Califano carries too much power

By James J. Kilpatrick
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WASHINGTON — Monday's mail brought two items that set thought in motion. The first was a note from Joe Califano, secretary of Health, Education and Welfare; the second a copy of People magazine containing an interview with Eric Hoffer, the old longshoreman philosopher.

Califano was in a plaintive humor, understandably, because I have been picking on him lately. Nobody likes to be jumped on, but Joe is an old pro with a one-centimeter hide and a trampoline psyche. The more you jump on Joe, the more he bounces back.

He sent me a speech he delivered last month at Ann Arbor. The idea was to demonstrate his deep sense of humility.

Joe dwelled upon the problems that he daily has to cope with. He cited regulation of genetic research, the use of federal funds for organ transplants, distribution of funds to fight cancer and federal financing of sterilization.

He continued: "What are the proper limits on fetal research? Under what circumstances should the national government finance abortion? Under what circumstances should we release potentially life-saving but potentially fatal drugs? To what extent should we fund psycho-surgery that alters the mind?

"Should we spend new federal money on expensive medical technology or on providing basic health care to the poor? To what extent should we hold people responsible for taking care of their own health before the government begins paying their medical bills?"

Such problems, said Joe, being humble, are too much for his department to handle alone. He thought Solomon, Aquinas and Hippocrates would be hard put to come up with answers.

Only society could provide the answers; meanwhile his department would consult widely, make haste slowly, operate in the open and do its best to accomodate the varied beliefs and values that compete in America. And thank you very much.

Hoffer wrote about activist presidents. He thought they cause great harm. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a disaster; his policies undermined the ancient American tradition of self-reliance. FDR got us into this welfare mess.

"President Eisenhower, on the other hand, was occupied with keeping things from happening. Eisenhower sat on his ass and we were a thousand times better off."

The same thought was expressed, rather more elegantly, by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to James Madison in 1787: "I am no friend to very energetic government. It is always oppressive."



Secretary Califano

The Hoffer-Jefferson observations lie at the heart of Joe Califano's perplexities. My friend the secretary is sincerely troubled because he cannot find all the answers. He leaps over the key point: What is the federal government doing with all those questions?

It is the intervention of big government, with its massive power and giant budgets, that has imposed upon Joe Califano the unbearable burden. Our fundamental error lies in creating a flawed structure in which so many great moral and ethical decisions must be made by the bureaucracy.

The laws have set up Califano as the One Great Doctor for Us All. He is also the One Supreme Educator for Us All. He is the One Great Pharmacist for Us All. The secretary is, of necessity, the infallible sociologist, the infallible architect of hospitals, the infallible judge of desegregation and the omnipotent treasurer upon whose yea or nay 90 percent of the nations's biomedical research now depends.

No man alive could exercise these vast powers wisely.

Joe has been exercising some of them, I believe, quite badly, but he is getting tons of bad advice from lower-level bureaucrats who are even more doctrinaire ideologues than he is.

My point is Hoffer's point. So long as the people delegate sweeping powers to government, the people will be sweepingly oppressed. The question, as always, is a question of power; and Joe has entirely too much.