

I D E A S M A T T E R

Happy Birthday, Milton Friedman (and thank you, Bob Chitester)

Today is Milton Friedman's 100th birthday. We've been gearing up for this day for a while. I guess you could say this is a fitting climax -- though we'll be celebrating the whole year.

Instead of simply putting up a famous Milton Friedman video and letting it go, I want to talk about [Bob Chitester](#) -- featured here in this fine video from Caleb Brown and the folks over at the [Cato Institute](#).

Because, you see, in 1978, Milton Friedman's life became inextricably linked with Bob's. And what follow would change history for the better.

Now, if you know Bob, you know he likes a crowd. In fact, he will sing to you. He will read you a poem. He might even take you to task in front of a lot of people. But when it comes to his commitment to liberty, Bob knows when to let other stars shine. Indeed, Bob is a kind of star finder -- a Hubble telescope of the liberty movement. And it is truly a gift, perhaps his greatest gift.

Of course, Milton Friedman was already something of a star in 1978. But Bob saw that Friedman could do even bigger things -- maybe even change the course of history. Here's Milton Friedman talking about why he did [Free To Choose](#):

(1) Bob hit me at a particularly good time. I had just retired from active teaching at the University of Chicago and was in the process of moving from Chicago to San Francisco to join the [Hoover Institution](#) at Stanford University. If I had been committed to my usual teaching schedule, it would have been impossible for me to also meet the shooting schedule for the documentary. But as it was, I had no specific commitments.

(2) The basic idea was enormously appealing to us. As Rose wrote in our memoirs (*Two Lucky People*, U. of Chicago Press, 1998), "Milton and I have spent much of our life trying to persuade our fellow men and women of the dangers of an intrusive government and the key role that a free competitive economy plays in making a free society possible. Bringing these ideas to the large audience that a TV documentary could attract excited us."

(3) As it happens, I had appeared on a considerable number of major television programs—such as *Meet the Press*—so I had no concerns about the medium and had had direct contact with its effectiveness. As the project proceeded, I found I had much more to learn.

(4) One condition I made in advance was that I was not going to read from a script, that I would speak extempore or from notes, in words that were my own, not words written for

me. As a result, while there was a shooting script which indicated when and where we were going to film and what point the filming was intended to make, there was no textual script giving the words to be spoken. The book was based on the transcript of the television programs and came after the television program, not, as is usual, the other way around.

Prior to recording Free To Choose, Bob Chitester had also had something to do with the famous university speaking tour that includes so many of the [famous clips](#) you're familiar with by now from You Tube.

But try to wrap your head around the incredible impact of Free To Choose in changing human events -- from its airdate in 1980 to today:

- Many speculate the series could have pulled the U.S. from the brink of a second Carter presidency -- i.e. more stagflation, energy problems and high unemployment.
- When the Soviet Union collapsed, Estonia created its first freely elected government. [Mart Laar](#), the first Prime Minister of a free Estonia, says it was Milton Friedman's book Free To Choose that he used in shaping the new Estonia. Millions of people around the world have benefited from Friedman's ideas.
- Continues to be a sensation on Youtube with millions watching clips like [The Pencil Story](#), his [showdown with Francis Fox Piven](#) and many others.
- Free To Choose has spawned other projects like [Testing Milton Friedman](#) and [Free or Equal](#).

Milton Friedman's legacy isn't waning. It's growing. Let's celebrate today. And in the process of celebrating the great man's life and work, don't forget about his lifelong love, Rose Friedman. The two were inseparable and she was a formidable intellect in her own right. They reinforced each other.

And finally, we owe a debt to that mercurial man behind the scenes with his poetry and his eyes always on the horizon.

To celebrate Milton Friedman events around the world, go [here](#).