

## THE TASK FORCE

On Thursday Harry got word that he'd been appointed to the Task Force. He felt that it was an honor that he had long deserved, but tried to restrain his enthusiasm as he phoned the director of the department from which he'd received notification of his appointment. "George, Harry," he said, when he heard the familiar voice at the other end of the line, "I've received your letter about the Task Force. I am," he paused for the appropriate emphasis, "gratified." Perhaps the emphasis had been too much—he'd nearly growled that last word—because it took George a moment before he said, "Good, Harry, good. We meet Monday, you know. In the conference room at the Department."

Only as the phone went dead did Harry realize that George had said nothing about the purpose of the Task Force and that he had no idea what significant societal issue it was to address. Surely, he thought, he had overlooked that important detail in the appointment letter. But, no, a more minute scrutiny of that document still left him in the dark. Picking up the phone, he called George back. But when George got on the line he got cold feet. It was embarrassing to ask such a fundamental question after enthusiastically accepting membership on the Task Force. And, too, how well did he know George? Sure, he'd known him for years, but he was always out for himself. How did he know he wouldn't screw him? If it would help him for the Governor or the press to think Harry was such a dumbass that he didn't even know the purpose of the Task Force, would he be able to resist?

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“What’s up?” George asked.

“I meant to ask you if you like to get together for a drink tonight.”

“Good idea. Why don’t you drop by my office after you leave work?”

Harry thought he’d certainly fallen on his feet after that one. Not only did he avoid embarrassing himself, he’d put himself in business for finding out the purpose of the Task Force. He knew George had no secrets after he’d had a few drinks. They went to a place George recommended where all of the cocktail waitresses looked younger than Harry’s tie. George leered at him knowingly as they were seated, then ordered each of them a vodka and tonic. He remembered now that George always ordered drinks for everyone, priding himself on knowing what everyone drank. Harry preferred a good English gin to the tastelessness of vodka with his tonic, but George was oblivious to this fact. So be it. He would even drink vodka to get to the bottom of this Task Force conundrum.

After the drinks had arrived and they’d had a go at them, Harry put his toe in the water.

“I believe the concerns of the Task Force are of great moment.”

“The Governor thinks so.”

“To the entire state.”

“The people are concerned.”

“Perhaps the nation.”

“Well, you know, Maxwell doesn’t care much about the nation right now, but long term . . .”

“I too am personally concerned.”

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“You are?”

Harry paused, brought up short by George’s tone of incredulity.

“Well, I mean, aren’t you?”

“Frankly, Harry, I don’t give a shit.”

“You don’t?”

“Hell, no. I’m surprised you do. What the Governor wants is to make people think somebody’s doing something. While he works on his real agenda. Higher office.”

“Well, of course I knew that.”

“Sure you did. You’ve been around. We’re not putting any young Turks on the Task Force, no angry young men, no fucking crusaders. I guess you saw we’re supposed to have to have a final report done in six months. We’ve been told privately that under no circumstances are we to have a report done then. Eight months, a year. That’d be fine. Have to get beyond the election. The damndest thing, isn’t it? The things that get people all riled up. Can you imagine being worried about a thing like this? Christ!”

Harry guffawed in his best imitation of what he thought he’d sound like if he knew what the hell George was talking about. “Still, it’s a complex problem.”

George looked at him as if he’d just farted the national anthem.

“Yeah, I suppose so. They’re all complex, aren’t they, when you really analyze them? But you can’t tell the people that. You have to make them think you’re on top of things and that there isn’t any problem too tough for you.”

A blond child-woman who wore the *de rigueur* mini-skirt and boots of the establishment placed a bowl of peanuts on the table between them. Harry thought he could almost hear the sound of George’s toes fusing to form cloven hooves as he looked

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her over. He was beginning to remember that there were more things about George that he didn't like than he did.

“Who's on the Task Force?” he asked.

“Oh the usual suspects, Harry. Buck Banshee and Fitz Warit. They were both voted out of the legislature last session and are looking to keep their hands in. And Scotty Worthington. You know one of the senior partners in his law firm, Brooks Blatherskite, I think. And the Chief Deputy AG, P. Porridge Hotter. Mind like a steel trap. And a woman from some minority group, Odetta MacPherson-Strut. And Curtis McNutt, president of the Secured Holdings and Federal Trust Bank.”

