

The fact that these are hard questions with no very satisfying answers should lead no one to jump to the conclusion that all decisions should be made hierarchically at a level high enough to include all the responsible organizations that might be affected — for instance, in the case of many SAC problems, by the National Security Council or the President. The burden on our highest officials is already too great for them to function efficiently as decision-makers. If any such “solution” were attempted, our governmental organization would become muscle-bound, rather than merely sluggish. Unfortunately the superficial illogicalities of decentralization are more strikingly obvious than the deadening consequences of extreme centralization.²⁹

In fact the United States government and the military Services are much less highly centralized than many outsiders tend to think. Departments are largely autonomous, and so are the major Commands. The President possesses some rather shadowy authority over the Departments, and the Secretary of Defense rather more over the military Services. But problems that intimately concern more than one Department are usually discussed and agreed upon in the Cabinet, the National Security Council, Cabinet Committees, or (even more frequently) in less formal direct bargaining between the Departments. Similarly, within the military, a very high premium is placed on reaching agreement in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its Committees, and within each Service, in bargaining among various Commands and staffs.

The intense dislike on the part of all officials for authoritarian decisions by higher officials is responsible for the pervasiveness of bargaining, which distinguishes other governments as well as our own, and indeed all large organizations. The dislike is based not only on egocentrism and envy (few people enjoy taking orders) but also on a shrewd recognition of the inevitable shortcomings of centralized decision making.

Intragovernmental bargaining of this kind is a poor substitute for the price-and-market mechanism of the private economy. It occasionally leads to agreements (of a log-rolling sort) which are conspiracies against the public interest rather than a broader, less parochial interpretation of it.³⁰ But bargaining does achieve some of the desirable effects in government that markets and prices achieve in the private economy. It goes some way towards reconciling the autonomy of lower-level organizations with higher-level (or at least more broadly based) criteria. SAC is unlikely to make a purely unilateral decision that adversely affects another Service for fear that the decision will be appealed to higher authority; it is unlikely to make a decision impinging on United States foreign policy with-

²⁹ Recall the storms kicked up by well-intentioned economy-minded people who discover from time to time that the Marines are paying more for toilet paper than the Air Force; or that the Navy is buying typewriters in San Diego while the Army is declaring others surplus in Detroit. The bureaucratic regulations and the paper work needed to prevent such occurrences would undoubtedly be far more costly and far more damaging to efficiency than any conceivable gains from coordination.

³⁰ So occasionally does the market mechanism.