

Full Circle: The Domestic Policy Association

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by Annabel Dunham Hagood, 1990

A rather remarkable event occurred in the nation's political history in February, 1983. At the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the first Presidential Library Conference was called to order by David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation. The co-chairmen of the conference were former presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Attending the conference were twenty-four of the nation's senior opinion leaders in government, business, education, and the media. The purpose of the meeting was to hear the advice of some 10,000 American citizens on the issues of jobs and productivity, inflation, and Social Security and retirement.

Those American citizens who sought to advise the national leadership on critical issues of domestic public policy were part of a new organization the Domestic Policy Association. In a nation dominated by single issue politics, those Americans were urging the leadership to consider the inter-relationships among public policy decisions and to build a consensus on fundamental values and principles before reaching specific policy decisions. The Domestic Policy Association, through its National Issues Forums, sought to create a new kind of dialogue based on informed public discussion of national issues.

This paper will describe the major events leading to the formation of the Domestic Policy Association and the way in which it goes about its consensus building activity. In many ways, it is a story about American citizens who dreamed of a better way of conducting the nation's business and who believed, as did the Founding Fathers, that the citizens should be actively involved in the process.

The story begins in 1976, and 1976 was an appropriate time for such dreaming. It was the 200th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the nation celebrated with a year-long series of commemorative events. There were those who interpreted the response to the Bicentennial as a resurgence of spirit after a decade of war and political turmoil. Still others viewed the lingering aftermath of the war in Vietnam, the unhealed wounds of the Watergate scandal, the suspicion and distrust of those who govern as a matter of grave national concern.

As the nation celebrated its Bicentennial, its citizens continued to be rocked by news of improper conduct by some of the nation's leaders, this time Congressional scandals involving some of its most influential members and some of the nation's most powerful corporations. In November, 1976, Democrat Jimmy Carter, who two years earlier was a little known Georgia politician, defeated incumbent president, Gerald Ford. The issues were taxes, jobs, and federal spending. Carter proclaimed his lack of Washington connection as he campaigned against one of Washington's most experienced political figures. As 1976 came to a close, events seemed to lend credibility to those who were concerned about the way in which America now governs itself, especially in domestic matters.

Among those concerned citizens was David Mathews, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in Ford's cabinet, a professional educator on leave from his duties as president of the University of Alabama. Addressing the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa in December, 1976, Mathews reminded his listeners that *some 200 years ago we opted to have no political masters in this country.*¹ The nation, he argued, had opted for a process of public deliberation and decision making. And today, *our desire to control the decisions that affect our daily lives seems to enjoy a resurgence that has a genuinely revolutionary flavor.*²

The speech was a general discussion of public deliberation and decision making by a self-educating society. In examining the speech, one senses a lament for the loss of the kind of national dialogue which existed in 1777-78 over the ratification of the Constitution of the United States. Mathews referred to the writings of "Publius" and claimed that *the Federalist Papers in the writing, publishing and debating they engendered gave us the self-educative process in its most complete form.*³ The speaker, however, was less than definitive about how the nation could recapture a self-educative dialogue. In later years, Mathews recalled that the reaction of the audience in Williamsburg on December 6, 1976, could be described as "puzzlement, at best."

While the Phi Beta Kappa address may not have served as a catalyst for the audience assembled in Williamsburg, it certainly marked the beginning of an effort by David Mathews to involve the American citizens more directly in the affairs of their government.

With the change of administrations in Washington, Mathews returned to his position as president of the University of Alabama. In the months that followed, he contacted a small but influential group of leaders in educational and educating institutions concerning the role that such institutions might have in promoting public understanding of major issues. Starting in November, 1977, a series of exploratory meetings were held in Washington, D.C., to examine the question in greater detail. These meetings drew a cross-section of representatives of public and private educational institutions, geographically ranging from Rhode Island to California. The American Council on Education, the American Association for Community and Junior Colleges, and the National University Extension Association were represented. Non-university educating institutions were consulted: The Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies, and the Learning Society Program of the College Entrance Examination Board. The government was involved through conversations with the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, and the HEW.

