IN MEMORIAM

WILBUR J. COHEN

To those of us who saw him the weeks before he left for Korea in May, 1987, it seems impossible that Wilbur Cohen could have died. How could someone so full of life, plans, and challenges no longer be with us?

Wilbur Cohen came to The University of Texas at Austin in 1980 at the age of 66, after retiring as the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan. During his seven years at the LBJ School, Wilbur carried a full load of teaching, delivered innumerable talks, and played a major role in national policy deliberations on the Social Security system. While Wilbur remained an unstoppable force for formulating and improving social welfare in the nation, he also played a crucial role in Texas in developing the 1985 indigent health care legislation and 1986-87 attempts to improve Hermann Hospital’s role in indigent health care.

Wilbur Joseph Cohen was born on June 10, 1913, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Aaron and Bessie (Rubinstein) Cohen. His father, Aaron Cohen, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1888, and owned a number of grocery stores and variety stores in Milwaukee. His mother, Bessie, was born in New York City, managed one of the stores and had a soft, sweet word for everyone. Wilbur's mother was 50 when she died, while his father lived to be 89. Wilbur’s brother Darwin, who was six years younger than he, continues to live in Milwaukee.

In high school in Milwaukee, Wilbur was an outstanding student. He won both the Harvard Book Prize and a competitive history examination award from the University of Chicago. Wilbur also became an avid stamp collector in grade school, an avocation he enjoyed throughout life. He once answered ads in newspapers offering to exchange stamps, a process that resulted in mailbags of mail. Finally, the mailman visited his school to find out who this Mr. Cohen was and to explain to him that he could no longer deliver mailbags full of stamps to him at school. From 1969 until his death, Wilbur served as a member of the Citizens Stamp
Advisory Committee of the U.S. Postal Service. He often noted that his role as stamp advisor led to more mail and requests - for stamps commemorating persons or events - than all of his other public activities. Wilbur managed to convince the Postal Service to commemorate a number of programs and persons dear to his heart, including Social Security and Alexander Meiklejohn, the founder of the Experimental College at which Wilbur enrolled in 1930.

At the University of Wisconsin, Wilbur enrolled at the Experimental College for two years and then transferred to the Economics Department, where he studied with John R. Commons, Selig Perlman and Edwin Witte. Wisconsin at that time was a center of progressive thought and social legislation. Wilbur won the John Landrum Mitchell Gold Medal for the outstanding thesis in industrial relations for his research on "A History of the International Association of Machinists: 1911-1926."

Wilbur Cohen launched into his life-time work at the age of 21. Edwin Witte, Dean of the College, asked Wilbur to accompany him to Washington to aid President Roosevelt's Cabinet Committee on Economic Security, which drafted the original Social Security Act.

At the Memorial Service in Washington, on June 17, 1987, Congressman Claude Pepper said:

"I know of no man other than President Roosevelt and Dean [Edwin] Witte, who Wilbur Cohen came here to help, more deserving of credit for that noble institution than Wilbur Cohen. He helped write a Social Security bill. He devoted nearly 20 years to improving the administrative procedures of Social Security and finally, as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, took over the administrative [direction] of that program into which he had poured his warm heart."
After the law was passed in 1935, Wilbur spent the next 17 years (until 1952) as the technical advisor to the Chairman of the Social Security Board and to Arthur Altmeyer, the Commissioner for Social Security. He was placed in charge of program development and legislative coordinator work with Congress. Of that time in his life, Senator Paul Douglas once noted that an expert on Social Security was someone who knew Wilbur Cohen’s phone number.

In 1938, Wilbur met and married Eloise Bittel. Eloise, a native of Ingram, Texas, had graduated from Baylor College [now Mary Hardin Baylor]. She had worked at the Schreiner Institute in Kerrville, and the State Child Welfare Division in Austin. She had attended the University of Chicago and was with Social Security in Washington.

Eloise wrote three haiku for their fortieth wedding anniversary. The first was entitled Our History: "Union Meeting, Water cooler date, Danish rose luncheon, whoops, a mate."

Second was The Couple Who Could: "Thought we could, thought we could, live our lives as one; no so, no so, have done." And, the third, Husbandry: "We sow the seeds, three sons came, sons plus wives more of same, now the harvest." Wilbur and Eloise went to Europe for their honeymoon, as Wilbur had a grant to study social security systems in several European countries.

One story that Wilbur often told was of his first meeting with Eloise’s parents in Ingram. He and Eloise went out for a walk on the family ranch and they encountered a rattlesnake, which Eloise killed. He said it boosted his stock with her family a great deal when Eloise told them that Wilbur had killed it.

