

My Colleagues

One of the pleasures of the academic life is the colleagues. Here are some of them:

Gordon Tullock

We were colleagues at the Public Choice Center at VPI. Some bits and pieces of my memories:

Gordon gave the impression that he read every book that was published. As best I could tell, he was bluffing about half the time.

My wife remembers meeting him when she was my girlfriend. He started the conversation by asking why she was wearing a backpack. Her interpretation was that the only form of conversation Gordon knew was argument, he only knew two things about her, that she was my girlfriend and that she was wearing a backpack, so he flipped a mental coin and chose the backpack. He never made the common mistake of thinking that an argument was a quarrel. Like George Stigler, he was sharp tongued but not, so far as I could tell, in the least malicious.

The best advice he gave me was that the one part of the submission cycle you can control is the time your article spends on your desk.

One chapter of the third edition of my first book is based on something I published when I saw an opportunity to argue, in print, that something Gordon had written was both obvious and wrong. Anyone who knew him will understand that it was a temptation I could not resist.

The last time I saw him was an event at George Mason a good many years ago. I told him that I had heard he was publishing a book of his rejected articles. He smiled and nodded. So I asked when the first volume was coming out.

I miss him.

Thank you, Jim

I owe two debts to James Buchanan. One is for the role he played in my becoming an economist. After I got a doctorate in physics and spent two years as a post-doctoral fellow, I decided to switch fields. Julius Margolis, who ran the Fels Institute of Government at Penn and had seen some of my work, invited me to come there. I spent two years as a post-doc at Penn, a third as a lecturer. During that time I wrote my first econ journal article, an economic theory of the size and shape of nations, published in the JPE.¹

At some point I met Jim and discovered that we had similar ideas about applying economics to political behavior, the subject of my article and much of his work. He invited me to come to VPI as an assistant professor of economics. During the next four years, I suspect as a result of his deliberate policy, I taught a wide range of courses, more or less the whole curriculum. Teaching things is a good way of learning them. That, a large chunk of my shift into economics, is one debt.

The other started even earlier. My first book, *The Machinery of Freedom*, received only one good review, defined as a review that makes the author think. Jim wrote it. A significant part of what

¹ "[A Theory of the Size and Shape of Nations](#)." Journal of Political Economy, (February 1977).

went into the third edition of that book was my response to a problem he pointed out with my exposition and analysis of a system of privately produced law. Readers who do not feel like reading the book can find the problem, and the response, in several of my [webbed talks](#), including [one](#) I gave at Buchanan house at George Mason University.

Jim by then had retired, so was not at GMU to hear the talk. I planned at some point to send him a link to the recording, or somewhere else where I responded. But I never got around to it.

And now I can't.

T. Nicholas Tideman

Nic Tideman — the T. is for Thorvald, which may be why he uses the initial — was the third memorable colleague at VPI; unlike Jim and Gordon he is still alive, indeed still there. The incident I most remember was a conversation in a room in the old house that housed the Public Choice Center. I had just read a news story about the sale of one of the miniatures from the Houghton *Shahnamah*, a famous work of Persian art, at a very high price. I commented to Nic that I had a very good reproduction volume of the entire book and that it was somewhat puzzling, in that case as in others, why someone was willing to pay so much more for the original. It implied that goods were valued not only for their physical characteristics — a good reproduction might have all the same relevant characteristics — but also non-material characteristics such as their history. The fact that George Washington sat in a chair gave it a value that an otherwise identical chair would not have.

I offered, as a hypothetical designed to interrogate my own utility function, three different swords. One was an antique, say a katana, a samurai sword. One was a very accurate reproduction of such a sword. The third was a fantasy sword, just as elegant in its design as the real one but with no connection to any historical weapon. I would value the first above the second, the second above the third.

Nic's response was that that no such pattern featured in his utility function. I offered as a counterexample the wedding ring he was wearing. Surely the fact that that was the ring he used to marry Estel gave it a value that an otherwise identical ring would not have. Nic responded that it was not the ring he used to marry Estel. From time to time he saw a ring he liked better and switched to wearing that instead.

Unwilling to concede defeat, I offered Estel herself as a final example. Surely, even if we could find him another woman just as well suited to be his wife, he would not be indifferent to the switch. In that case, at least, the history mattered.

He conceded that it did. They are still married.

Nic went out, and I thought about what a pleasure it had been to have a conversation about ideas in which I did not feel as though I needed a translator — neither for the ideas nor for why ideas mattered. That was after my first marriage had ended; I concluded that in order for a second marriage to work I needed to find a woman with whom I could have that sort of conversation. It took time to find her and another six years to persuade her of the virtues of long-term contracts.

That was 1983. We too are still married.

Exit Conversation

After leaving VPI I spent three years at UCLA as an assistant professor of Economics but was not offered tenure. Ed Leamer, then chairman, commented to me that I was a smart fellow and, if I spent a few years following the journals and writing articles on whatever were the current hot topics, I should have no trouble accumulating publications that would get me tenure at someplace such as UCLA.

DF: “That’s probably true. If you were in my position, would you do that?”

EL: “No.”

It was the right decision. What was interesting was that he agreed.

Earl Thompson

Some years ago I was corresponding with a fellow economist, a friend and ex-student, and he mentioned having organized a session at some meetings in honor of the late Earl Thompson of UCLA. I responded by commenting that I too was an admirer of Thompson and remembered James Buchanan having once said that Earl had the highest IQ of anyone he knew. My friend described having spent very many hours as a graduate student arguing with Earl, to their mutual enjoyment.

The first time I encountered Earl, he was giving a talk offering arguments in favor of things that I and most of his audience were against. I remember, half way through his talk, thinking that while these were very clever arguments for why some things we disapproved of were actually desirable, they did not explain why they existed — the talk was at the public choice center, where nobody expected governments to do things just because doing them was good.

Answering that was the second half of his talk.

He did not, ultimately, convince me, but he changed how I thought about certain theoretical issues by convincing me of the importance of commitment strategies. It was the basis for what I sometimes think may be my most important article, an explanation of rights not as a legal or moral category but a description of human behavior. One version is Chapter XXX[A Positive Account of Rights in Libertarianism].

This is how the academic world is supposed to work. What was important about Earl, to all three of us, was not whether he agreed with us but whether he had intelligent and interesting ideas. Which he did. He will be missed.

When I searched for Earl’s web page while writing this chapter, I discovered it was no longer there, not surprising since he had died in 2010. The [page](#) can, however, still be found on the [Wayback Machine](#). It contains a list of his articles and links to them, some but not all of which still work.

Other people on Earl:

[David Glasner](#)

[Tyler Cowen](#)

[Scott Sumner](#)

[Josh Wright](#)

[Thomas Lifson](#)