PS1 for 7/20/89 Pell Brings New Age to the Senate

Wouldn't you think that, with all the real responsibilities Senators have to deal with, they wouldn't be out inventing new problems for themselves? It looks like New Age has come to the Senate in the form of S.J. Res. 135 sponsored by Senators Claiborne Pell (D-RI), Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS), and Albert Gore (D-TN).

This bill would set up a National Commission on Human Resource Development. No, we are not talking about natural resources such as oil or water, but about a new federal agency to "facilitate the fuller attainment of human potential." Senator Pell could save the taxpayers' money by just using his free WATS line to call up Shirley MacLaine right now and get his New Age advice straight from her.

But a federal project couldn't possibly be that simple. The bill would establish a "scientific advisory panel," an "academic and industry advisory council," and a plan to "communicate with foreign governments and international organizations."

What exquisite window-dressing! The "scientific" panel will provide a mantle of respectability, the "academics" will grind out op-ed pieces telling how important this commission is, and the "foreign and international" mandate will authorize junkets to faraway places where Commissioners can sit cross-legged and meditate with others about human potential.

The bill calls for a "Center for Human Resource Development" to provide an office for those working on this project. The 25 Commissioners will each be paid a per diem at the rate of $86,000 per year plus all expenses. The Executive Director will receive a salary of $75,500, and there is no limit on the fees that can be paid to "experts and consultants."

The National Commission on Human Resources Act almost sailed through the Senate this year without any hearings. This attempted snow job (stopped in the last minute by the vigilance of Senator Dan Coats) was rationalized on the ground that hearings had been held by a Senate subcommittee last year on a similar bill.

To testify on behalf of this bill, Senator Pell invited Dr. Herbert Benson, chief of Behavioral Medicine at a Boston hospital and founder of a Mind-Body Medical Institute. He would naturally be expected to favor a new federal spending program, since his own work for the last 20 years has been wholly financed by taxpayer and foundation sources.

Benson said he has devoted his career to "relaxation response" and "mind-body interaction." He told the Senators that the "relaxation response" for 10 to 20 minutes once or twice daily can be an effective treatment for everything from high blood pressure to diarrhea.

Benson described the relaxation response as the repetition of a word, sound, prayer, or phrase while putting other thoughts out of your mind. Just sit quietly, he said, close your eyes, relax your muscles, breath regularly, and repeat over and over again for 10 to 20 minutes: "The Lord is my shepherd," or "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," or "Shalom," or "peace," or "love," or "one," or whatever phrase comports with your own value system.

Senator Pell asked, “Could a mantra substitute for that?” Benson replied that each one should choose his “one word or mantra.”

“We have found no inherent superiority of one phrase over another,” Benson said. Other techniques which he said can be used to elicit “the hypoarousal physiologic changes of the relaxation response” include “the practice of Zen, Yoga, and Transcendental Meditation.”

To demonstrate, Benson led those at the hearing in a “relaxation response” experience. Senator Pell asked if anyone experienced “any physiologic changes.” Nine raised their hands out of the 15 or 20 in the room and one called out, “I felt a difference in my heart.” Benson asked, “How many of you noticed a warming of your hands and feet?” Half a dozen hands went up.

Pell’s next expert witness, Robert Schwartz of the Tarrytown Business Center, described how Venezuela had carried on a “human potential” program for five years under the direction of a National Minister for the Development of Human Intelligence. The Venezuelan President invited a Harvard group to study this program, and they solemnly reported that the program brought about “an increase in I.Q.” in the “nation at large.”

Predictably, this led Schwartz to voice enthusiastic support for “government supported programs to develop human potential.”

In the 1920s and ‘30s, a Frenchman named Emile Coue made a big name for himself and presumably a fortune by telling people to repeat over and over, “Every day in every way, I’m feeling better and better.” The difference between then and now is that, 50 years ago such hucksters had to peddle their wares by seeking out the suckers (whom P. T. Barnum said were born every minute), but years of liberal spending programs have encouraged such persons to think they can make the taxpayers pay for their posturing.