Eloise and Wilbur have three sons: Christopher, born in 1942; Bruce, born in 1944; and Stuart, born in 1946. Christopher is an attorney in Chicago; he formerly served as an Alderman in the City of Chicago and as the principal regional official for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare during the Carter administration. Bruce, who served in Bolivia in the Peace Corps and worked in agricultural development in Kenya, currently lives in Wilmette, Illinois. Stuart received a Ph.D. in naval architecture and lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he teaches courses and consults in problems of hydrodynamics.
Between 1953 and 1956, Wilbur was initially Assistant Director and then Director of the Office of Research and Statistics of the Social Security Administration. During the late forties and early fifties, he had served as a member of the Federal Security Agency Committee on Aging (1945-1953), and was Chairman of the Wage Stabilization Board’s Committee on Health, Welfare, and Pensions (1950-1952). He helped prepare President Truman's historic 1945 health message and represented the United States at international conferences on Social Security in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela. On several of these trips he accompanied Nelson Rockefeller. In 1956, the Eisenhower Administration reclassified Wilbur’s job to a political appointment; after 22 years in Washington, D.C., Wilbur sought other employment.

Fidele Fauri, Dean of the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, offered Wilbur a position as a Professor of Social Work, which he held from 1956 to 1960. During that period, Wilbur taught many unpopular courses and got rave reviews; his enthusiasm for life, his students and Social Security were infectious. He developed job placements for social work students in Washington, and broadened the perspective of many faculty members. Many students from abroad came to Michigan to learn how to set up a social security system from Wilbur. He was a consultant to several congressional committees, Michigan agencies, and the Social Security Administration throughout this period. He was Chairman of President Kennedy's task force on Health and Social Security in 1960-1961, which recommended Medicare, Social Security, health and public welfare proposals. These proposals formed the basic welfare and aging strategy of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations.

In 1961, President Kennedy appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) for Legislation. During the 4 1/2 years he served in that post, Wilbur had primary responsibility for handling some 65 major legislative proposals, including the Food and Drug Amendments of 1962, the Mental Health and Mental Retardation Act, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of 1963, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Higher Education Act, Medicare and Medicaid in 1965
and other Social Security legislation. It was in this period that Wilbur worked the legislative magic for which he will always be known.

He would describe to students how compromise made possible each of these pieces of legislation, the vagaries of the legislative process, and the personalities which required special attention if one were to be successful. This outpouring of legislation was unprecedented in most of our lifetimes. Wilbur often espoused Arthur Schlesinger’s view that there is a 30-year cycle, at least, in the American Republic, which requires that significant social legislation be passed every 30 years. He would point to Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Era early in the twentieth century, and then the New Deal where he began and the legislation of the sixties which he was so influential in passing. He would conclude with the prediction that the mid-1990s will see another set of initiatives. Surely one of his greatest professional regrets would have been that he did not have an opportunity to set the agenda, craft the legislation and kibitz the implementation of the new initiatives.

From 1965 to early 1968, Wilbur served as HEW Under Secretary to John Gardner. He was responsible for coordinating major policy issues between the legislative and executive branches and the administrative implementation of legislation, such as the Older Americans Act, the Food and Drug Administration, Medicare and Medicaid and the National Institutes of Health. In 1968, President Johnson appointed Wilbur to serve as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; thus Wilbur is the only person to have served as Assistant Secretary, Under Secretary, and Secretary of HEW.

In a Memorial Service, Bob Hardesty remembered that Wilbur was exciting, brilliant, intense, original, competitive and energetic, and always upbeat. He said that

"He excited Lyndon Johnson, too, he literally revved him up -- not that he ever need revving up. But Wilbur was his kind of Democrat. ‘Can’t’ and ‘impossible’ were two words you never heard him utter. And you could usually tell when the President
had been visiting with Wilbur. He would be straining at the bit to go do something, something for the people, the P double E PUL, as he used to say 'the peepul'. And he'd be down on the rest of his cabinet. 'I just don't know what's the matter with so-and-so,' he'd say, mentioning a cabinet officer. 'Every time I ask him to do something he's got a dozen reasons why he can't, why he doesn't think it's a good idea. I may just send Wilbur Cohen over there to that department and stir things up.' Then the President would give himself away. 'You know, I was talking to Wilbur just this morning. Do you know what he told me? He said, "If we can just keep the faith for three more years we'll eradicate hunger in this country." That is the most can-do man I have got in the cabinet,' he would say, 'He is a real go-go Secretary.' He called Wilbur his field general in a great crusade.

Wilbur and LBJ both believed that government could make a difference in righting inequities, in eradicating poverty, and in improving the common lot. They both had developed the faith during the New Deal and witnessed to it with great effect in the sixties.