“Who do you think is the most important to the purpose of the Task Force?”

“You, Harry, you.”

“Cut the shit, George.”

“No, really. You're a consensus builder, Harry. We'll need that ability with the bunch of strong personalities we have on the Task Force. Like Buck Banshee for one. You know how he is. Blah, blah, blah. Doesn't know how to shut the fuck up.”

“Do we really need consensus?”

“Harry, Harry—you know how Webster is. He doesn't want anybody pissing into the punchbowl. No dissenting opinions. Unanimity. That's what he wants.”

“But on a topic like this . . . I mean, you know, I'm sure there are aspects of the concerns to be addressed by the Task Force that will be controversial.”

“Like what?”

Harry was stumped on that one and fell silent. The pubescent cocktail waitress returned and George ordered two more of the damnable vodka and tonics. There were to

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be more after that. By the time the evening was over the only thing Harry remembered with clarity was that he still had no idea what the Task Force was about.

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The expansive conference room basked beneath the glow of a score of recessed ceiling lights. In the midst of it was a huge table which was surrounded by padded swivel chairs that cocked their arched backs at diverse angles like animals at a trough. As he entered the room Harry recognized the local political reporter Bud Dudley talking to Buck Banshee. Another reporter had George button-holed. George nodded almost imperceptibly toward Harry in mid-sentence, then resumed his demeanor of fierce resolve to the reporter. Harry made his way to the place that had been reserved for him at the table and looked at the nameplates he could make out. They included several names George had mentioned, and a few he hadn't, including Clive Coriolanus, a bearded fellow who was seated at his nameplate, Melvin Ex. Jones, who was presumably the nattily clad, wiry black man hovering around his, and Mrs. June Taylor Dancer, a prim, graying woman in a burgundy dress.

Harry eagerly seized the meeting materials. Finally, he would figure out what this thing was about! The agenda was not revelatory, but that wasn't surprising: agendas seldom were. Beneath the agenda was a small paperback book entitled *The Efficient Conduct of Task Force Meetings* by Laszlo Cysz, Ph.D. Under that was the Task Force roster containing the members' names in all of their glory. Scotty Worthington became Remington Wainscot Worthington, III; Fitz Warit, F. Fitzhugh Warit. Clive Coriolanus, it turned out, was the Director of the Klinginpiel Institute of Marine Science. But, except for two well-sharpened pencils and a pristine legal pad there was nothing else.

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Harry sat back in his chair feeling out-of-sorts. He would just have to wait to hear George's opening remarks. Surely there would be revelatory nuggets there. As George rose from his place at the table, Harry leaned forward in his chair and almost felt as if his ears were growing. If anyone were to have a coughing fit, he thought, his or her life might well hang in the balance.

"We are here today to address a serious problem," George began, "a problem that has resisted the efforts of the best and the brightest in numerous previous administrations. You can see it rear its ugly head throughout history from the very first civilizations. It's a persistent problem, and it has defied every previous effort to solve it. Indeed, it just seems to get worse. Now, you may ask, how can we succeed where so many others for so long have failed? Well, maybe it's presumptuous of me, but I think we have a very good chance of success. I think this for two reasons. One is the makeup of the Task Force. We have a diversity that is virtually unprecedented. Because of this we know that no viewpoint will be rejected out of hand or ignored, no potential solution overlooked. The second reason is the Governor himself, Webster Spalpeen, a man with an unprecedented commitment to problem solving, and a zealous desire to leave no stone unturned in finding solutions for even the most intractable problems.

"Make no mistake: This will be a hard nut to crack. For that reason we will study a vast array of resources, discuss them, and apply the lessons we can distill from them to the problem at hand. We have a capable, dedicated staff to furnish us with everything we need to do our job. Each of you will have to be prepared to make the necessary commitment of time and energy to make effective use of these resources. If there is any one of you who cannot make that commitment, now is the time for you to step down."

