



THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

When Your Friends Start Dying

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April 3, 2021, 12:05 AM

In memory of Brett Sciaroni and other lost friends.

I lost my first friend during my early 20s while I was in school. He was a youngish, politically active professor at a community college I attended while living in Florida's panhandle. It was an interesting time: the state was increasingly going Republican in local as well as state and national races. He greatly intensified my interest in politics.

We stayed in touch after I went on to Florida State and beyond. He wanted to run for Congress and hoped to call on me for help. Alas, he smoked and suffered from diabetes, among other conditions. His frail health gave way far too early. He was a serious academic eager to put his theories into practice.

Early in the Reagan years a friend working for the general counsel of a major Cabinet department died. He'd given me some inside information that yielded a *New York Times* op-ed chastising the administration for abandoning principle, using an obscure regulation to enrich industry interests. The leak sparked an internal kerfuffle, but he emerged unscathed.

His obituary appeared the day I was heading off on a church singles beach trip, and it put a damper on my departure. I knew he'd been sick and had sensed that things were worse than he let on. Still, we hadn't seen each other for some time, so I was shocked by the news. I heard his distinctive voice as I read of his death and life and for the first time gave a few thoughts to my mortality.

Around that time another friend was killed by a drunk driver. Again, I learned through an obituary that announced his death. He also was roughly my age, so the arbitrariness of his death — killed on the road by someone who should have been home sleeping off a hangover — was jarring. Of course, I knew that people, far too many, died that way. But until then not people I knew.

In succeeding years the death notices for peers remained mercifully rare. Even a decade or two on the friend mortality rate seemed little changed. Older relatives, including my far-too-young mother, and my parents' friends, whom I knew, succumbed. So did some of my more distinguished teachers and professors and a few political mentors, including the man who brought me into the Reagan presidential campaign. And my dad.

A few years back I came across a box of old emails, including from a number of friends and associates with whom I'd fallen out of contact. I realized that I hadn't heard or seen any news about several of them. Most were older and/or sicker than me, so with foreboding I began putting

Google to work. Both husband and wife of a couple who used to attend Cato policy forums were gone. So was an energy analyst I'd worked with after leaving the White House passed several years before. A sickly older friend from out of state with whom I'd lost touch finally succumbed. With these, at least, I didn't much contemplate my own mortality. Rather, I thought more about the many people who flit in and out of our lives, with whom we form connections of varying intensity. Many of these connections turn out to be transitory, however, and when they disappear they leave small holes in our lives, which we often don't notice until much later.

Sometimes the lines crossed, as when my collecting buddy, a substantially older firefighter whom I met through a want ad, died. We were extremely close. I was his executor and even now hang with his family — widow, kids, and grandkids — who also became my family.

Increasingly, however, friends my age have been dropping. There was a law school classmate. An editorial page editor just a couple years older than me hit with liver cancer. A conservative activist who wandered overseas and I last saw in Kabul a few years before. The head of a think tank program in which I participated. A Cato staffer who'd enrolled in law school and went overseas for his internship. A former editor and presidential aide. A couple members of my church. And a friend — Christian, libertarian, great personality, comparable age — who at one time I'd hoped would be more than just a friend. This last hurt more than most, especially when mulling what might have been. A few months ago, a former intern of great character and promise left us, another tragic shock.

Mortality kept creeping closer.

A couple weeks ago brought another casualty, which, surprisingly perhaps, had a particularly strong personal impact. Brett, a friend of some 40 years, who'd spent the last quarter-century overseas in, of all places, Cambodia, passed. It was probably a heart attack, his brother was quoted as saying, though no autopsy was performed.

Brett and I met at the Hoover Institution as I was finishing law school at Stanford. He was a few years older but also a Ronald Reagan supporter who showed up in Washington after the electoral gods smiled upon the political fortunes of the "governor." For me it was a grand adventure. Improbably, my student columns in the *Stanford Daily* landed me in the White House. And working for Reagan's chief domestic policy adviser pretty much guaranteed a good position.

Brett was not as well connected. But he was a loyalist and lawyer — he alerted me that I could use my California bar exam scores to conveniently "waive into" the D.C. bar — and picked up a counsel position with an advisory panel, the President's Intelligence Oversight Board. The early 1980s were fine for him, but in 1987 he became a sacrificial lamb in the Iran–Contra scandal. He did nothing wrong, but his legal opinion that the National Security Council was not covered by congressional restrictions turned him into a partisan target. And with the Reagan presidency seemingly in the balance, his boss tossed Brett under the proverbial bus.

It was a difficult time for him (years later I suffered a somewhat similar experience, which I would wish upon no one). He was the subject of unflattering news stories, had no income, and became unemployable on the right. I suggested a therapeutic day at a Civil War battlefield. It was an appropriately dreary February day when we contemplated the "almosts" during America's bloodiest single day in the fight near the town of Sharpsburg on Antietam Creek in

Maryland 125 years before. That day he spent at least a few hours away from the horrible feeling that his life was collapsing around him.

