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Rockefeller expert lauds federalism in America

By Fan Zhang

Richard Nathan, co-director of the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute in Albany, N.Y., lauded American federalism, which he credits with facilitating important policies, innovating government and allowing beneficial shared responsibilities between the states and the national government. Nathan spoke at the Rockefeller Center on Tuesday to commemorate the center's 25th anniversary and its ongoing centennial celebration of Nelson Rockefeller's birth.

In his speech, Nathan revisited Rockefeller's "Future of Federalism" lectures that Rockefeller delivered as part of Harvard University's annual Godkin lecture series in 1962.

"Federalism is described most commonly as a mechanism for reconciling unity and diversity," Nathan said.

According to Nathan, the founding fathers of the United States accepted the idea of federalism to allow the 13 states, which were varied in culture and size, to form a nation. Since then, history has shown that the principle of federalism has given energy to the country, Nathan said.

"States test ideas to confront problems," Nathan said. "These ideas then diffuse or morph into national policies."

Nathan cited specific issues confronted by federalism, including healthcare and education, which states as well as the national government attempt to address. Furthermore, federalism allows the American government to be flexible, he said. Nathan described how the Reagan administration cut back many social programs that the states in turn provided.

"Strong central policies must still rely on school districts and local institutions to enact them," Nathan said. "Our government cannot operate with implementing policies as the short suit. Federalism allows for extravagant promises to be changed into realistic public policies."

Nathan also spoke about the 87,578 state and local governments in the United States that provide services ranging from infrastructure to public safety. This structure allows for greater transparency of government and more opportunities for Americans to become involved in government, he said. One-sixth of the entire American workforce serves in state and local governments or nonprofit organizations, making public service a key component of the nation's economy, Nathan added.

Another benefit of federalism, according to Nathan, is that regional governments allow the federal government to better focus on issues of foreign policy and defense in an increasingly changing world. He explained that American federalism allows the U.S. to be more balanced in dealing with both domestic and international issues than other countries.

Andrew Samwick, director of the Rockefeller Center, said Rockefeller was a scholar and practitioner of federalism, and that Rockefeller's enthusiasm for the subject reflects the center's goals.

Nathan, who worked for Rockefeller during his presidential campaigns as the coordinator of domestic issues, agreed with Samwick.

"The hardest part of working for [Rockefeller] was because he cared so much and knew so much, it was hard to tell him anything," Nathan said.

The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute is a public research division of the State University of New York.