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# THE "GREAT DECISIONS" PROGRAM IN OREGON

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Oregon's experience with the Great Decisions program of discussion groups on foreign policy issues shows that many people are interested in intellectual questions. The Great Decisions program has been successfully carried on in all sections of our state, and it has reached both urban and rural people.

This program is sponsored nationally by the Foreign Policy Association. The fact sheet materials used by discussion groups are prepared and published by this association. Each year, the program covers eight different issues in the field of foreign policy in a series of weekly discussions in February and March. For this past season the issues were:

- Communist Timetable for 1960—What Odds?
- Divided Europe—Cooperation or Crisis?
- Red China on the March—What U. S. Action?
- What Chances for India's Middle Way?
- Middle East—What Hope for Stability?
- What Goals for Africa's New Leaders?
- Cuba's Revolution—Reform or Fiasco?
- U. S. Global Strategy—What Outlook in 1960?

These issues were explained in a set of fact sheets that could be purchased for a dollar. People organized in discussion groups and used the fact sheets as study guides on which to base their discussions. Newspaper feature articles and radio and TV programs were used to focus public attention on the issue of the week and to convey background information that would supplement the fact sheets.

About 4,000 adults and 2,000 school youth have participated in 300 to 400 discussion groups each year. The intensity of individual interest and group discussion varied widely. Some have become intensely interested and highly stimulated by the experience, while others have undoubtedly felt that this was a waste of time.

Participation in the Great Decisions program appears to be quite directly related to local sponsorship and leadership. One keenly interested individual may be sufficient to get several discussion groups started in a community. A few active workers may suffice to get the program going on a county-wide basis. The

major difference between a county where the program succeeds and another county in which it makes no headway at all may well be the simple matter of interested local leadership.

Such interested local leadership has to be sought. Once found, it will expand and perpetuate itself if the program is satisfying. Sometimes the needed leaders will appear as volunteers in response to publicity, but personal visiting is a more dependable method.

Operation of a discussion group program of this nature through existing organizations in the community was found to be impractical. For example, one of the objectives of the Rotary Club is the improvement of international understanding. But this does not automatically mean that the Rotary Club will devote a series of its weekly programs to the Great Decisions issues or that a substantial number of discussion groups can be organized within the Rotary membership. You will be lucky to get one Rotary luncheon program devoted to Great Decisions, and you will be lucky to get one discussion group of Rotarians organized. A factor of "selective interest" has to be taken into account in setting up the organization for discussion groups.

Some people are attracted by the idea of discussion groups on foreign affairs; others find the same project either dull or frightening. The key to success lies in finding some interested people and enlisting them to find others. The first year's experience makes the job easier the second time. Some leaders will stay with the program year after year because they enjoy it and because they get a sense of constructive accomplishment from working on it. Some new blood will be needed each year, however. Also a considerable turnover will take place in the membership of the discussion groups from one year to the next.

Many people who will not join a discussion group do pay attention to the program through reading news articles on the issues and watching TV presentations regarding them. The fact that discussion groups exist is undoubtedly a factor in stimulating a great deal of thinking among other people. The end result is some effect upon public attitudes regarding some broad questions of national policy. This effect may be a simple "speeding up" of developments that would take place anyway because of what is happening in the world. The Great Decisions program is not the only avenue through which our citizens have access to information on these questions.

Agencies that sponsor discussion groups on public affairs issues will find that their motives are suspect and their pedigrees subject to scrutiny. We regard this as logical and an encouraging sign of interest in the functioning of a democracy. People want to know who is trying to influence them and why.

In the case of the Great Decisions program in Oregon, the Extension Service did not find itself subject to extensive questioning —because the agency was quite widely known and its reputation for honesty and accuracy was well established. But we found that we needed to explain what the Foreign Policy Association was and why it was sponsoring this program nationally. Some people were fearful that the Great Decisions program was a device of the Communists to infiltrate American thinking and weaken our efforts in the Cold War.

A program of group discussions on agricultural adjustment would quite conceivably face similar questions and explanation of its parentage might be equally necessary. Certain city groups might logically presume that the purpose of the undertaking was to sell a certain bill of goods for the farmers—and some farm groups might presume that the undertaking was intended to sell the program of another organization rather than their own.

In this connection, the skill of the writers who draft fact sheets and opinion ballots has to be of a high order if the materials are to be truly objective. Biases and habits of thought have a tendency to show in selection of facts and phrasing of questions. If the material obviously is slanted, its value is greatly impaired.

**PART V**

*Economic Growth*

