



Remembering Leonard P. Liggio

[Sheldon Richman](#)

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I lost one of my favorite teachers this week, as did so many other libertarians, not to mention the freedom movement as a whole. Leonard P. Liggio, 81, died after a period of declining health. Leonard was a major influence on my worldview during the nearly 40 years I knew him. While I had not seen him much in recent years, I have a hard time picturing the world — and the noble struggle for liberty — without him. He was one of my constants.

Leonard was not my teacher in the formal sense. I never got to take any of his classes. But like many libertarians of my generation and beyond, I learned so much from him through occasional lectures and especially conversations.

Since the early 1950s, before he had reached the age of 20, Leonard was a scholar and activist for individual liberty, the free-market order, and the voluntary network of social cooperation we call civil society. (He was in Youth for Taft in 1952, when the noninterventionist Sen. Robert Taft unsuccessfully sought the Republican presidential nomination. See Leonard's autobiographical essay in [I Chose Liberty: Autobiographies of Contemporary Libertarians](#), edited by Walter Block.)

In his long career, Leonard was associated with the Volker Fund (a pioneering classical-liberal organization), the Institute for Humane Studies, Liberty Fund, the Cato Institute, and finally, the Atlas Network. He was also on the faculty of several universities, including George Mason Law School, after doing graduate work in law and history at various institutions.

Leonard studied with Ludwig von Mises and a long list of eminent historians. He knew the founders of the modern libertarian movement: F.A. Harper, Leonard Read, Pierre Goodrich, Ayn Rand, and more. He was an early member of the Mont Pelerin Society, founded by F.A. Hayek, and eventually president of the organization. As a young man he became close friends with Murray Rothbard, Ralph Raico, George Reisman, Ronald Hamowy, Robert Hessen, and others who comprised their Circle Bastiat. He literally was present at the creation of the movement and helped to make it what it would become.

I believe I originally met Leonard in 1978, at the first Cato Institute summer seminar at Wake Forest University. (I was a newspaper reporter in those days.) However, I may have been introduced to him the year before in San Francisco. That was the year Cato was founded. Leonard was an original staff member and editor of its unfortunately short-lived journal, *Literature of Liberty*.

I remember Leonard's lectures at the Cato seminar very well. Among other things, he lectured on the history of Western imperialism. This left a permanent impression on me. I recall that he explained that the imperialists in Africa compelled indigenous individuals to work in the mines by requiring payment of taxes in a currency obtainable only by doing such work. Leonard's insights on imperialism and war — and the long-standing classical-liberal opposition to those horrors — account for my passion for these subjects.

I saw Leonard on and off over the next several years as I held various libertarian-movement jobs with the Council for a Competitive Economy, the late *Inquiry* magazine, and Citizens for a Sound Economy. But my contact with him increased dramatically in 1985 when I went to work for the Institute for Humane Studies, where Leonard also worked. That was the year IHS, led by John Blundell (who, alas, also died this year), moved from Menlo Park, California, to George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Now I was in a position to talk to Leonard nearly every day (though he traveled often). What an opportunity!

One thing you learned about Leonard right away is that he could generate a long bibliography on virtually any topic in the humane studies at the drop of a hat. He was incredibly multidisciplinary. You knew to bring a notebook with you when asking him for reading suggestions. I had many occasions to seek his guidance when working on research projects, such as my papers on noninterventionist Old Right ([PDF](#)) and [U.S. intervention in the Middle East](#), which would have been much tougher to write without his help. (I dedicated the latter paper to Leonard, among others.)

He was unfailingly generous with his time and deep knowledge of history and political thought. You didn't have to know Leonard for long to appreciate his encyclopedic mind, which astounded even seasoned scholars. I still marvel at his ability to read, assimilate, and integrate prodigious amounts of information, not just about history, but also law, legal institutions, philosophy, political theory, contemporary politics, and so much more.