He rebounded and bounced around a bit within the conservative movement in Washington. Then, in 1993, Brett disappeared. It turns out a friend recommended that he head over to Cambodia to advise one of the political parties as the post-Khmer Rouge country sought to implement democracy. From a career standpoint he made a fortuitous choice. The party belonged to Hun Sen, who eventually grabbed control and today still reigns in a system more quasi than democratic.

I ended up in Phnom Penh a few years later. It was quite a trip. I was traveling with a group that confronted religious persecution. We met with groups to check on local conditions. We also visited Tuol Sleng prison and the infamous “killing fields.”

I remembered reading about Brett going to Cambodia and checked with the concierge at my hotel. The staff knew him well. It turns out Brett was often there, since it was the best hotel (and at that time about the only one meeting Western business standards) in the capital. He was out of his office when I called, but I soon received a return call.

He opened with “Well look who the wind has blown in.” We made plans for dinner. He drove up in a Land Cruiser, or I should say was driven up, with a driver and an armed guard, who sat in the back of the vehicle. They were police, he explained, provided by the Department of Interior, which he paid for their services. He noted that the cost was less than his auto insurance premium. Police protection could come in handy in the sometimes-rough city. And, no doubt, it would be nice to have police on one’s side in an accident!

He explained that after doing the initial election work he developed a niche there and had nothing to return to in the U.S., so he stayed. As he prospered he had even less reason go back. He headed a Thai law firm’s Phnom Penh office. And he was preparing to move into a villa being vacated by a diplomatic mission.

We stayed in touch for a while after my return, but I never got back to Cambodia. From time to time I wondered how he was doing, but my email address for him went cold. And there wasn’t much to be in contact about. I wasn’t involved in commercial activity in Southeast Asia, and at that point our old times together were really old and fading. Past experiences can sustain a friendship only so long.

Then in mid-March he received the only kind of publicity that no one wants: a sizable obituary. “Brett Sciaroni, American power broker in Cambodia, dies at 69,” blared the *Washington Post* headline. It was a surprisingly large write-up. He’d never been a player in the Imperial City, Washington, D.C., as opposed to a distant province. His Warholian 15 minutes of fame were three decades old. His subsequent mentions in the U.S. press were few. But it seems the paper’s obit writers found his story — American political rags to Cambodian political riches — compelling. A few days later he enjoyed, if that is the right word, an equally impressive write-up in the *New York Times*, which wouldn’t allow the competition to have a monopoly on the story.

It turns out Brett had done even better after I last saw him. He started his own law firm, married a Cambodian, and had a daughter. The *Washington Post* tagged him as “a power broker for the global business community in Cambodia” in its obituary. The paper went on to explain:

As one of the first American lawyers in the country, Mr. Sciaroni became a sought-after counselor for the [ruling party] and within a few years was made an official adviser to the government, a position that came with the ceremonial rank of minister. His primary role seemed to be to attract foreign capital and serve as a go-between for business executives seeking audiences with top Cambodian government officials.

Brett's passing triggered a welter of emotions. None of us know the future. Lives can take odd turns. Had he imagined the enormous impact that a job he assumed would be temporary would have on his life? Despite his success, did he have any regrets about never returning "home," which after so many years was mostly a memory? He wasn't that much older than me. My story could end as abruptly and unexpectedly.

Finally, profound sadness: he is one of so many genuine friends to essentially pass out of my life, no longer connected by presence, geography, activities, work, or anything else, really, except a fading set of shared experiences from long ago.

During the COVID-19 madness I tried to connect with some past friends who'd disappeared far and wide. In only a couple cases was our bond rekindled. Two never responded. One, with a very common name that made the search difficult, had changed jobs, email, and cell number. Another answered, but almost immediately went silent again — perhaps still stalked by the depression that had driven him from place to place years ago.

With a couple of others our initially enthusiastic conversations soon ran out of energy. There simply wasn't much to talk about. Disappointing marriages and jobs. Medical ailments. The doings of kids I had last seen as toddlers. And reliving moments from 45 years before — were college and law school really that long ago? — quickly yielded diminishing returns. The present had almost completely swept out the past.

Brett certainly won't be the last friend to go. Indeed, the pace of departures from this world of those I know is likely to pick up. I suppose I'd better hope that is the case, since if I am not watching the funereal parade I will be in it!

Still, every departure leaves a sense of loss, especially when I wonder what might have been if the friendship finally severed by death had been sustained over the years. Fixating on what cannot be changed is pointless: "A fool will lose tomorrow reaching back for yesterday," runs one of my favorite songs. Nevertheless, the sense of regret might push us to do better today.

I hope my memories of Brett will have that impact. In a small way, that would honor a friendship that understandably, but sadly, lapsed through no one's fault. RIP Brett.

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