Finding general support for his concern about the way in which the nation determines its domestic policy, Mathews elaborated on his thinking in a paper entitled "A Case for a More Coherent and Democratic Approach to the Formation of National Domestic Policy," dated June 30, 1978. *Domestic policy*, he wrote, *particularly social policy, is distinct from other kinds of policy...Domestic issues usually have a high emotional charge, are not necessarily glamorous, are seldom quantifiable, are characterized by long chains of interrelations, touch upon a host of ambiguities in our national purpose, and are the province of intense special interest politics. Domestic policy is, therefore, always going to be 'messy', not neat, and the subject of intense, highly personalized debate.*⁴

While acknowledging that there are some organizations, such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, which assist the nation in making rational public policy decisions, Mathews noted that there are only a few general forums for the informed framing of issues. He then posed the question which would set the direction for what he referred to as the “public policy education” project. *Since universities and colleges are in the position to frame and discuss public issues, might it not be wise to bring the public and government together in conversation through academia’s conference activities?*⁵

At first glance it seems such a simple solution to the problem. Thousands of conferences, workshops, and seminars are sponsored each year by colleges and universities. The proposal, however, was far more complex. How do you organize these activities into a cohesive effort, and how do you actually involve the citizens and the representatives of government in an on-going dialogue?

The months ahead were to demonstrate the difficulty. “A Case for a More Coherent and Democratic Approach to the Formation of National Domestic Policy” received wide distribution. New supporters were attracted; yet, they seemed to identify more with the criticism of the way in which the nation governs itself in domestic matters than with the eight possible courses of action outlined in the paper.

By the end of the year, 1987, a small nucleus of committed institutions had been identified. The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Study had made a major staff commitment to advancing the project in the context of a similar Aspen project. Discussions involving representatives of the Aspen Institute, the Poynter Center at Indiana University, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, among others, had tended to sharpen the focus of the project. Thought was being given to the development of a common agenda of national policy issues which would serve to guide conference activities.

The vexing questions, however, remained. How could a partnership between government and education be formed so that education would serve the citizens by providing forums for enlightened discussion of important domestic problems facing the nation? What kinds of links should be established so that the discussions, instead of being isolated events occurring across the nation, could become a part of an organized national dialogue? How were the results of the discussions to be preserved so that they could be channeled to the nation’s decision makers?

Communication theorists were challenged to look at these questions and to develop a process which would lend itself to an on-going national dialogue. Political scientists were asked to examine the impact of citizen participation on public policy decisions.

Gradually a plan of action unfolded. A series of conferences to be held in four geographic locations during a seven month period was planned. These conferences were to be the test run for a process of involving citizens in the formation of public policy. They also were to test the assumption of the early planners that conferences should be the vehicle for restoring a self-educative process to public deliberation and decision making. The program, called “Public Action and Social Change,” a phrase taken from Mathews’ address to Phi Beta Kappa, was to run from November, 1979, through May, 1980, with conferences in Alabama, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Kentucky.

As political scientists examined some of the existing forums for citizen participation in the formation of public policy, communication theorists worked on developing an instrumental approach to participatory public policy analysis.

The conference planners rejected at the outset the often held belief that a conference should consist of a series of speeches by “experts” with questions from the audience. To achieve the goal of a self-educative dialogue, participants in a conference should be actively involved in all phases of the deliberations. The process should encourage interaction among equals as they analyzed problems of public policy and evaluated the consequences of choice.⁶

So that the participants could approach the conference with a common understanding of the problem, the self-educative process should begin prior to the conference. Selected readings should be sent to the participants prior to the meeting.

Each conference should be task oriented in that participants would be asked to reach decisions and to formulate recommendations, where appropriate. Those who chaired or moderated the conference would be instructed to guide, to facilitate, and, if necessary, to direct the progress of the group toward that goal.

The Alabama conference in the program “Public Action and Social Change” addressed the question: How can conferences assist citizens to become more effectively involved in formulating public policy? Three keynote position papers, which set the theme for the meeting, emphasized the importance of citizen participation in the decision making process and the inadequacy of existing programs of citizen participation. Some sixty citizen opinion leaders, primarily from the Southeast, who participated in the one and one-half day conference concluded that conferences can contribute directly and forcefully to training citizens and officials of government agencies for their complementary roles in citizen participation.

There was general agreement that in formulating public policy there is a tendency to focus on short range concerns often to the detriment of long range goals and effects. Special interest groups and a “crisis atmosphere” were seen as compounding the tendency to make immediate concerns appear to be the primary issue. The participants agreed that at all educational levels there should be a new focus on the interrelationship among humanistic values, and on both short range goals and long range goals as they relate to public policy. It was felt that conferences emphasizing decision making skills could help in this reorientation.