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There was a pregnant pause, during which of course no one stepped down, then more inspirational rhetoric from George. But George said nothing that even approached specificity about what this diffuse, inordinately difficult, pervasive-throughout-human-history problem was. It was difficult to believe that such a level of imprecise, unfocused rhetorical abstraction could be sustained for such a long period of time—for George spoke for nearly three quarters of an hour—but George did it brilliantly. Nor did the rest of the meeting supply any helpful information. There was a moment of hope, however. At a break George had told Harry who the Task Force members were whom he did not know. One of them, Mrs. Dancer, was the so-called “citizen member,” the wife of a local doctor. As the meeting wound toward its end, she raised her hand and asked tentatively: “I was just wondering, because it doesn’t seem terribly clear, what exactly is the problem that the Task Force is supposed to address?”

Harry sighed inwardly. Finally, he thought, he would know what the hell this thing was about. He looked expectantly to George. George seemed stunned at first, then his lower lip began to quiver and he began to blubber uncontrollably with laughter. He seemed embarrassed, but he simply couldn’t stop. Then, slowly, one by one, every other member of the Task Force also began to laugh, each with his or her own distinctive sonority and nuance, until Harry decided he too must laugh, or be the only one other than poor hapless Mrs. Dancer left inappropriately sober before the brazen ignorance of her question. And so he laughed and laughed and laughed.

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Harry didn’t know how it had happened. Certainly no one had warned him ahead of time. But somehow, without any discussion or dissent, he’d been elected chairperson

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of the Task Force. He wasn't worried. Clearly the purpose of the Task Force would have to be entirely manifest in the package of materials that would accompany the second meeting. But when they arrived in the mail, that did not turn out to be the case. There were studies of everything from premarital sex among inner-city youth to the work habits of first-generation Hispanic immigrants. It was impossible to extrapolate any single, coherent conclusion from them. After reading everything twice, Harry concluded that the purpose of the Task Force must be to focus on and solve problems deriving from either inner-city crime, drug trafficking, premarital sex, AIDS, prison overcrowding, capital punishment, cigarette smoking, abortion, child pornography, alcoholism, climate change, the effects of agricultural chemical runoff on marine habitats, the deficiencies of public education in poor neighborhoods, the high cost of legal services, the high cost of health care, the effect of the high cost of legal services on the high cost of health care or vice versa, the post-war industrialization of Japan (highly unlikely, he thought, but one of the monographs so heavily emphasized this at the expense of all else that it was difficult to understand why it was in the materials otherwise), the effect of television on violent crime, the effect of television on creating apathy and pacifism, the correspondence between television and literacy, or, perhaps, some strange amalgam of two or more of these.

Not knowing what else to do, he decided that he would sleep on the problem and hope for inspiration and clarity in the morning. It didn't take that long. He awoke in the middle of the night convinced that the subject the Task Force was convened to address was crime. It had to be crime! It all fit together neatly when you got a handle on it. Inner-city crime, drugs, AIDS spread by illicit drug use, prison overcrowding, capital



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punishment, child pornography, educational deficiencies, the cost of legal services, the effect of television on violent crime—all of these subjects of the readings were aspects of the problem, a face of this multi-faceted question that had bedeviled the Athens of Pericles and the London of Pepys. He laughed out loud, laughed with such assurance and relief that he nearly forgot climate change and the post-war industrialization of Japan. But when he remembered them, even they could not resist his procrustean bed. Clearly climate change would destabilize societies and cause crime. And wasn't it true, as the monograph mentioned, that the crime rate in post-war Japan was very low? Why was that? The answer to that question was obviously pertinent. Yes, crime it was!

He took the zeal born of his revelation into the next Task Force meeting where he surprised everyone by the glow of resolve that densely enveloped him like the penumbra emanating from Excalibur. His enthusiasm for the complex issue before the Task Force so animated him that he vibrated like a tuning fork. Even George, no shrinking violet when it came to highly charged rhetoric, told him he found his performance inspirational.

“Good going, Harry,” he said. “A real motivational performance. I think everyone found your anecdotes and asides quite diverting. We can get down to business at the next meeting.”

After the first flush of pleasure at George's comments, Harry became troubled. He could recall no anecdotes or asides. He had been all business, talking nothing but crime, crime, and more crime. And what did George mean about getting down to business next meeting? How could anyone get more down to business than he had? Unless crime was not the problem the Task Force was to address. That was it, of course. Not crime! He groaned inwardly at the realization that the third Task Force meeting was

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looming ahead, the second that he would chair, and he was still uncertain—hell, completely clueless, as in the dark as if all previous discussion surrounding the Task Force had been in Swahili or Esperanto—about the purpose of the Task Force.

