



A MESSAGE ON RICHARD P. NATHAN'S RETIREMENT

November 5, 2009

By **Thomas L. Gais**
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On October 23, 2009, Richard P. Nathan retired from the Rockefeller Institute of Government, twenty years after he was appointed director by the Trustees of the State University of New York. Although his appointment came seven years after the Institute was established, it was Dick who gave the Institute its distinctive mission and methodological style. He was well prepared to do so when he arrived. Before Dick returned to Albany (he and his wife Mary grew up in the city), he had already spent many years as a scholar at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. He had held top positions in the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. He had also served as an adviser to Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller. During those years, Dick had worked on issues of federalism, social policy, and program implementation, and he had pioneered the field network evaluation methodology, which relies on indigenous field research teams to conduct coordinated analyses of how national initiatives are put into effect in different states or localities.

Dick brought these interests and skills to the Institute and applied them to the tasks of educating citizens and policymakers about the enormous, yet not well understood, roles and capacities of the states in U.S. domestic policy. Dick first recruited Steve Gold, then working at the National Conference of State Legislatures, to monitor and assess state finances. He collaborated with Frank Thompson and former Mississippi Governor William Winter to create the Winter Commission, which sought to improve the performance of state and local civil service. Irene Lurie and Jan Hagan launched the first field network evaluation study at the Institute, an analysis of ten states' implementation of the Family Support Act of 1988. Dick also brought in Michael Malbin to study legislative and campaign finance issues, and Gerald Benjamin and Frank Mauro to grapple with New York State matters.

Since those early years, Dick has recruited many researchers and has led or overseen many more projects. The Institute has conducted field network studies on welfare reform, workforce investment programs, enterprise zones, state fiscal crises, community service programs, Medicaid managed care, Medicaid outreach, hurricane recovery efforts in the Gulf Coast, and many others. Indeed, one of the largest impacts of Dick's work has been the creation of a national network of seasoned field researchers, many of whom have become leading policy and management experts in their own states and have continued work in a policy area years after the initial field study.

The Institute's State Revenue Reports have long drawn national attention. Yet the fiscal studies staff has greatly expanded their work to encompass state and local expenditures, analyses of recessions and federal stimulus efforts, and the dynamics of different revenue sources. Many other projects, all of which involve states, have been carried out by researchers during Dick's tenure, such as monitoring and analyzing the role of faith-based organizations in delivering social services; tracking "nonprofitization" and other trends in the use of private agencies in providing public services; and assessing service integration efforts at the local level. Dick and other Institute scholars have contributed several influential analyses of federalism, such as cyclical changes in federal-state relations; the growing use of waivers and other executive powers in shaping the federal system; and the use of performance measurement and management. Finally, Dick has conducted a wide variety of special projects when asked by New York State officials, and he has kept his inimitable "Book List" up to date.

Many themes run through Dick's own research and writings, but two are particularly striking. One is his emphasis on institutional analysis in public policy studies. Dick understands better than anyone the challenge of shaping the behavior of the nation's vast array of public and private institutions involved in implementing U.S. domestic programs. These multiple layers of organizations bring specific — yet diverse — capabilities and cultures to bear on any new responsibilities assigned to them, and the differences exert great influence over what services and regulations are eventually put into effect. Dick has studied these institutional effects in his many field research studies, from revenue sharing to welfare reform, and he has created a body of work well worth considering as the nation faces the huge task of reforming its multifarious health care institutions and their complex interrelationships.

Another motif in Dick's work is his deep concern for finding ways to inject more and better analysis into public decisions. He knows this is no simple task. It is not easy for analysts to produce information that is truly helpful to policymakers and administrators. Nor is it a simple matter for public institutions to make decisions based on even the best and most pertinent studies. In his book *Social Science in Government*, his several writings on applying "base-closing" arrangements to divisive yet technically tractable collective problems, and his recent essays on the role of experimental evaluations, Dick has articulated many realistic ways in which government can be made smarter and analysis more relevant.

We will miss Dick's energy, intelligence, determination, and unquenchable curiosity at the Rockefeller Institute. Still, the Institute's mission remains important. States are in trouble. Dick's early mentor, Governor Rockefeller, saw the states' independent capacity for action and leadership as essential to American democracy:



Richard P. Nathan was director of The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government from 1989-2004 and co-director from 2005-2009. He served during the same periods as distinguished professor of political science and public policy at Rockefeller College at the University at Albany. Dick may be reached via [e-mail](#), or letters sent in care of the Institute, 411 State Street, Albany, NY 12203.

As the needs and desires of peoples are perceived, in a federal system, they thus can be met as the opportunity, imagination, and energy of those who staff the multiple posts of power make it possible.

Yet the gulf between states' vast responsibilities and their volatile, eroding, and often haphazard revenue systems has rarely been wider. This gulf not only threatens states' historical capacity for innovation, democratic responsiveness, and leadership; it may undermine a wide range of basic public functions, from K-12 education to environmental protection and health care. Understanding and educating the public about what is happening in the fiscal crisis, what is at stake, and what can be done to reconcile promise and performance in the states are without a doubt challenges appropriate to the Institute that Dick Nathan built.

The Board of Trustees of the State University of New York has created a distinguished search committee to find and appoint a new permanent director. We expect the committee will complete its search early next year, and all of us at the Institute look forward to a new director and colleague. In the meantime, we appreciate the enthusiastic support and encouragement we have already received from Nancy Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York, George Philip, president of the University at Albany, as well as many other officials in the SUNY system.

We are proud to have worked with Dick Nathan on so many exciting and worthy projects. We now look forward to advancing the missions of the Institute, the University at Albany, and the State University of New York in this new phase of our institutional history.

And with all our heartfelt gratitude, we wish Dick and Mary a wonderful and well-deserved retirement.

ABOUT THE ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York, conducts fiscal and programmatic research on American state and local governments. It works closely with federal, state, and local government agencies nationally and in New York, and draws on the State University's rich intellectual resources and on networks of public policy academic experts throughout the country.

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