The second conference, an Evening Dialogue held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., built on the conclusions of the Alabama conference. This linkage was essential to the instrumental nature of a program designed to involve many citizens from different sections of the country in the ultimate decision making which would guide the Consortium.

The principal speaker, or keynoter, at the Evening Dialogue was David Mathews. He described the work of the Public Policy Education Consortium and offered two proposals for consideration: 1) the creation of a Domestic Policy Association, and 2) the formation of a partnership between government and educational/educating institutions to achieve the objectives of the Consumer Affairs Council.⁷ Approximately 50 citizens opinion leaders, including citizen participation professionals, representatives of the media, and representatives of educational/educating institutions, discussed the proposals in detail and indicated their general support.

Three proposals actually emerged from the Evening Dialogue. In addition to a Domestic Policy Association and an Institute for Citizen Participation, support for a program of technical assistance to citizen participation programs was expressed. The conference planners, working with representatives from the Consortium, decided that all three proposals should be placed on the agenda for the third conference. A fourth proposal dealing with the problem of civic literacy and the nature of the school curriculum was added.

The third conference was held at the Aspen Institute's Wye Plantation in Maryland. Citizen participation professionals and representatives from the Consortium analyzed each of the proposals in detail. Working as members of the larger group of seventeen and as members of small committees, they agreed on three programs of action for the Public Policy Education Consortium. Task forces were appointed to draft proposals for a Domestic Policy Association, an Institute for Citizen Participation, and a Public Policy Technical Assistance Project.

The final conference in the program, "Public Action and Social Change," was a seminar which was held at Transylvania University, in Lexington, Kentucky, on the occasion of the institution's bicentennial anniversary. Twenty participants reviewed the Task Force reports, evaluated each proposal, and discussed methods of implementation. Consensus emerged that the Consortium should devote attention immediately to the establishment of a Domestic Policy Association which was seen as requiring detailed and comprehensive orchestration. In addition, the participants approved the proposal that an Institute for Citizen Participation should be established. The Institute was viewed as a means of complementing and supplementing the Domestic Policy Association.

Stephen P. Strickland, Chairman of the Task Force on a Domestic Policy Association, argued forcefully in favor of a need for immediate action by the Public Policy Education Consortium.

Clearly, the substantive challenges to our ability to govern ourselves through democratic institutions are testing the capacity of those institutions. But broad constitutional or governance questions- such as whether presidential powers are broad enough, or congressional organizations too splintered, or state and local authority too much eroded by concentration of power at the national level, or public and private bureaucracies too strong, or what is the role of the private sector in resolving national dilemmas- are only meaningful in the context of the problems of our times. These problems include energy, jobs and unemployment, inflation, income security, health care, and a dozen more. The solution or amelioration of these challenges depends on several factors, including: intellectual and practical innovations devised by ordinary citizens and leaders alike; availability of resources; the establishment of a social consensus that can be transformed into political will; and effective and equitable processes of applying that will.⁸

The Domestic Policy Association envisioned by the Task Force would be a national organization, with a grassroots base and individual memberships, as well as institutional memberships.

The Domestic Policy Association would seek to identify, through its individual members and its directors, the most critical substantive issues facing the nation, perhaps on an annual basis, and would seek to build structured, focused, and open dialogue about those issues. The first function of such an association would be an educative one.⁹ The

Task Force Report reflected a strong belief that a Domestic Policy Association “might be an important step toward a more dynamic democracy and a more coherent society.”

Through the four conferences in the program, “Public Action and Social Change,” the Public Policy Education Consortium had received its mandate. Events were to unfold rapidly in the movement to establish a Domestic Policy Association.

Mathews resigned as president of the University of Alabama effective July 1, 1980, although he retained his academic rank of Professor of History. He was assigned to Washington, D.C., where the university maintained an office. This office became the home base for the National Consortium for Public Policy Education, as the alliance of concerned citizens was called officially.

Assisted by a small staff, Mathews began to contact organizations and institutions interested in public policy education. *The Consortium*, he said, *is the sum total of our institutional efforts. We're rather like a joint stock company, a convenience which each institution uses to carry out its own objectives.*¹⁰

In the Consortium's first newsletter, published three months after his return to Washington, Mathews reported that “many groups have requested NCPPE assistance or have expressed an interest in working jointly on projects.”