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So he finally did what he should have done to begin with: he went to the website of the local newspaper and did a search for “Task Force.” There were several hits over the last several weeks. Harry started with those that slightly predated his appointment. The first article he pulled up on his computer screen noted that the Governor had appointed a task force to study and make recommendations about poverty, the second that he had appointed a task force to study the failures of the state’s schools. Then, a few days later but still before his appointment, the Governor had appointed yet another task force to look into and make recommendations about the state’s failing roads, bridges, and other infrastructure. In each instance the newspaper accounts recorded that the Governor had put George Grimshaw, his good friend, protégé, and former campaign director, who was currently the Director of the Department of Aged Statistics, in charge of directing and coordinating these task forces’ work.

So, Harry thought, the purpose of the Task Force was either poverty, education, or infrastructure. That was points. But when he pulled up the next article, which was published the day before he received his appointment, he was unduly depressed to see this caption: “No Task Too Small for Governor.” The article that followed said this: “Governor Maxwell Spalpeen has probably set some sort of record with the number of task forces he has appointed to study and make recommendations on various problems facing the state. No previous governor has used this mechanism to such a great extent.

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At last count, Spalpeen had directed the convening of 47 task forces to study everything from poverty and corruption to tax fraud, cyber piracy, and whether the state parks should be sold to reduce the deficit.” Well, Harry thought, certainly George couldn’t be in charge of 47 task forces, could he? As he read on he saw this: “George Grimshaw, who the Governor has put in charge of all of these task forces, noted, ‘The Governor strongly feels that there is no better way to address the serious problems confronting the state than by convening groups of the very best people to study them and recommend solutions.’”

“Shit,” thought Harry.

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Harry chaired the next meeting of the Task Force as if suffering from narcolepsy or *trypanosomiasis*. The combined failure of his crime initiative and his discovery of the mind-boggling breadth of the Governor’s faith in task forces, and in George keeping track of all of them, left him in a nearly comatose state. Again, the materials for the meeting were no help. There was no logical thread that ran through them. Some seemed, frankly, bizarre beyond all belief. The prime candidate in this regard—a long essay on Aquinas’s cure of Reginald of Piperno of tertian fever—was disposed of when a staff member apologized for copying the wrong article. It was supposed to be an article about aquariums, she said sheepishly. But still remaining in the welter of diverse information were, among other things, photocopied articles on the disappearance of the black rhinoceros and on the dismal conditions surrounding the production of bricks in Pakistan.

Woefully perplexed, Harry shifted his plan of attack: he asked the members of the Task Force to apply the materials to the problem under scrutiny. Things got off to a promising start when Odetta MacPherson-Strut noted that she thought the point of the

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article on the black rhino was to show how the government corruption in Kenya had impaired efforts to protect this endangered species. This moment of promise was immediately blunted by Buck Banshee who wanted to know what possible relevance that could have in a state with squeaky-clean government. Scotty Worthington said the Pakistani brick production article seemed to be about government corruption too and therefore was also irrelevant. Melvin Jones said he couldn't figure out what either article had to do with the subject of the Task Force.

Here, with the speed of D'Artagnon flicking away the blades of the cardinal's guard, Harry said, "And, Mr. Jones, what do you believe that subject to be?"

Before Jones could answer, Mrs. Dancer, who had been trying to ingratiate herself with the Task Force members and resurrect herself from their ridicule since the first meeting, said, "Surely you don't have to ask Mr. Jones that. Everyone knows that." Everyone laughed, this time with, rather than at, Mrs. Dancer. Everyone, that is, except Harry. And George. Because George wasn't there. One of his other 46 task forces must have been meeting.

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"This is Bud Dudley," said the man on the phone.

"Bud, Harry Grandstaff. How you been doing?"

"Fine, Harry. You?"

"Just fine. Listen, Bud, I saw you at the first meeting of the Task Force."

"Which task force?"

"Well, the one I'm on. But I never saw an article."

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“Yeah, we made the editorial decision not to cover all of these task forces. Christ, how many has Spalpeen convened? Forty? Fifty?”

“Forty-seven, I believe.”

“We just don’t have the resources to cover all of those, Harry. At least not after the layoffs.”

“But you were at mine.”

