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THE NEW LEFT IN GOVERNMENT: PART II THE VISTA PROGRAM AS "INSTITUTION-BUILDING"

(Executive Summary)

VISTA "is probably one of the few government agencies established in the '60s which is both fondly remembered by the Left and still staffed by leftists." This was the assessment of Mother Jones, a magazine published by the Foundation for National Progress, referring to a June 1980 Washington, D.C., conference commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of Volunteers in Service to America, originally part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." That the journal of a foundation created in 1975 by the far-left Institute for Policy Studies should so characterize VISTA says much about the redirection of the agency during the Carter Administration under the leadership of two principal New Left activists, Sam Brown and Margery Tabankin. It also helps explain both the Reagan Administration's reported decision to phase out the program entirely by the close of fiscal 1983 and the widely-held perception of VISTA as a program which, from 1977 through 1980, was captured by New Left radical activists and used to funnel government funds to organizations advocating programs and strategies basically antithetical to American political and economic usages.

It was Brown's view that federal anti-poverty efforts had tended to degenerate into programs that encouraged dependency rather than "self-help" and that what was needed was a renewed emphasis on "citizen participation." Tabankin's view coincided with Brown's. Stressing the need to develop "institution-building" and "networking" at the local level through community organizing programs based on the nationwide network of radical organizations

For Part I, see Heritage Foundation Institution Analysis No. 9, "The New Left in Government: From Protest to Policy-Making," November 1978.

from which activists like Brown and herself had emerged, Tabankin said that "VISTA should work towards more equitable distribution of income and opportunities."

The result was the national grants program, whereby grants were awarded by ACTION headquarters to national organizations with affiliates in local communities without restrictions imposed by state or regional boundaries. These grants were to be used "in support of citizen participation organization building efforts and the creation/expansion of advocacy systems" rather than for any "direct service for the sake of service (i.e., the end goal is to provide a service)." As noted in the March/April 1978 issue of Working Papers for a New Society, another IPS-related publication, "this procedure shielded the agency's new direction from the public eye for a while -- an important strategy, as later became apparent."

The national grants program emerged from a lengthy "citizen review process" initiated early in 1977. Tabankin appears to have played an especially important role in this process and acknowledged that she had "made up the list" of those who should be invited to participate in a series of roundtable discussions held by VISTA in May and June of 1977. By ACTION's own account, the national grants concept "evolved" from these meetings, in which 100 organizations were represented, among them the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), Campaign for Economic Democracy, Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Laurel Springs Training Center, Midwest Academy, National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, and National Training and Information Center. Of these, at least five -- ACORN, FSC, MA, NCUEA, and NTIC -- were among the first twelve recipients of national grants (ACORN benefitting through the Community Organizations Research and Action Project, which the ACORN leadership created specifically to handle VISTA funds). Another recipient was the Youth Project, a leftist funding agency for which Tabankin had worked as executive director.

One regional ACTION director was quoted as characterizing national grants as "Marge Tabankin's program and all her cronies." As summarized by Representative John M. Ashbrook (R-Ohio), "Of the 22 organizations represented at the meetings with which Ms. Tabankin claimed some prior association [exclusive of the Youth Project], 13 ended up as beneficiaries under the National VISTA Grants program." The leadership of these organizations, among them Michael Ansara of Massachusetts Fair Share and Heather Booth of the Midwest Academy, had in many cases been active in groups like Students for a Democratic Society and in annual conferences conducted by an IPS offshoot known as the National Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies, one of several IPS projects funded in part by Tabankin's Youth Project.

Subsequently-uncovered abuses in the operation of the national grants program included the use of volunteers in restricted staff-related work, union organizing, and political activity.

Under the ACORN/CORAP grant, VISTAs engaged in blatantly political activity in Arkansas and Missouri, while five VISTAs were active in a labor organizing campaign in New Orleans. In like manner, under the Midwest Academy grant, two VISTAs worked virtually full-time in Rhode Island in labor organizing among jewelry workers. Training materials had to be withdrawn from use by both CORAP and Midwest because of "intemperate" and excessively confrontational language.

National grantees were not the only organizations of a radical hue to benefit under the new program. Sponsoring organizations like the Illinois Public Action Council, Cleveland Women Working, the California Housing Action and Information Network, and the Institute for the Study of Civic Values also received assistance. Both CWW and CHAIN have been actively represented at "Alternative Public Policy" gatherings staged by NCASLPP or CED; and IPAC, working through a subsidiary known as the Illinois Coalition Against Reagan Economics (ICARE), mounted a demonstration in Chicago during July 1981 to protest an appearance by President Reagan. The Institute for the Study of Civic Values, which was represented at a July 1977 NCASLPP conference, recently produced "The Cruelty Index -- A Guide to Reagan Budget Cuts" and "The Greed Index -- A Guide to Reagan Tax Reductions."