The second newsletter, published in the winter of 1981, announced that the Johnson Foundation would work with the Consortium in planning a Domestic Policy Association. Through a grant to the Consortium:

*The Johnson Foundation agreed to sponsor a series of four conferences to plan the Domestic Policy Association at their Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The conferences, scheduled to take place between May and September of 1981, will enable the Consortium to involve the leadership of higher education institutions, national organizations, the media and government in the design of the association, at the onset. The new association is intended to establish a “process” for annual national dialogue on domestic policy issues...a process that will serve to increase citizen understanding of domestic policy issues and provide citizens with opportunities to express and convey informed opinions on the issues to the nation's decision makers. Formats and program ideas that emerge during the planning conferences will be tested at various demonstration sites.*¹¹

In the same newsletter, Mathews announced that he was resigning from the University of Alabama to become president and trustee of the Kettering Foundation on February 1, 1981. He indicated that his personal involvement in and strong commitment to the Consortium would continue and that the Consortium for Public Policy Education would continue as an independent entity.

The first planning conference was held at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Conference Center on May 18-19, 1981. Twenty-five leaders from national and local organizations met to plan for the Domestic Policy Association. The organizations represented included, among others, the AFL/CIO, the League of Women Voters, the American Library Association, and the Foreign Policy Association. Adding to the sense of purpose of the meeting was a personal message from President Ronald Reagan.

*Our citizens need increased information and analysis of the critical domestic issues facing our nation. I wish you well in encouraging greater participation in the dialogue on domestic concerns and hope that increased public discussion will bring more understanding to these issues.*¹²

The Recorder's Report noted that the Consortium, in proposing a Domestic Policy Association, was inspired in part by the success of the American Issues Forum and the National Forum on Energy and the Way We Live. These public education programs had been a part of the bicentennial celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. There were, however, problems with each program. Neither was ongoing, and each owed its existence, in large measure, to federal funding. Neither program established effective means of making the views of the citizens known to the national policy makers. Instead of replicating these programs, the Consortium was committed to exploring new ways of encouraging and enhancing the participation of citizens in public decisions.

The recommendations of the twenty-five participants in the first planning conference were to have a profound impact on the shaping of a Domestic Policy Association. They saw a DPA as a non-advocacy, grassroots organization which would address the low level of civic literacy in the nation and raise the expectations of the citizens about participation in the decision making process. National, regional, and local organizations interested in public discussions of domestic issues would be encouraged to participate. Each year an agenda of issues would be identified, and this common agenda would provide the basis for local programs. These issues would be topics of general concern which could engender common debate. They would be presented in the most practical of terms while at the same time inviting a consideration of the interrelatedness of one action to another and to the overall governing process.

The Domestic Policy Association would be guided by an advisory board which would set the agenda of issues and assume responsibility for any materials published by the association. Because of the sharp curtailment of government funding, it would seek alternate sources of support.

The second planning conference, July 13-14, 1981, was based on a premise which had guided the early planning of the members of the National Consortium for Public Policy Education. Since there are hundreds of institutions and organizations involved in public policy education, many with a mandate to convene the public, a Domestic Policy Association must be a different type of instrumentality. Rather than merely adding one more national organization, the Consortium must seek to enhance existing efforts by providing a common umbrella under which organizations could achieve their individual objectives.

The participants in the second planning conference were leaders from community-based institutions who were experienced in developing issue education programs. Mathews posed the fundamental question for the conference: "Can existing educational institutions (both formal and informal) be used to form a coalition for a sustaining national network that would be the basis for the Domestic Policy Association?"

In establishing the context for the deliberations, Robert Kingston reviewed "A Case for a More Coherent and Democratic Approach to the Formation of National Domestic Policy," the paper which David Mathews had written in 1978. Kingston and Diane Eisenberg, organizer of the Wingspread Planning Conferences, reviewed the basic structure of a Domestic Policy Association as agreed upon by the earlier Wingspread participants.

This planning conference was the occasion for sharing insights gained from the experience of planning issue education programs. The participants identified problems to

be addressed, approaches which had proved effective, and resources which might be tapped in creating a network of local, regional, and national support. Mathews summarized the discussion when he asked how a Domestic Policy Association might “barter” its way into existence. How might this process start at the grass roots and work its way to the national level? As the meeting progressed, the participants repeatedly were asked: What do we need to give each other to establish a Domestic Policy Association?

