

In The Nation: The Ambiguity of O. M. B.

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, June 15—George Shultz is as able a man as this Administration boasts, and President Nixon has reached for control of the bureaucracy by putting him in charge of the new Office of Management and Budget. All the management consultants and former White House staffers seem to approve the plan as well as the man, so ordinary mortals will dissent at their peril.

Still, at the risk of outraging these experts, a few questions need to be raised, about O.M.B. if not about George Shultz. After all, while the new organization proclaimed by Mr. Nixon need not necessarily be retained in future Administrations, the force of inertia will give it a headstart; and the long-term effects could therefore be sweeping indeed.

Demoting the Cabinet?

First, doesn't O.M.B. effectively demote every Cabinet department by placing between each of them and the Presidency a super-management agency?

A glance at any of the Rube Goldbergian charts outlining the shakeup will show that it does so demote the Cabinet. These charts cannot tell us whether the demotion, on balance, is a good or a bad thing,

and that obviously depends to some extent on who is in the Cabinet and who is at the head of O.M.B. and how they function in fact rather than on paper.

Isolating the President

It does seem clear, however, that the interposition of O.M.B. between the President and his Cabinet officers also shields the White House more than at present from the Cabinet department's constituencies—labor and businessmen and farmers and conservationists, and the like. So the various interest groups that now play so large a role in American Government, often constructively, have also been pushed farther from the power center; and the President will be more nearly than before "alone, at the top," in John Kennedy's phrase.

The last three Presidents, preferring all sorts of more homogeneous and efficient ad hoc groupings, have tended to play down the Cabinet's group function as an advisory body. Now the department-head function is being similarly downgraded by the O.M.B. super-agency; if it matters any longer, all this is surely going to lower the quality of men willing to accept Cabinet positions in the future.

These factors lead straight to a second major question. Doesn't

the advent of O.M.B. mean even greater centralization of power and responsibility in the office of the Presidency?

Of course it does—and just at the moment when certain developments were suggesting a trend in the opposite direction. The revival in Congress, for instance, of an interest in foreign policy directions, Mr. Nixon's own plans for revenue-sharing programs with the states and municipalities, the widespread public interest in political "participation"—all seemed to evidence a creeping trend toward a decentralization of government.

O.M.B. means quite the opposite. Taken together with the curious new Domestic Council, which somehow is supposed to make policy without having any responsibility either for putting it into practice or evaluating policy or practice later on, it puts in the executive office of the Presidency, where neither people nor Congress can easily question it between elections, most of the effective power of the executive branch.

It is claimed, for instance, that O.M.B. will be able to pull together all the programs, now scattered through the Cabinet departments, that bear on the national environment. No doubt it will. But one of the impulses

toward decentralization has been the growing belief that such problems exist on a scale far too broad to be handled from Washington with due regard for local, state and regional peculiarities. It remains to be seen whether a super-agency is a better remedy than decentralization.

This is particularly so in view of a third question. Isn't O.M.B., at root, another bureaucracy superimposed on all the bureaucracies that already exist?

Duplication and Conflict

The charts say that it is, although again it has to be conceded that the answer really lies in how Mr. Nixon, Mr. Shultz and the others involved work things out in practice. But already O.M.B.'s chances of duplication and conflict with John Ehrlichman's Domestic Council are obvious; and it is an absolute certainty that some of the Cabinet officers will not take kindly to the Shultz-Ehrlichman dominance of policy, program and funds.

Mr. Shultz has perceptively remarked that "those who can't stand ambiguity can't be creative here." But the question is whether O.M.B. ultimately will mean less ambiguity and more control, less creativity and more management.