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Remembering Bill Niskanen, 1933-2011

by [Walter Olson](#) on October 29, 2011

The distinguished economist, who served the Cato Institute as its longtime chairman, was famous for his integrity, collegiality, and far-ranging scholarly interests, and in particular for his pathbreaking work in the field of “public choice” economics [Cato [bio](#) and [announcement](#); [NYT obituary](#)]. His departure from Ford Motor’s chief economist post after declining to back the company’s push for auto import quotas came to symbolize an honesty and adherence to principle that set a sorely needed example in Washington. An expert on the economics of defense spending and professor at UCLA and Berkeley, he was later an architect of the Reagan economic program as a member of that president’s Council of Economic Advisers. Throughout his career, his personal warmth, approachability and unquenchable curiosity about the world made him an inspiration and mentor to generations of scholars. Some tributes: [Lew Uhler](#), [Ben Zycher](#), [David Henderson](#), [Randal O’Toole](#), [Ian Vasquez](#), [Fred Smith](#), [Nick Gillespie](#), [Stephen Moore](#), [John Samples](#) (audio podcast). [Bureaucracy and Representative Government](#), Niskanen’s pioneering public choice analysis of the incentives facing government agencies, appeared in 1971; a more recent essay collection, [Reflections of a Political Economist](#), explores a range of current controversies in that and other areas.

Both before and since joining Cato in 2010, I had many chances to converse with Bill and get to know his enormous range of interests, extraordinary self-command, soft-spokenness and lack of pretense, and understated humor. Often, after hearing what I was working on, he would wait for a quiet moment to ask whether I was familiar with thus-and-such a scholarly paper that had appeared some while back. He then would summarize the paper’s findings, which typically would neither reinforce nor contradict the particular point I was pursuing, but instead approached the material from some entirely different perspective or pointed up an unexpected connection to what had seemed an unrelated set of issues. *This is what graduate school is supposed to be like*, I would think — and it was why, when the news came last week, I recalled what is said to be an African proverb: when a wise man dies, it is as if a library has burned down.