The turning point in the deliberations occurred at a late evening session when the participants were asked to make an informal commitment, on behalf of the institutions they represented, to the formation of a Domestic Policy Association. “Can a national network be built in the old barn-raising fashion,” Mathews asked, “with each bringing to the venture whatever is available?” Can the institutions represented collaborate in building a coordinated national network of conferences on the major issues facing the nation?

The general response of the participants was positive provided that the Domestic Policy Association represented something more than a mere linking of existing programs. They wanted a new program which would be a series of conferences based on a common agenda of issues. They believed that sound educational materials should be developed which not only would inform, but, also, would invite diverse groups of Americans to discover through discussion what they have in common. A steering committee should be established to coordinate local efforts so that common objectives could be reached and the results of the conferences could reach appropriate policy makers.

Ten of the participants volunteered to serve with David Mathews, Diane Eisenberg, and Robert Kingston as a steering committee to begin planning the production of the educational materials, the media components, and the training sessions for the conveners of the local conferences.

The third planning conference, which was held September 14-15, 1981, was a meeting of the steering committee. Two days were devoted to planning the activities of the first year of operation. Of primary importance was the selection of issues to be placed on the national agenda and the development of the educational materials.

General agreement emerged that the DPA should choose issues which are general enough to allow flexibility in local programming but specific enough to engender common debate. The issues selected should be those which directly affect a broad spectrum of the citizens. The issues should be presented in practical terms which encourage an exploration of the linkage between local concerns and national policy and which suggest the inter-relatedness of national policy.

The educational materials should reflect sound scholarship. They should be balanced, as well as objective; and they should be easily understood by a wide range of readers.

Fundamental to the entire planning process was the development of mechanisms for reporting the views of the citizens to the policy makers in order to insure that the citizens would be heard by those charged with the responsibility of determining domestic policy.

On October 20, 1981, Jon Rye Kinghorn, Program Associate of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, informed the DPA steering committee that Daniel Yankelovich, president of the Public Agenda Foundation, had identified six potential issues for discussion: the shortage of adequate and affordable housing, the mismatch between

people and jobs, the problem of rising health care costs, the Social Security dilemma, chronic inflation, and immigration.

The issues were selected because of their daily impact on a broad spectrum of the population. These were issues which engage public attention and discussion without necessarily inviting the emotional dialogue which produces irreconcilable positions. They were issues which involve value judgments, as well as technical considerations, because they involve deep-seated and widely held sentiments and principles.

A seventh issue dealing with governance was added, and the entire list was referred to the participating institutions with the request that the communities rank the issues. Based on this ranking, three issues were selected for the pilot year of the National Issues Forum, as the program was to be called: inflation, jobs and productivity, and Social Security and retirement.

The Public Agenda Foundation agreed to prepare the educational materials. A separate discussion guide, of approximately thirty-five pages, was to be prepared for each of the issues. The guide was to be written from a problem solving perspective with a general discussion of the problem and the consequences of choosing among the available alternatives. Each booklet would contain survey sheets so that the participant could respond to a few key questions about the issue before and after participating in a National Issues Forum.

In June-July, 1982, issue of the *National Issues Forum Newsletter* it was reported that the manuscripts for the three discussion guides were in the hands of the review panel and would be available for distribution in mid-August.

The *Newsletter* also announced that the pilot year of the National Issues Forum would be concluded with a Leadership Conference in February, 1983, at the Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. President Ford had agreed to serve as chairman of the conference, and he had invited President Carter to serve as co-chairman. The Leadership Conference would bring together forty-five to fifty policymakers from government, business, the unions, the media, and the nonprofit sectors to discuss the outcome of the community forums.

Would this conference make a difference? Representative Albert Gore, Jr., argued that it would:

Congress is hungry for the chance to listen to those who take part in the National Issues Forum, Representative Albert Gore, Jr., chairman of the Congressional Clearinghouse for the Future, told members of the Domestic Policy Association's steering committee in Washington last month.

We need much better input from the citizens, a better source of judgments, to harvest ideas from the country, Gore said during the two-day meeting hosted by the National Archives and Records Service.