During these years Leonard was a regular at an informal Monday-night dinner gathering known as the Clarendon Club, which was held at an excellent Vietnamese restaurant in the Little Saigon section of Arlington, Virginia, near Washington, DC. I recall these weekly get-togethers fondly because the conversations about politics, history, philosophy, religion, and whatnot were such joyful occasions and I learned so much. The other regulars included Jeff Tucker, Roy Cordato, Joe Sobran, Tom Bethell, Yuri Maltsev, and Phil Nicolaidis, with occasional visits from Pat Buchanan and Tony Snow. Good friends, good talk, good food: who could ask for more!

Leonard had the remarkable ability to find common ground with diverse people. He was a radical libertarian devoted to individualism, free markets, and peace. He was a sworn enemy of tyranny, imperialism, and war. But he could overcome ideological disagreements with others by finding those areas in which they believed in human dignity and freedom. He was welcome in New Left circles during the Vietnam War (he participated in [Bertrand Russell's War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam](#) in 1971) and some years later at the conservative Heritage Foundation and Philadelphia Society. The key to his success was his ability to show the connections among the mercantilism, imperialism, regulation of business, welfarism, and government spending, inflation, and debt.

One thing that made it easy for him to reach people of diverse persuasions was his unmistakable kindness. You could see it in his eyes and in his smile. Leonard was the quintessential gentleman and scholar. When he explained some controversial point in his soft but clear voice, you couldn't help but listen. He was a natural teacher, a wonderful storyteller, which a good historian ought to be.

His role in building the modern global libertarian movement may be unappreciated by many friends of freedom because he was so unostentatious. But he is beloved by libertarians throughout the world for his indefatigable efforts. Leonard had few rivals when it came to the number of young libertarians he advised as they embarked on their intellectual careers. He knew the value of networking, and he developed that craft to perfection.

Leonard's approach to activism set an example for us all. Brian Doherty, whose [*Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement*](#) discusses Liggio's role, [put it well](#):

Liggio had, as one admiring student of his once told me, a vast thousand-year vision of the slow spread of liberalism across the globe, one that allowed him to contemplate both past and present with equanimity, neither despairing for liberty's future nor being unrealistically enthusiastic about its imminent victory. He was the man I met and was impressed by in 1988: inspired and inspiring but calm and steady in the promotion of these ideas, and the organizing and aiding of students and intellectuals who wanted to understand and promote them better.

He was truly unique, the soft-spoken radical who could talk to anyone.

What is even less appreciated about Leonard is his written work. He never wrote a book, but he contributed many articles and book reviews to many publications, including [*Left and Right: A Journal of Libertarian Thought*](#), a mid-'60s publication that he founded with Rothbard; [*Libertarian Forum*](#), a later newsletter edited by Rothbard; [*Radical History Review*](#); [*The Journal of Libertarian Studies*](#); and [*The Libertarian Review*](#).

You can get a sense of Leonard's intellectual interests by surveying the titles of his articles: "English Origins of Early American Racism," "Isolationism, Old and New," "Early Anti-Imperialism," "Palefaces or Redskins: A Profile of Americans," "Massacres in Vietnam," "Your Right to Be Against War," "Charles Dunoyer and French Classical Liberalism" (a discussion of pre-Marx classical-liberal theory of class conflict); "Felix Morley and the Commonwealthman Tradition: The Country-Party, Centralization and the American Empire," "Why the Futile Crusade?" (a favorable and wide-ranging review of Sidney Lens's *The Futile Crusade: Anti-Communism as American Credo*), "Oil and American Foreign Policy," and "Richard Cantillon and the French Economists." (Many of these are online. Check the links above.)

I acknowledge that this is an inadequate tribute to Leonard Liggio, but I cannot find the words to do him justice. So I'll end with the words Benjamin Tucker used to close his obituary to his friend and teacher, Lysander Spooner, "[Our Nestor Taken From Us](#)":

I am at the end of my space, and have not said half that I had in mind. It would be easy to [go on and on]. But I must not do it, I need not do it. Does not his work speak for him as I cannot? It is ours, my readers, to continue that work as he began it. And we shall not have rendered him his full reward of praise unless it shall be said of us, when we in turn lay down our arms and lives, that we fought as good a fight as he and kept the faith as he did.