

SOME INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

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As the twenty-first century approaches, the federal courts confront a destiny that is somewhat uncertain. Despite escalating workloads and diminishing resources, the mission of the courts remains to provide “just, speedy, and inexpensive determinations” to the legal disputes brought to them for resolution. Whether this challenge can be met depends on whether the traditions of federal justice can be adapted to ever-changing circumstances.

The vision of “conserving core values, yet preserving flexibility,” expressed by the Committee on Long Range Planning of the Judicial Conference of the United States, is the appropriate course to follow. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity: the judicial branch can either *lead* in finding the requisite solutions, or it can simply *wait* for others to do so. If the latter approach is followed, we may have to settle for less desirable answers and the courts’ status as an independent, co-equal arm of government may suffer.

If recent experience is a guide, we need not doubt that the judiciary will rise to the occasion. On July 15, 1995, L. Ralph Mecham completes his tenth year as Director of the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. Throughout his tenure, Director Mecham has worked unceasingly to ensure that the federal courts are equipped to meet their historic challenge. The Administrative Office under his leadership is committed, above all, to providing high quality services to judges and court administrators so that judicial business proceeds smoothly and with the degree of excellence the public has come to expect. These efforts include stronger staff support to policymakers in the Judicial Conference of the United States and its committees, as well as increased program assistance and training for court officers and employees at the national, regional, and local levels. With an

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enhanced policymaking capability and improved management, the federal courts are now better positioned to develop and implement innovative answers to existing and future problems.

I am pleased to introduce this special issue dedicated to the stewardship of L. Ralph Mecham and the spirit of public service he represents. The articles that follow are a chronicle—though necessarily an incomplete one—of the many improvements, initiatives, and creative thinking occurring in and about the federal judiciary over the past decade or so. These illustrate in large part the key areas in which Director Mecham has focused his attention with the most positive effect: (1) strengthening local courts; (2) managing limited resources more efficiently; and (3) maintaining effective communications with the other branches of government, the bar, and the public. It is my hope that increased interest in the internal workings of the federal courts, spurred by publications of this kind, will further inspire the judiciary's own efforts to anticipate and cope with the future.