“I went to several of the first meetings before it became apparent that Spalpeen was just using this task force thing as a gimmick and we made the decision not to cover them. Hell, they even sent me to the first Shark Task Force meeting. Some kid gets gnawed on by a shark down at the beach and Spalpeen appoints a fucking shark task force! Can you believe it? Ichthyologists, marine biologists, pop culture sharkologists—all these people getting together to waste the taxpayers’ money and figure out that sharks are big aggressive fish with lots of teeth and like to eat big chunks of meat and don’t care if it’s human. Jesus H. Christ!”

“But mine, Bud, surely you don’t think mine—?”

“Which one is yours, Harry? I can’t keep them all straight in my mind. Harry . . . Harry . . . ?”

But Harry had cut off the connection. It was clear that he wasn’t going to learn what the purpose of the Task Force was from Dudley. And now he had a further worry. Because in the latest package of readings he’d received from the Task Force staff was this: “Instances of Aggressive Behavior by Sharks off the Great Barrier Reef: 1957-1975.” And there was that monograph from the first meeting about the effects of runoff of agricultural chemicals on marine habitats. Imagine you’re a fifteen-foot-long shark

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swimming through crystalline waters and suddenly you get this big shot of Ortho-Gro up your nose. It would make you want to bite somebody's leg off, wouldn't it? And what about that article on aquariums that the girl on the staff had mistakenly not copied? There were sharks in aquariums, right? Then there was Clive Coriolanus? Of course he had to be a marine biologist, didn't he? Or an ichthyologist or a sharkologist? What else would he be at the Klinginpiel Institute of Marine Science? And there were other people on the Task Force that he didn't know what the hell they did. They could be some sort of –ologist or other too. He remembered George's opening peroration at the first Task Force meeting about how old the problem was that they would be addressing. Sharks had been around since prehistoric times. Undoubtedly, they'd been attacking people that went into the water since there'd been people. Finally, he remembered George laughing and saying, "The damndest thing, isn't it? The things that get people all riled up."

There was no question about it: He was the chair of the fucking Shark Task Force!

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Well, at least, Harry thought, now he knew, as he stared around the table at the next meeting. Clive Cuspidor, Clive Cloaca, Clive Cunnilingus? The marine-friggin'-biologist! What the hell was his name? There he was at the far end of the table but he couldn't call upon him to opine on the paper about sharks unless he could remember his name. He couldn't just say, "Hey, Clive." That would sound too crass. Damned senior moment! He rummaged through his papers looking for the Task Force roster. While he was looking, Curtis McNutt, president of the S.H.A.F.T. Bank, piped up.

"Am I the only one here who thinks we need to get rid of this Ms. Pennywhistle?"

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“Eh, what?” Harry asked.

“This staff member Petula Pennywhistle. This is the second time she’s wasted our time by copying the wrong article. I mean I guess I learned a lot about Aquinas and sharks but I only have so much time.”

“Actually,” observed Clive Cuspidor, “the article about sharks was terribly dated. Much more recent research exists.”

“But the point is,” said Buck Banshee, “this girl can’t seem to keep her mind on her work. What was it she said she was supposed to have copied?”

“Article about pottery shards discovered at various archeological sites of the early Native American peoples of the state,” said Scotty Worthington. “Truth be told, I don’t see how that would have had much relevance to what we’re looking at either.”

“The shark article was wrong?” Harry asked in the tone of a child who has been told that, no, there is no more cake.

“Oh, yeah,” growled Banshee. “You didn’t hear that? You must have been in the men’s room.”

“No . . . sharks . . .”

“You sound surprised. Just what in hell did you think sharks had to do with anything we’re looking at? You think we’re on the Shark Task Force or something? You know, my old school buddy Chap Chapman is on that.” Banshee looked around the room to verify that there were no reporters. “Seems like Webster went a little off the edge with that one.”

“Our concerns, on the other hand,” Harry offered, “are of great moment.”

“No question about it.” Banshee laughed. “No question.”

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Harry never did determine what the purpose of the Task Force was, but he began to wonder why he'd ever cared. No specific proposal was ever put forth or debated, and he wasn't sure whether this was because no one was certain what they were supposed to be doing, or because they knew but further understood that the topic under scrutiny was so complex and insoluble that specific proposals would expose them to criticism. It was probably a little of each. But the point was that he was at no disadvantage whatever because of his ignorance. Rather, that ignorance—or “lack of specific knowledge” as he called it to himself—was a positive attribute. He had total deniability. Should the Task Force make any controversial proposal, he could dissociate himself from it with the unimpeachable credibility of someone who had no idea what had been going on.