In 1969, Wilbur returned to the University of Michigan as Dean of the School of Education. For the next eleven years, he broadened the school and continued to crusade for social justice. He recruited a number of good people to the faculty and initiated affirmative action in hiring women and minority candidates. He brought the alumni into the school and politicized the organization of Deans of Schools of Education. During this same period, he served as President-Elect and President of the American Public Welfare Association. He defended Social Security and demanded more funding to protect the poor and the elderly.

Wilbur, when initially asked by President Johnson to join the faculty of the LBJ School in the early 70s, suggested that if he did so, he would like to spend a large portion of his time with students in Washington, D.C., getting them acquainted with congressmen who were
influential in matters dealing with health, education and welfare and with the work of the committees that dealt with these subjects. He wanted them to become informed spokesmen and promoters for the programs in these fields -- those that already existed and others that were needed. But President Johnson said he wanted the students at the LBJ School to be able to see and talk with Wilbur on an informal basis as well as a formal one. He wanted them to be able to observe his approach to social problems and his commitment to helping those too young, too old, or too untrained to promote their own well-being. He wanted them to benefit by osmosis.

In January of 1980, Wilbur was scheduled to come to the LBJ School. In Washington, he had a heart attack, which delayed his coming for six weeks. It was fortunate that Wilbur had his heart attack in Washington. Although he had left Washington 11 years earlier, he and Eloise had retained their charter membership in the Group Health Association, a Washington Health Maintenance Organization (HMO). In fact in many areas Wilbur showed great constancy. Although they left Washington, first in 1956, he and Eloise not only held onto their house at 9319 Capitolview Ave. in Silver Spring, Maryland, they also acquired additional lots as they became available. After moving to Austin, he and Eloise continued to maintain a home in Ann Arbor as well, to which they returned from May through August. It was the constants in his life -- Eloise, his social philosophy, stamp collecting, his residence and his army of friends, colleagues, proteges, and benefactors -- that perhaps permitted Wilbur to do so much and touch so many lives.

Certainly, when he arrived in Austin after a stay in the hospital, he hit the ground running. During his seven years at the LBJ School, Wilbur taught seminars and directed policy research projects dealing with social welfare and health policies. He was often in Washington testifying on Social Security and Medicare issues, kept up a public lecture schedule that would overwhelm younger men, and yet found the time to advise students and junior colleagues on career choices or policy topics.
Wilbur challenged himself and his students each year by designing an advanced seminar that would respond to the current issues of the day: welfare reform, unemployment insurance, income transfer programs, or health care for the indigent. His style as a seminar leader can be gleaned from the following sample of student comments tabulated in the Spring, 1983, by Elspeth Rostow, former Dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs:

"Superb teacher and human being. Cohen loves learning himself and fosters learning in others. Always knew his stuff. This man is a rare gem and if UT wants to be an institution of the first-class, it would do well to seek out others as great as Wilbur Cohen. Cohen, you are an inspiration. A fine example of communication in the teaching process."

"My interest in and commitment to public health has been increased by participation in this course...consider myself very fortunate to have participated in this seminar...vital learning experience."

"This course teaches more from rubbing elbows with the instructor than the specific policy area of the course. The insightful thoughts, relevant anecdotes, political acumen and broad knowledge displayed by the instructor are invaluable and unique."

"W.C. is the finest professor I’ve had in this school. His interest in the subject matter made my research a joy. Extremely stimulating. While I agreed with his political slant, he offered both sides of every issue. Always prepared and willing to meet with us outside of class. I hope to keep in touch with him forever."
"Incredible enthusiasm, positive attitude...combined with a keen sense of what is realistic. Interest in students learning great."

"Can't think of anyone more qualified, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about subject matter."

"No one else in the world could give the special insights which Professor Cohen brings to this class. Uncanny ability to summarize major points..."

Wilbur took special enthusiasm in directing policy research projects, year-long courses jointly taught with another faculty member involving 20 students in applied research on social and health service topics. Wilbur chose topics to involve students directly into policy debates of the day. Student research from one project co-directed by Joe Heffernan on social welfare reform was used in testimony before Congress on Carter and Reagan legislative proposals.

The two policy research projects he directed on health care for the indigent in Texas not only fed into the 1985 state initiative in this area, they also helped train a group of students who continue to work on these issues in Austin, Washington and elsewhere. Hermann Hospital implemented many of the recommendations of a joint project co-supervised with Lonna Milburn to strengthen its capacity to deliver health care to indigents in Houston. Also, Wilbur was always generous with co-authorships and helped many fledgling academics establish themselves in the area.