I want to encourage you to take this task seriously, he told representatives of some twenty-five groups involved in this pilot year's project, because we are in a make-it or break-it period. I think it is an exciting project, and my dream is that it will grow to a larger capacity to undertake a wider study of the issues. I think it is worth the effort and I wish you well, Gore, said.¹³

Earlier in the year, Kinghorn had written to the DPA steering committee about media support for the National Issues Forum. *We want to engage the services of the mass media in creative ways. The DPA network does not want to either ignore*

*technology or be driven by it. The opportunity exists to create and invent the most appropriate use for effective forums.*¹⁴

Plans for the media components began to unfold in late summer, 1982, with the announcement that the Christian Science Monitor would publish a series of articles on the problems selected for the National Issues Forums.

The Johnson Foundation agreed to produce three thirty minute interviews on the issues for its radio series, "Conversations from Wingspread." The interviews were to feature former Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Wilbur Cohen, discussing Social Security, Paul W. McCracken, long-time member of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, discussing inflation, and former Secretary of Labor, Willard Wertz, discussing jobs and productivity. The interviews ultimately were broadcast nationwide on some 180 stations during the month of October.

Julius Duscha, Director of the Washington Journalism Center, arranged a briefing of the press in the nation's capital on September 20, with Mathews and Yankelovich discussing the plans for the pilot year of the National Issues Forum.

During the briefing, it was announced that the concluding event of the pilot year would be the Domestic Policy Association's inaugural conference on the public and public policy to be held at the Ford Presidential Library in February, 1983. The co-chairman for the conference would be former Presidents Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter.

On the same day as the press briefing, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, better known as C-SPAN, broadcast an interview with Mathews, and Bob Edwards taped a thirty minute interview with Mathews and Yankelovich for broadcast on the radio program, "Morning Edition."

The pilot year of the National Issues Forum, as conceived originally, was to be a modest beginning for what would become a national movement. It was to be the year of capturing the attention of the public and the policy makers and gaining the support of other institutions committed to educating the public on issues of public policy.

As news of the program spread, however, requests for affiliation were received from additional organizations. No legitimate request was refused. During the fall of 1982, 313 forums were held in seventeen states. A total of 9,491 people participated in a total of forty forums and in small towns like Olsburg, Kansas, where fifty-five residents, more than one-third of the town's population, discussed the key domestic issues.

Sixteen participants in the local forums were invited to attend the Presidential Library Conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They agreed to reflect the sentiments expressed in the forums, in addition to expressing their own views on the issues. The sixteen selected were broadly representative of the range of backgrounds and interests which had been reflected in the 313 forums.

David Mathews opened the first general session of the Presidential Library Conference on the Public and Public Policy. In his report to the public and the policy makers attending the general session, he explained that:

The Ford Library has, since Tuesday, been host to panels (each consisting of citizens and experts together) who have been working to develop presentations on the "State of the Discussion in the Union" on the three forum topics. They will report Thursday to Presidents Ford and Carter on whether policymakers and the public are getting across the gulf that separates their two worlds—on what progress they are

*making in working through the issues toward common judgments and on where the policymakers are in making clear to the public the difficult choices that have to be made. You are invited to watch these two panels and to join in their deliberations on Thursday morning.*¹⁵

The major address at the opening session was presented by former President Gerald R. Ford. In talking about the growing gap between the public and the policy makers, President Ford noted the resulting frustration for both the officeholders and the public. The gap exists, he said, because of the very complexity of today's issues, but it is made worse by news organizations that are more interested in entertainment than fact, by 'pushy lobbyists' who speak only for special interest groups, and by obsession with public opinion polls. We must help those who make policy see far deeper than the opinion polls when they weigh their decisions.

The problem created by special interest groups was underscored by former President Jimmy Carter in an address to the conference:

*One thing about being President or governor or member of Congress is that the voices you hear are the strident voices, the narrowly focused voices, and the selfish voices. This is a consequence, he said, of people forming together in special interest groups which favor specific measures, even if they make things worse for everyone else.*¹⁶ What is needed, President Carter said, is more groups like the National Issues Forums where people come together to talk about what would be best for the country, as a whole, not for some constituency.