From idly pondering why he, who knew so little, had been made chairperson of the Task Force, he came firmly to believe that his choice had been enlightened, positively inspired. No one could possibly have brought so much objectivity to the role, or have exercised leadership so totally unfettered by prejudice. The example of his leadership was the example that prevailed on all of the highest levels. Hadn't the Governor just given a fifty-minute speech on education in which he hadn't made a single specific proposal? “Educating our children is our hope for the future,” he said; and “Our teachers are the linchpins of our system”; and “Getting back to basic values in the schools is fundamental”; and so on. Each governor, in fact, seemed to outdo his predecessor in this ability to assume a magisterial pose in which great general truths were stated and enfeebling minutiae were rejected. Why divide the people with details that could not or would not be implemented. Tell them things everyone could agree on and move on.



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*That* was leadership! And what of the members of the legislature, some of whom had been re-elected four, five, or six times, when had any of them spoken in terms other than those embraced by the Task Force? There was no question that, despite his brief delusions to the contrary, he had been the perfect chairperson. He had guided the group unerringly through the troublesome shoals of potential controversy and presided over the genesis of a final report that spoke exclusively in the exalted terms of public discourse.

*That* was leadership!

Harry proudly opened the lengthy *Final Report of the Task Force* and read the executive summary:

*It was the consensus of the Task Force that no single solution to the problems that were lengthily studied presented itself. It was clear, however, to all who participated in the process that coordinated efforts at all levels of government were imperative if any progress was to be made. The current climate of "the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing" was universally lamented by the Task Force members. One member even stated that in his experience duplication of services had become such a chronic problem that a year-long study had been instituted to recommend ways to deal with it.*

*Obviously, the Task Force did not have the leisure to wait for the conclusions of that study. Our mandate was to finalize our conclusions within six months. While the complexity of the issues being addressed resulted in our taking considerably more time than that, we were nonetheless mindful of the need for haste and proceeded with all requisite dispatch, not giving short shrift to any of the myriad ramifications of the problem before us, but not indulging in endless scrutiny of any of those ramifications either. After this rigorous process, we have agreed on the following recommendations (the full description of which will be found in the text that follows):*

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- *Conduct a complete and full analysis of all presently existent governmental systems that bear upon the problem and consider their consolidation or streamlining to deal effectively with it. Strive to cut bureaucracy.*
- *Consider criminalization of types of behavior that make the situation worse, and de-criminalization of types of behavior that make things better, or do not affect the situation one way or the other.*
- *Prioritize appropriations that directly bear on ameliorization. Encapsulate current available funds into hard-hitting, focused types of expenditure that will appreciably and immediately have an effect.*
- *Do away with useless programs that have outlived their usefulness, or were never useful at all. Retain only personnel that can be productively reassigned to taut, decisive programmatic goals.*
- *Seek to implement greater cross-agency and cross-departmental cooperation. Eliminate “balkanization” in government.*
- *Prioritize all currently pertinent programs to assure that those that most specifically and meaningfully address the current situation receive full backing before more tenuous and questionable programmatic efforts are attempted.*
- *Consider de-regulating activities that would more efficiently function without governmental oversight, and the unregulated functioning of which constitutes no threat to the public. Consider regulating presently unregulated activities that justify regulation under the above criteria.*
- *Sensitize the public to the nature and extent of the current situation so that they will understand the pervasiveness of the problem, and support the measures that must be undertaken to combat it.*
- *Consider the appointment of another task force to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations made by the Task Force.*

-- Harry Grandstaff, Chairperson

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Harry put down the report, shifting his gaze to the front page of the morning paper where he was pictured shaking the hand of the recently re-elected Governor Maxwell Spalpeen. *“Governor Congratulates Task Force Head,”* the caption read. Harry hadn’t read the accompanying article. It might, he thought, cloud his objectivity and fill him with the type of prejudice borne of specific knowledge that could jeopardize his future. From being a minor functionary in an obscure governmental agency, he was convinced that his heading up the Task Force would be his springboard to greater things. He simply knew too little to be ignored any longer.