Recently-discovered documentary material reveals that a major training contract was awarded in August 1978 to the Laurel Springs Institute, self-described as a project of a Campaign for Economic Democracy enterprise known as the Laurel Springs Educational Center. As far back as May 5, 1977, Tom Hayden wrote to Tabankin, "We want a voice in the training of VISTAs in California and the definition of their work." The CED staff employee recommended to Tabankin by Hayden was among those later invited to the roundtable meetings.

Laurel Springs Educational Center was specifically designed to train activists "in the fields of electoral campaigning and community organizing" and to enable participants to "learn more about the way our economic and political systems operate and what CED's alternatives are." It was also designed, in the words of Hayden's wife, Jane Fonda, to aid CED in "building a political power base." It is therefore not altogether surprising that assessments of certain VISTA-related LSI programs written by ACTION officials have emphasized that CED and LSI were virtually indistinguishable, that project meetings were dominated by extraneous CED business, or that VISTAs were pressured to attend CED meetings unrelated to their projects. Of the eleven staff members and consultants originally proposed by LSI, no fewer than nine had been actively involved in CED, frequently in leadership capacities.

Laurel Springs training material was pronouncedly New Left in content. It included a training manual issued by the Midwest Academy and a resource list recommending publications of such organizations as the CED-related California Public Policy Center

and an SDS offshoot known as the North American Congress on Latin America. Past workshops dealt with such subjects as "An Overview of Electoral Strategy in Relation To Community Organizing" and a "discussion of the meaning of Economic Democracy as it relates to community organizing." The propriety of government support for such a radical political apparatus is open to serious question, but it may be that the machinery of VISTA itself must be changed if similar abuses under future Sam Browns and Marge Tabankins are to be prevented.

THE NEW LEFT IN GOVERNMENT: PART II
THE VISTA PROGRAM AS "INSTITUTION-BUILDING"

INTRODUCTION

On the weekend of June 13-15, 1980, a conference was held in Washington, D.C., to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the domestic anti-poverty program operated by "the federal voluntary service agency" known as ACTION. At a White House reception to help mark the occasion, Rosalynn Carter praised the estimated 1,000 assembled volunteers for their service to "people whose needs have been forgotten or were never understood -- people in Appalachia, in the Indian nations, the South Bronx, Chinatowns, Hispanic communities, the Ozarks -- in all our states."

Among those attending the reception, as reported in the Washington Star for June 14, 1980, were ACTION Director Sam Brown, ACTION Deputy Director Mary King, VISTA Director Margery Tabankin, and former Peace Corps Director Sargent Shriver, who observed that "The fact that VISTA is alive and growing and being celebrated at the White House is...a sign of its success." Shriver also served as master of ceremonies for an evening awards ceremony and benefit at the Kennedy Center; according to the Star account, "With singers Peter, Paul and Mary and John Denver heading the entertainment bill, well-heeled supporters of VISTA bought \$1,500 boxes for the event, and single tickets went for a modest \$10." The September/October 1980 issue of Mother Jones, a magazine published by the Foundation for National Progress, a creature of the "far-left" Institute for Policy Studies,* reported that an "unusual aspect" of this benefit was the "coughing up" of "\$2,500 or more each" by such sponsors as "AT&T, Atlantic Richfield, the Carnegie Corporation, the Exxon Corporation, the est Foundation and Laurance Rockefeller."

Less than a year later, the administration of Ronald Reagan reportedly had decided to abolish VISTA by the close of fiscal year 1983, a dramatic reversal that has prompted some sharp criticism. The question is, quite simply: Why? Given VISTA's seeming acceptance since its creation in 1965 as part of Lyndon

*In its financial report for 1976, the Foundation for National Progress is described as "formed in 1975 to carry out on the West Coast the charitable and educational activities of the Institute for Policy Studies." For a detailed examination of FNP, its subsidiary projects, and its ties to both the Institute for Policy Studies and Tom Hayden's Campaign for Economic Democracy, see Heritage Foundation Institution Analysis No. 14, "Campaign for Economic Democracy: Part II, The Institute for Policy Studies Network," April 1981. The origins, leadership, activities, and institutional perspective of IPS, which was characterized as a "far-left radical 'think tank'" in the 1971 annual report of the House Committee on Internal Security, are treated in Heritage Foundation Institution Analysis No. 2, "Institute for Policy Studies," May 1977.

Johnson's much-heralded "War on Poverty," what has happened to discredit it so completely in the eyes of the new administration?

The problem, it seems, is not merely budgetary. Rather, VISTA is now viewed as a program so conceptually flawed that, no matter what the intent of its creators, it became during the Carter Administration an instrument for New Left activism rather than an agency to provide "direct service" to America's poor. Indeed, Mother Jones has observed with unusual candor that VISTA "is probably one of the few government agencies established in the '60s which is both fondly remembered by the Left and still staffed by leftists."

The present study is devoted largely to the actual operation of the national grants program through which Brown and Tabankin redirected VISTA along essentially New Left lines; included are representative case studies of alleged abuses and examples of demonstrably radical organizations that were among the program's principal beneficiaries. The appendix provides additional background data on how, and for what ends, these individuals and organizations operated as a closely-knit network in conceiving and implementing the grants program.