As Daniel Yankelovich reminded the delegates, it will require: *a special effort and an enduring commitment. It is not a simple matter of closing a communication loop. We're quite effective in raising people's consciousness about the issues. We have aroused the American public to a state of high anxiety about inflation, unemployment, interest rates, Social Security, the nuclear arms race, and other issues. The trouble is, we assume that once the public consciousness has been raised that debate has taken place. We fail to realize that mere awareness of an issue isn't enough. This is a formula for frustrating people and turning them off, not a method for making a place for the public at the table where policy is formulated. What the public needs to be involved in is the process of examining options for action, thinking about the best remedy, and then conveying its considered judgment to national leaders. That's what is required if we are to achieve a 'genuine public debate'.*¹⁷

As the conference progressed and the policy makers and the representatives of the public began to grapple with the complex issues of Social Security and retirement, jobs and productivity, and inflation, an understanding of the different perspectives began to emerge. Harlan Cleveland, Director of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and former Assistant Secretary of State, summarized the sentiments of the participants when he said: *I was very much impressed by the breath of common sense that seems to blow through these materials and discussions that have been developed by the Domestic Policy Association. To me the most impressive thing is the difference between the way these issues get addressed in the media and what happened here. In the media, and even among experts, the debate often seems to be structured as if these were two-sided issues—growth versus environment, for example, or almost anything else you can put in the court of two-sidedness. But most of the people out there seem to recognize that*

*we need both, and that we ought not to be debating extreme positions but rather the choices in the middle part of the spectrum.*¹⁸

The people “out there” were given an opportunity to observe the deliberations through gavel to gavel television coverage by the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network. Through a two-way teleconference to selected sites in which forums had been conducted, participants in those forums were involved in the deliberations by asking questions of former Presidents Carter and Ford and a panel of experts.

President Carter, in summarizing the events which had occurred, said that: *The most significant thing that has been learned in these efforts is how much people change their minds toward a more responsible position when provided with a modicum of accurate information. I think that part of the responsibility of this exciting new association ought to be to magnify what has been learned this year by encouraging responsible people in the media to spread this effort nationwide. I think we'll be gratified and perhaps surprised to see how many people really want to know what's going to happen in Social Security, or what a \$200 billion deficit really means.*¹⁹

In the closing remarks of his address to the conference, David Mathews observed that *we are met here, in our generation, to do our part in the ongoing work of informing the discretion of the American people and putting that informed discretion to good use.*²⁰

The dream of those American citizens who began in 1976 to seek a better way of conducting the nation's business and who believed, as did the Founding Fathers, that the citizens should be actively involved in the process had come full circle. A small group of concerned citizens, assisted by a nucleus of committed educational and educating institutions, had engaged their fellow citizens in a national dialogue designed to recapture the concept of a self-educating society. From their deliberations had emerged the mandate to create a Domestic Policy Association.

President Ford concluded the first Presidential Library Conference on the Public and Public Policy with this statement: *I happen to have a tremendous faith in the ultimate good judgment of the American people. Their judgment is a lot better—and a lot deeper—than either the press or most politicians give them credit for.*²¹

¹ David Mathews, “Remarks Before the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa, Williamsburg,” 6, Dec. 1976, p. 1.

² *Ibid.* p. 4

³ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁴ David Mathews, “A Case for a More Coherent and Democratic Approach to the Formation of National Domestic Policy,” 30 June 1978, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, A Case, p. 5.

⁶ Primary planners of the program, “Public Action and Social Change,” were Annabel Dunham Hagood, Philip Coulter, and Robert H. McKenzie, all of the University of Alabama.

⁷ On 26 Sept. 1979, President Jimmy Carter issued Executive Order No. 12160, entitled “Providing for Enhancement and Coordination of Federal Consumer Programs.” The Executive Order established a Consumer Affairs Council. Esther Peterson, Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs, was designated Chairperson of the Consumer Affairs Council.

⁸ Stephen P. Strickland, “Report of the Task Force on a Domestic Policy Association,” *Public Action and Social Change Book II*, ed. Eva M. McMahan (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama, 1980), pp. 15-16.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 17.

¹⁰ *National Consortium for Public Policy Education Newsletter* (1980), p. 1.

¹¹ *National Consortium for Public Policy Education Newsletter* I No. 2 (1981), p. 1.

¹² News release from the Johnson Foundation, n.d., p. 2.

¹³ National Issues Forum Newsletter (June-July, 1982), p. 1.

¹⁴ Memorandum from Jon Rye Kinghorn to the DPA Steering Committee, 5 May 1982.

¹⁵ David Mathews, "Remarks Prepared for the Opening Session of the Presidential Library Conference on the Public and Public Policy," Feb. 1983, p. 4.

¹⁶ *The Domestic Policy Association, A Report on Its First Year* (1983) p. 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 53-54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 57-58.

²⁰ *Remarks*, p. 7.

²¹ *A Report*, p. 57.