

Government, Business and the Economy

by Roy Parker Jr.

In a sense, it was a crowd of 900, all with their hands out.

Speakers at this event wanted:

■ More money for research to benefit clients.

■ "Crisis teams" to rush in when a client is in trouble.

■ Tax breaks for clients who are trying new approaches.

■ "Incubators" where new clients can have free space and help to get on their feet.

■ Government-guaranteed monopolies for certain clients.

■ More money for government programs in education, job training, and transportation.

Were they welfare recipients?

No, they were businessmen, industrialists, bankers, venture capitalists, community economic developers, representatives of trade associations, county commissioners, legislators, professors, and analysts and brokers.

This powerhouse of economic prestige was gathered for a day at N.C. State University for a massive think-tank exercise known officially as the "Emerging Issues Forum" with the theme: "Innovation and Competition—The Challenge to America."

The "want list" above came from a lineup of speakers that included John A. Young of Hewlett Packard, who is chairman of President Reagan's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness; Richard Cyert, president of Carnegie-Mellon University and a leading idea-man of modern U.S. capitalism; Charles Dunn, then of the North Carolina Textile Manufacturers Association; and

Don Beilman of the Microelectronics Center of North Carolina. Former Governor James B. Hunt Jr. and NCSU Chancellor Bruce Poulton were chairman and chief host, respectively.

There was irony in the fact that even as the speakers made their points, the federal government was struggling with ways to comply with the new spending-limits law that if successful could well *reduce* the sorts of resources mentioned by the speakers.

Nonetheless, the message was remarkably unanimous that the American economy is heavily dependent on the government, especially in research, education, and policies that give a financial break to investment and the building of infrastructure for economic activity.

If anything, business will be calling on government more and more in the countdown years before the 21st century as the world economy grows more and more independent of Uncle Sam. The need to innovate and retrain and reinvent, to invest intensely and to muscle into new markets, will become increasingly vital.

All these things require more intense interplay between public and private plans and resources, what the speakers often euphemize as "cooperation" but what is basically nothing more than your good old-fashioned government help.

North Carolina could be a curiously unique testing ground of the emerging new economy because the new and old are working themselves out in close proximity in the state.

In one sense, the Old North

State is one of those decaying "smokestack industry" places where grand old stalwarts like tobacco and textiles face an uncertain future.

On the other hand, North Carolina—at least some parts of it—is on the new Sun Belt frontier of high-tech, microchip-and-robot growth.

The trick will be to balance the state's economic future so that everybody can benefit from it—textiles and tobacco, turkeys and timber, and high-tech, too.

In that balancing act, the gaging was as one in the conclusion that nothing is more necessary than the continued enhancement of the already awesome research and technology resources of such great campuses as N.C. State, Duke, and the University of North Carolina, and the improvement of secondary schooling to produce a trained and intelligent workforce for an era in which brainpower will be the main resource on the production line, in the front office, and at the marketplace.

So it turned out that if North Carolina has a new secret weapon to win economic victory in the new century, it is a commitment to education for its people at every level.

It was an important rediscovery of an old verity. □◡□

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