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States can be trusted in new federalism roles

by Dick Thornburgh

INTEREST GROUPS OPPOSING President Reagan's spending reforms have taken some familiar shots at state government that simply aren't on target anymore. Their motives undoubtedly range from a genuine concern for those whom social programs are meant to help to a simple desire to protect bureaucratic turf in Washington. Their tactics, however, have involved the unfair resurrection of charges that the states are racist or incompetent or insensitive to the needs of the poor. These charges have little of the credibility that might have been present 20 years ago.

Since then the states have reapportioned their legislatures, modernized their executive branches, professionalized their work forces and legislative staffs and assumed increasing responsibilities for the disadvantaged.

Although black Americans continue to be underrepresented in elected positions at all levels of government, they are better represented in the state legislatures (4.2 percent of all members) than in the Congress (3 percent).

The states have expanded and modernized their revenue-raising capacities, increased aid to local governments and financed a sizable amount of property-tax relief, much of it targeted to low-income households. Recent studies have found state aid to be better targeted to local needs than federal aid.

States also spend a larger proportion of their resources than either the federal government or local governments to meet the needs of the most unfortunate members of our society: the poor, maladjusted, mentally retarded, handicapped and lawbreakers. In Pennsylvania, programs to meet these needs consume about 40 percent of our general fund and 30 percent of our total resources,

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while at the federal level they consume less than 20 percent of domestic outlays.

Yet state leaders are continually second-guessed by critics who do not have to carry these burdens to the same degree and who complain that the states are insensitive or inhumane.

Much of our progress was made in response to federal "sticks and carrots," to be sure, but much also was undertaken by the states on their own. Indeed, there is a growing perception among thoughtful observers that the states are ahead of Washington in experimenting with innovative approaches to our most stubborn problems, thereby reviving their roles as "laboratories of democracy."

It is to the future that we all must look. President Reagan's fiscal 1982 budget reductions represent the acceleration of a downward trend in real federal aid that began four years ago under a Democratic president and Congress. International realities and economic forces beyond our control point inevitably to a continuing shift of domestic responsibilities to the states.

Indeed the perception of a federal government more enlightened and compassionate than the states grew at least partly out of the illusion of inexhaustible federal resources.

In the '60s and '70s, Congress attempted to solve virtually every problem brought to its attention by implementing a national spending program. Only recently have federal policy-makers faced the anguished long famil-

iar to their counterparts in the states: how to allocate limited resources.

The nation's governors are willing, in the short run, to bear part of the burden of helping the government reduce its deficit and revitalize the economy. But Washington should end its preoccupation with hundreds of questions meant for local decision-makers and its tendency to impose unrealistic mandates that undermine public support for such worthy goals as helping the handicapped and cleaning air and water. The states and the administration need to continue to negotiate a long-range sorting out of appropriate state and federal roles in such areas as income-support programs, education, transportation, community and economic development and law enforcement.

The National Governors' Association believes that "block grants," thoughtfully designed to ensure flexibility within reasonable federal guidelines, would offer

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opportunities for achieving administrative savings of about 10 percent. If the cuts must be deeper, as Reagan says they must, then maximum flexibility to allocate funds to areas of greatest need becomes even more important. But if Congress delivers budget cuts without flexibility, or delivers the cuts and the flexibility too late in our fiscal and legislative years, the states will not be able to make rational and humane adjustments.

Timing and flexibility, in other words, can be crucial in giving the states their rightful role in the resurgence of federalism we see before us.

We believe that the states are ready to assume that role and help deliver better, more efficient government for all Americans.