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## Policy Research

The title of this discourse is “Policy Research,” a contradiction in terms. Its purpose is to explain that the demise of this once proud office was not an accident of circumstance but an inexorable consequence of a tendency which has been at the heart of political systems since the Middle Ages.

The elements which come together to explain this phenomenon were collected in various places.

The first element appeared at the International Trade Commission, where for a year I was privileged to observe both the deliberations of the commission to reach decisions and the diligent efforts of their staff to produce a staff report. But there was no relationship of one to the other. Indeed, the place where the commission’s decision and the staff report came together was always the printshop. I notice that though its purpose was obscure, the staff report did serve a function—to misdirect and to obfuscate. Having been exposed to the institutionalist tradition, I was confident that this function served some purpose, but I was unable to determine what that purpose was.

Years passed, and I observed that in nearly every town and city of Europe, there was a “Jews quarter” or *Ruelle des Juifs* in the old commercial part of town. This treasure, too, I stored in the backyard of my mind.

Finally, a book by Lester Thurow reminded us that zero-sum decisions are *very* difficult for a democratic political process to make. Then things began to fall into place. The purpose of misdirection and obfuscation became obvious. By making the decision process difficult to understand, they discourage those with a diffuse or marginal interest from participating in the decision; that is, they tend to disenfranchise the opponents to a petition for protection and hence transform a zero-sum *situation* into a positive-sum *decision*—a decision from which all the *effective* participants will gain.

This, then, is the essence of the decision process. Unless the great clamor of procedure confuses one side about what is going on, there can be no decision, that is, no policy.

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Of course, if procedure confuses both sides, the government is in the ideal situation of not having to make a decision at all. This occurs with some frequency.

But if one side sees through the obfuscation and the other does not (the result which the system seems designed to produce), then the aware side's interests will be disproportionately weighted in the decision process, and equilibrium will be "too far" in their direction. In summary, the policy process in an open political system

- (1) does not do a lot of things it should do,
- (2) appears to do a lot of things it does not do, and
- (3) overdoes everything it does do.

Good research which accurately identifies the costs and benefits of a course of action is, in any of these avenues, more likely to be embarrassing than welcome. It returns attention to the direct conflict which had to be *avoided* before a course of action—a policy—could be set. This means that a person who delivers a novel piece of analytical work to his Political Master will be made to feel like a woman who brings a new child to her husband—who had a vasectomy 5 years before. The Master is less likely to share her joy in the birth of a new thing than to decry this evidence of her having conspired with mean spirits. Political responsibility is, you see, the ultimate intellectual vasectomy.

The history of research in government agencies is like the history of Jews in pre-Industrial Revolution Europe. The Gentiles of a town would decide that they wanted to establish their town as a center of commerce. They would then invite the practitioners of this science into their town and set aside a place where they might live and practice. But, the Jews would practice their trade by rules so basic that they would not allow their gentlemen competitors, to whom commerce was a diversion and a livelihood but not a life-style, to turn a profit. So, slowly the number of streets open to the Jews would be restricted and the number of products they were allowed to trade reduced. Or, they would be limited to the wholesale trade, in the hope that gentlemen could turn a profit retailing the merchandise the Jews gathered.

But their numbers would dwindle, not so much because they had been sent away but because other Gentiles in other towns had decided that they should establish centers of commerce and had lured them away, to begin the process again.

As we see across Europe the signs announcing the former presence of Jews, we see across organization charts of government agencies the street signs of research. But the original citizens of these quarters have usually gone, and their places have been taken by reform congregations, or even Gentiles. Thus, we, the researchers, like the Jews of the Middle Ages, are cursed to wander from agency to agency,

deprived of home and property by our inability to lose track of what we do.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The mortal remains (former employees) of the dissolved Office of Trade Research were sent away with a memento inscribed "There are no Statesmen in this business. Trade theory is about whose hand is in whose pocket and trade policy is about who should take it out." It was noted gratefully that as they departed, their temple would be dismantled and the signs in their quarter taken down. Thus they would be spared the indignity of seeing a reform congregation move in and eat pork and write briefing papers where once they followed the old law. The spirit of the office was also dispatched. It was represented by a full frontal picture of a charging infantry brigade, inscribed, "We owe our success to a simple underlying philosophy."