NATIONAL GRANTS: THE PATTERN OF ABUSE

The national grants program appears to have evolved from three roundtable meetings conducted by ACTION in Washington, D.C., during May and June 1977. The evidence summarized in the appendix demonstrates that Tabankin played a crucial role in organizing these sessions and that those invited formed a network of like-minded New Left-oriented activists whose predispositions were shared by the ACTION/VISTA leadership. This virtually guaranteed a radical orientation for the new program before the sessions had even been held.

Just how the national grants program operated under Brown and Tabankin is explained in a report prepared during 1978 by the investigative staff of the House Committee on Appropriations and published in the record of an April 5, 1979, hearing before the Committee's Subcommittee on the Departments of Labor and Health, Education, and Welfare. It found that, unlike other grants made by ACTION, all of the national grants approved as of September 30, 1978, "were awarded without formal advertising or requests for proposals." In other words, as the report noted elsewhere, all "were awarded noncompetitively." Instead of the previously-followed procedure, "applications were informally solicited by circulating the word about the new program among community action organizations with interstate operations. Fourteen applications were received, and 12 were ultimately approved." Also, "Another 20 local organizations represented at the [roundtable] conference were subsequently assigned VISTAs under the National Grants program."

Implementation of this program resulted in a number of abuses that were discussed at length in the staff report. In general, it was found that "rules governing selection of VISTA sponsors" and "spelled out in the VISTA policy guidelines" had not been properly observed by ACTION "in numerous instances." Rather,

The Investigative Staff found volunteers working in many communities and with constituencies that would not qualify under the Community Services Administration poverty income guidelines for participation in Federal programs designed to help the poor. VISTA volunteers were also found working with groups whose chances for survival without the continued services of a full-time organizer were poor....

New, less stringent approval policies resulted in assignment of volunteers "to a number of local sponsors who were never incorporated as non-profit organizations" and who were approved in some cases "without on-site visits."* Also,

A combination of poorly trained supervisors and inadequate monitoring has resulted in national grant VISTAs becoming involved in restricted staff-related work, union organizing, and political activities. These situations may not have developed if project supervisors had been better trained to draw the line between proper and improper VISTA activity, and if the State directors, who might ordinarily have been expected to pick up the violations, had an interest in monitoring the projects properly.

The many allegedly improper activities that grew to plague VISTA's national grants program developed in a number of cases. Perhaps the most glaring examples were the Community Organizations Research and Action Project (CORAP) and the Midwest Academy, both of which were discussed at length in the investigative staff report.

THE ACORN/CORAP GRANT

The CORAP grant was awarded in September 1977 and provided \$470,475 "for the training of 100 VISTAs, of whom 80 were to be placed with the ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) field organization to work with low-income people on a broad scope of local issues" in Arkansas, Texas, Missouri, Tennessee, Louisiana, Florida, and South Dakota.

*"ACTION State director recommendations for approval or disapproval of projects were often overruled by either the Project Review Board (PRB) or the VISTA director," a problem illustrated by the Midwest Academy grant; see below, p. 10.

The ACORN leadership organized CORAP specifically to receive and administer VISTA funds. As noted in the investigative staff report, however, it was

difficult to distinguish between the makeup and operation of the organizations. The officers of both the CORAP board and the ACORN board are the same individuals. The project supervisor and the project coordinator are paid under the grant for full-time employment, but both are also on the ACORN payroll. Training under the grant is provided by the Arkansas Institute for Social Justice (the Institute), another spinoff organization run by two former ACORN organizers.

It appears that the VISTA grant was crucial to the survival of ACORN. The report quoted an ACORN publication's account of an October 15, 1977, meeting of the ACORN Executive Board at which consideration was given to the organization's "policy of taking money from the federal government." It was noted that "In the past ACORN has avoided being this close to federal funds, but our financial situation is such that we can no longer afford to be as distant--unless we are willing to see the organization risk death." The report observed that in states "visited where VISTAs were working, ACORN had no more than 1 or 2 staff organizers assigned as compared with a total of 32 VISTAs" and added that "ACORN had at least 16 organizers who were immediately converted to the VISTA payroll upon approval of the grant." The conclusion reached was that "VISTAs supported by the grant probably comprise the majority of the overall organization."

Other adverse findings with regard to the CORAP grant abound, but the heart of the matter is found in certain proscribed activities for which volunteers were allegedly used:*

In May of this year, in connection with the Arkansas primary election, at least one VISTA (possibly more) was instructed by his ACORN supervisor to participate in a mailing of a slate of endorsements to ACORN members, develop and reproduce a flyer endorsing candidates to State and local office for distribution at neighborhood meetings, cover the polls and pass out a slate of ACORN endorsements, and distribute endorsed candidates' literature to members.

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Also, in Arkansas, the Investigative Staff interviewed a VISTA who had been involved in scheduling appointments for the local ACORN Political Action

*It is noted that these questionable "assignments were all made...well after ACTION's own Office of Compliance had completed an audit of ACORN which emphasized that volunteers were under no circumstances to get involved in the political process."

