications

represent a kind of institutional creation Coser has called "safety valve institutions"¹ and Tom Wolfe, "flak catchers."² Organizational change as evidenced by the Corps represents the development of an organizational unit to contain conflict and insulate dissidents from key institutional decision processes, precisely the pattern anticipated by Ingram.³ To the extent that environmental units dealt exclusively with citizen related issues and the staff held essentially dead end career positions, environmental demands were modulated in order to minimize their impacts on basic Corps objectives. One wonders if these alterations were little more than symbolic gestures.

What would be expected from an agency whose primary mission is public works? As long as the Congress can justify expensive water resource projects, there always will be a market for what the Corps provides, the efficient transfer of public resources from the federal government to loyal congressional constituents. In another light then, this study may reflect the relatively slight influence environmentalism has had on grass roots and congressional politics.

In sum, this well-researched study will have its share of critics, to be sure. They will argue that the cases selected for analysis were merely showcase projects which cannot be considered representative examples of the Corps at work. Others perhaps will utilize it only for its examples of effective (and ineffective) citizen participation techniques. Can organizations change? It all depends upon your viewpoint and your values. For some, the Corps has changed enough. For others, it's still business as usual.

TERRY D. EDGMON
North Carolina State University
Department of Political Science

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1. L. COSER, *THE FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT* (1956).
 2. T. WOLFE, *RADICAL CHIC & MAU-MAUING THE FLAK CATCHERS* (1970).
 3. See Ingram, *Information Channels and Environmental Decision Making*, 13 NAT. RES. J. 150 (1973). See also Ingram & Ullery, *Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making: Substance or Illusion?* in *PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING* 123-29 (W. Sewall & J. Coppock eds. 1977).