Chapter 2

The Legacy of Neglect . . .

The normal process of development in a region rich in natural resources may be reduced to an a-b-c-d statement as follows:

(*a*) Exploitation of natural resources produces local wealth.

(*b*) That local wealth is invested in human and social capital, or so-called "social overhead" (the complex of housing, education, transportation, public and private services, community facilities such as hospitals, planning commissions, organizations and institutions).

(*c*) The investment in social overhead provides a platform for a kind of spiraling, self-generative development which is wholly independent of the natural resources that triggered the regional economy in the first place.

(*d*) The key to sustained progress is the continuing successful development of the human and social resources attracted to the region by the natural resources.

In most of Appalachia this process was never fully realized, except in a relatively few communities. Even the first stage of exploitation of the region's great resources was retarded—by a primitive agriculture and by changing technology and consumer demand within the timber and coal industries.

The cropland was too often despoiled by agricultural practices which were not only crude but not even native. The settlers were migrants from the cities of 17th-century England, Ireland, and Scotland—urbanites who, during their temporary residence on coastal plantations or in the piedmont area had acquired the corn and tobacco agriculture of the Indians. This was the only kind of agriculture they knew, and they sought to establish it, first in the narrow valleys and then on the steep slopes of the highland, which the hill Indians had wisely left to the forest. It is not surprising that now almost 95 percent of the Appalachian cropland and 70 percent of the pastureland is in need of conservation measures.

With the construction of long-distance pipelines for oil and natural gas and with the replacement of the steam locomotive by the diesel, the exploitation of Appalachia's coal deposits was dramatically slowed. The simultaneous introduction of new machines for

both underground and strip mining, drastically reducing the manpower requirements in coal mining, further aggravated the drop in regional income from that resource.

The exploitation of the great hardwood forests in the region came closest to a full development process. The huge trees were systematically felled to be processed into ties for the railroads, timbers for the mine shafts and the lumber for eastern housing and its furniture. But when the second growth in these forests came to maturity, the railroads were built, the mines were closing and laborsaving substitutes had taken over a substantial part of the hardwood markets in construction and furniture.

Except in its northern reaches, Appalachia was left untouched by the Ice Age, and the natural lakes which the glaciers left in other parts of the Nation are largely absent in the region. Without such natural impoundments, Appalachia's runoff pours down the mountain slopes into plunging streams which periodically rise to flood entire valleys. As recently as the spring of 1963, whole sections of the region were severely flooded. The $40 million in damage which then occurred repeated a disaster of similar magnitude in 1957. There is evident need for the fostering of new public and private practices to control erosion and reduce runoff without impairing the economic benefits of agriculture, timber cutting, and mining. Resource utilization in Appalachia can and must proceed without contributing to the tragic waste of floods.

This waste has been compounded by practices which have polluted the region's once sparkling streams and left them ugly. Acid leaked from the mines threatens fish and game. Where private plumbing facilities are lacking—as is the case in many sections of rural Appalachia—raw sewage seeps or is dumped into the waters. And the unchecked rainwater runs off the overcultivated or strip-mined slopes heavy with clay and coal dust.

Where a society depends primarily on the extraction of natural resources for its income and employment—as did the people of Appalachia—it is extremely important that a high proportion of wealth created by extraction be reinvested locally in other activities. The relatively low proportion of native capital did not produce such a reinvestment in large sections of the region. Much of the wealth produced by coal and timber was seldom seen locally. It went downstream with the great hardwood logs; it rode out on rails with the coal cars; it was mailed between distant cities as royalty checks from nonresident operators to holding companies who had bought rights to the land for 50 cents or a dollar an acre. Even the wages of local miners returned to faraway stockholders via company houses and company stores.

In the future, Appalachia's potential of timberland, fossil energy and recreational water and wilderness will be required for the satisfaction of our national goals. But further resource activity in the region—if uncoordinated in its timing or its relationship to human and social capital—could repeat the past pattern and make little more than a piecemeal improvement of the Appalachian social and economic substructure.

Appalachia's millions of people, whose material and social betterment is the focus and end of all development effort, are also the region's prime resource. Their individual distress is today a national liability; but their pooled personal hopes, talents and resourcefulness is a reservoir of creative energy the Nation can no longer afford to ignore.

The Appalachian people have no desire to abandon their traditional home, but whether they leave or stay, their continuing distress compounds a double loss for both the region and the Nation—the cost of welfare maintenance and the loss of productive vigor.