

William Niskanen RIP

Jonathan H. Adler October 27, 2011

I was saddened to learn last night that economist [William A. Niskanen](#) has died. A former academic, Bill served as acting director of the President Ronald Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers and later Chairman of the Board of the Cato Institute. His 1971 book, [Bureaucracy and Representative Government](#), is a public choice classic, though hardly his only significant work. I first met Bill while working as an intern at the Cato Institute in the summer of 1990 — it's impossible to forget the odor of pipe smoke that pervaded his office in the old Waterston House — though I did not really get to know him until much later — and even then I never knew him that well.

In the mid-1990s I was thumbing through some back issues of *Policy Review* — I cannot recall why — and I came across a short piece of his commenting on conventional political perspectives.

One passage from the piece stuck with me: The problem with conservatives is they cannot distinguish a vice from a crime, and the problem with liberals is they cannot distinguish a virtue from a requirement. Bill's articulation was pithier, to be sure, but this is the essential formulation. Bill understood that one could be a libertarian without being a libertine, and that one could be compassionate without seeking to make compassion compulsory. If only more saw the wisdom in these twin perspectives.

Here are additional remembrances from Cato ([1](#), [2](#)) and [Reason](#).