Wilbur would go to lunch most days at the Wyatt's Cafeteria in Hancock Center; his most frequent eating companions included Emmette Redford, Sidney Weintraub, and Joe Heffernan. The discussions would generally be wide ranging and might be about foreign policy, social welfare, or the nature of the budget. Wilbur's roving mind could deal with almost any subject, and he seemed always to have read nearly everything about all these topics. He was a voracious reader; Wilbur would often share books he had read with colleagues, after having had a conversation that touched on the subject.
He often said that he preferred to see things in writing, a surprising trait for one who had worked so long with Congress. In fact, his skill as a drafter of legislation has touched all of our lives, and legislation in the last analysis is on the printed page.

Even while teaching a full schedule, Wilbur remained ubiquitous in Washington through testimony before Congress and lobbying on various topics relating to health, education, and social welfare. He was particularly active in supporting efforts to improve Social Security through his role as Co-Chair of the citizens' coalition, "Save Our Security" (SOS), an organization he had played a leading role in developing in 1979, and Co-Chair of the SOS Education Fund. He testified before the U.S. Congress ten times during 1983 and 1987 on legislation concerning Medicare, Medicaid, health care cost containment, services for the disabled, catastrophic health insurance, and unemployment insurance.

Congressman James H. Scheuer (D-New York) filed the following tribute of Wilbur's advocacy in the Congressional Record of May 18, 1987:

"What characterized Wilbur Cohen as an individual was his zest for the good fight. He was a Don Quixote, except he did not fight windmills; he fought for good legislation, and he racked up a number of victories that Don Quixote would have envied."

Congressman Dan Rostenkowski (D-Illinois) noted in the same Congressional Record:

"...right up to the end, Wilbur was working to improve the well-being of the elderly and the poor...in a career of public service that lasted his whole life, always speaking, writing, lobbying, and sometimes scolding, in support of the notion that a major purpose of government in an industrial society is to help those least able to help themselves...Wilbur Cohen was truly a modern-day pioneer and hero...He blazed new trails and, as a result of his imagination, insight and energy, he improved the lives of millions."
His approach to politics was to lobby in a positive way. As Elspeth Rostow, former Dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs, once said:

"Wilbur believed in doing good works and in doing them himself. He was not a cynic. He believed good things would happen and he would make them occur. He even tried to find virtues in Reagan's policies such as New Federalism, which attempts to put the burden of planning on states' shoulders and away from federal control. Wilbur was disturbed by this concept which didn't send adequate funds to the states...but he hoped for its beneficial results."

Sidney Weintraub, Wilbur's colleague at the LBJ School, has observed:

"He...took up a lot of causes, such as Social Security, Medicare and government benefits for the poor. He was careful to think out the best political way to get these things done. He often spoke of his opponents, yet he looked at them as fellows to beat, and if he happened to lose, then he simply lost. There was very little malice in Wilbur's system...many people disagreed with him but nobody disliked him."

At the memorial service in Austin, Max Sherman quoted from Wilbur's letter of resignation as Secretary of HEW to LBJ:

"I return now to teaching and social action, where I hope to encourage young men and women to join in that ever challenging quest for a more just and a more beautiful society. Justice and beauty have ever been the goals of leaders of the state since the time of Plato. I hope the quest will never cease. I hope we can encourage young men and women to continue that quest now."
In the months before he died, Wilbur had worked with the school to plan a professorship to continue his life’s work. The statement of purpose for the Wilbur J. Cohen Professorship of Health and Social Policy, which he drafted a month before he died, said:

"The major emphasis would be on the understanding of the formulations of past and present social policies, in both the U.S. and abroad, and the evaluation and research of options for future domestic social policy...The scope would cover all safety-net programs and proposals, such as those relating to health, education and welfare, including those in both the public and private sector."

In the memorial service in Austin, Shelley Leavitt, one of Wilbur's students, read part of a speech Wilbur had given in a memorial to Eveline Burns, a colleague from the New Deal. He had said,

"There were giants on the earth in those anxious and uncertain days fifty years ago. They stood tall and could see far into the distance beyond the horizon. They saw far beyond fifty years into another century. They realized that they should not build merely for the present, but that they must also build for the long-run future. They were dreamers and visionaries, but with a plan. They were social architects who could envision the idea in their mind's eye and transform it into an institutional creation. Some could defend the idea with simplicity; others saw it from the standpoint of complexity. They were innovative men and women, labor economists, social workers, politicians, social reformers, representatives of labor, business and the public. They were creative thinkers and writers, teachers and researchers. But they were also giants."
His speech concluded with "Do not be of little faith. Think big when big steps are possible; think small when small steps are feasible." Shelley added:

"Professor Cohen never considered himself as a giant, as a visionary, as a legend. He never thought of himself that way. But those of us who knew him realized how great he really was, and I know that my memories of him will always influence my actions."

William H. Cunningham, President
The University of Texas Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Professors David Warner (Chairman), Leigh Boske, and David Eaton.