

WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE: DELEGATES SAY VALUE OF PARLEY HINGES ON UNITY

FORUM

If the agenda doesn't work, it's our fault

By Howard N. Bernstein

Delegates to the White House Conference on Small Business should expect to get nothing out of the conference. Any delegate, or any nondelegate small businessman for that matter, who expects the conference to solve one or more of his personal business problems is going to be disappointed. That's not what the White House Conference is all about.

In my business I employ 180 people and generate more than \$20 million in revenue per year. But at the 1979 regional conference in Chicago, where I sought and won election as a delegate to Washington, I found myself sitting next to a woman who runs a hairdressing business. Her shop is in her living room, and it employs one person: her. Nonetheless, she and I share a common interest in preserving and improving the economic system that gives us the freedom to run our businesses. What helps her helps me. And that's what the White House Conference on Small Business is all about.

The conference has been structured,



The author, a delegate to the White House Conference on Small Business, is the founder and president of Atlas International Lift Trucks Inc., a distributor of materials handling equipment located in Schiller Park, Ill.

theoretically at least, so that small business can draw up its own agenda. The White House Conference staff has not led us in any way, but has limited itself to digesting and distilling the thousands of suggestions made by small business people at the state and regional meetings in 1978 and 1979. If it's not a good agenda, it's our fault, not theirs. And if the conference breaks down into factions more interested in pursuing their own special interests than in improving the national climate for all business, that will be our fault, too.

At the Chicago conference last July, I sat in on the workshop session dealing with women in business. I was appalled at what I heard. They were talking about all the special help they needed from the Small Business Administration and from other government agencies. Women may have more problems in business than men because of past discrimination, but they shouldn't be highlighting those differences. They ought to be working to show that they have the same problems as the rest of us in small business. That's true of other minorities, too.

So, if I have any problem with the way the conference has been organized, it is that by devoting one of the 13 issue areas exclusively to the problems of women in business and another to the problems of minority business, the conference staff has put too much emphasis on the differences between these groups and small business in general. We ought to be concentrating on the commonalities.

Every sector of the small business community will benefit from tax structure changes that promote capital formation and retention. Added incentives to exporting will help most small businesses expand their markets. All small business people, whether male, female, or minority, can serve their own best interests by speaking with one strong voice on these universal issues.

I said that I expect nothing from the conference, but I do go into it with hope. If the legislative and executive branches of government will only open their ears to the crescendo of voices raised in defense and support of small business and the free enterprise system,

we will have accomplished quite a lot.

I have one other hope for the White House Conference: that through this process of identifying and synthesizing our collective needs and objectives, the delegates and the millions of small business people they represent will emerge with a greater sense of community and purpose. If we can, we'll be better prepared to preserve the economic system that rewards us all.

Conference no place for short-term fixes

By Duane Pearsall

The more than 2,000 delegates to the White House Conference on Small Business have the opportunity to lay the groundwork for legislation that will rejuvenate the country's small business sector and, thus, the entire economy of the United States.

They could blow it, however, if they focus on short-term palliatives and overlook long-term goals.

Small business didn't lose overnight its access to capital, its ability to compete in the domestic and overseas mar-



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ket, and its inclination to innovate. These problems resulted from years of social legislation that had the unintended effect of crippling the small business community. Those effects can't be corrected in one four-day meeting, no matter how well prepared and ambitious the participants.

The small business representatives in Washington should not resort to simplistic generalizations. Resolving that "government should get off our backs" will do little to untangle the web of controls and regulations that now inhibits small business profits and growth. However, if the White House delegates can identify and rank their problems in specific, consistent terms, their message will become a platform for action.

For small business to benefit from the work of the White House Conference, the delegates must carefully balance short-term expediency against long-term goals, specific program design against broad policy objectives, and narrow self-interest against the needs of the entire small business sector.

One other danger confronts the White House delegates and threatens the unanimity with which they must speak if their final resolutions are to have any lasting impact. The conference materials have been organized into 13 issue areas. Some of them—capital formation and retention, government regulations and paperwork, for example—affect all small businesses. Other issue areas—such as women in business, federal procurement, and minority business development—do not.

If the conference delegates permit themselves to pass resolutions reflecting the most important concerns in each of the 13 areas, their unanimity can remain intact. But if the delegates fall into the trap of making value judgments between these issue areas—deciding, for example, that the problems of women in business should be subordinated to the paperwork problems confronting all small business—factionalism and discord will emerge. Congress, the President, and the country may conclude that small business cannot speak with one voice.

Both dangers are real and potentially destructive to the best opportunity small business has ever had to influence the environment it must exist in over the next quarter-century. But I am encouraged by the commitment to selflessness and greater purpose shown thus far by most conference delegates. With that continuing commitment, they'll skirt the pitfalls and acquit themselves well on behalf of the millions of their small business peers they've pledged to represent. □