IN MEMORIAM

WENDELL C. GORDON

One of his closest friends and a long-time colleague described Wendell Gordon as a “man of lost causes.” But a good cause, even if lost, is worth the fight. This attitude of Wendell’s helps us to understand much of what he accomplished in life.

Wendell Chaffee Gordon was born on October 9, 1916, in Birmingham, Alabama, to Gertrude Mills and Dugald Gordon. This quiet and unassuming scholar with Presbyterian upbringing talked very little about himself, so not much is known about his early life. He graduated from Byrd High School in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1933, matriculated to Rice University (then Rice Institute), and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1937. In college, economics and history vied for his attention. In recognition of his superior work, he received a scholarship from American University and graduated with a master’s degree in 1938. The university awarded him a prize for the best thesis written that year. He was then awarded a Penfield Fellowship to attend New York University to study economics, government, and international law. He received a Ph.D. in political science in 1940 after only two years as a graduate student there. His formal schooling thus came to an end before he had turned twenty-four years old. His dissertation, The Expropriation of Foreign-Owned Property in Mexico, was published in 1941.

In 1940 Wendell accepted a position as instructor of economics at the University of Texas, where he remained, with some interruptions, until his retirement in 1984. The first interruption came in early 1942 after the shy and unassuming instructor became the eye of a
storm over academic freedom at the University. The story that follows reveals much about his character and ideals.

In March, 1942, The Dallas Morning News sponsored a “mass meeting” to air views about the forty-hour work week legislated in the Fair Labor Practice Act of 1938. Recall that the attack on Pearl Harbor had occurred only three months earlier and there was only gloomy news to report from the Pacific. So, it was convenient to bill the event as a “patriotic mass meeting;” in fact, it was a thinly-veiled attack on the forty-hour work week. Powerful conservative interests were misinforming the public about the Fair Labor Practice Act. For example, along with the announcement of the meeting was a statement alleging that factories were turning out only half as many instruments of war as were possible. The statement gave the reason, “…because there is a law which says a man should work only 40 hours a week… Is there a law which says our sons must fight only 40 hours a week or die only 40 hours a week?” Of course, the real complaint was overtime pay. [Henry Nash Smith and Horace Busby, “The Controversy at the University of Texas, 1939-1946: A Documentary History.”]

Gordon, Fagg Foster, and Nelson Peach, all from the economics department at the University, requested a mere two-minute spot on the program in order to clear up the misunderstanding about the recent labor legislation. Their request was turned down and they attended the rally as spectators. Having failed to obtain a spot on the program, Gordon wrote letters to The Dallas Morning News and The Austin American Statesman exposing the meeting for what it really was. An infuriated Dallas federal judge wrote regents calling for changes in the economics department. Although no general changes were made, Wendell was not rehired when his contract expired in June despite urgings by the economics department, the dean, and
President Rainey. [An excellent account of the academic freedom controversy at the University of Texas and its blacklisting by the Southern Association of Colleges is given in Alice Green Cox, *The Rainey Affair: A History of the Academic Freedom Controversy at the University of Texas, 1938-1946*, a doctoral dissertation at the University of Denver, 1970.]

The next interruption proved to be an aid in undoing the outcome of the first. Wendell was inducted into the army on July 25, 1942, only a month after he was not rehired at the University. He served with distinction in counterintelligence work for the next three years. His service took him to North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany, winning him five battle stars and the Bronze Star for “meritorious service in direct support of combat operations from 15 August 1944 to 1 May 1945 in France and Germany.” This crusader for human rights once complained that the most distasteful part of his work was seeing the military government round up many suspicious Italian citizens of low rank while giving special treatment to persons of high rank. However, his service did have its gratifying moments as well. In April 1945, Wendell, then a Master Sergeant, and three others from his unit were sent to Heidelberg to lay plans for the reopening of the famous university located there. The Nazi regime had suppressed academic freedom and had otherwise corrupted Heidelberg University. The counterintelligence report called for a fundamental reorganization based on legal process, academic freedom, and minimal military presence. Only under these conditions could the university function “as a positive influence in the development of a democratic attitude among the German people.” [A report of the 307th Counter Intelligence Corps Detachment, April 9, 1945.] In Wendell’s mind his participation in this noble enterprise was the greatest achievement of his military service.
When Gordon returned to Austin after his discharge he reapplied for a position in the economics department. Of course, his former colleagues were happy to recommend him for assistant professor. The appointment was forwarded to the Board of Regents and the chairman approved the appointment personally. With the sanction of the Southern Association of Colleges still disgracing the University, what else could he do with this man who had proved with deeds his patriotism beyond question? This second career at the University of Texas was never interrupted.

Several years later Ronnie Dugger took Wendell’s course in international economics. In his book, *Our Invaded Universities*, Dugger placed Wendell Gordon in the august company of economics heretics and academic freedom fighters Clarence Ayres, Bob Montgomery, and Everett Hale. Of the shy and unassuming Gordon he wrote, “He taught looking off to one side, or at the blackboard he was using, or down, but there is no surrender in him…..” To his death there was no surrender in him despite causes lost on several fronts.

For almost four decades following his reinstatement, the weather must have seemed very calm in comparison to the storm he had experienced earlier. Maybe his best friends came to know that this man of principle was never content to leave well enough alone; thus, smaller storms, at least, were inevitable.

**Teaching and other departmental activities**

The economics department was *his department* and he did not take his duties lightly. First of all, he did not take his teaching lightly. A modern day department chairman would be blessed to have a colleague like Wendell, who generated Teaching Load Credits (TLCs) far in
excess of what was required. In his early years he taught freshman economics, international economics (undergraduate and graduate), Latin American economic problems, and specialized courses such as the one called “International Cartels.”

He moved more and more to graduate offerings in the middle of his forty-year teaching career. He regularly taught a graduate level two-course sequence in international economics as his main subject. His teaching appears to have been greatly reduced in 1969. The explanation is that he took time off from his teaching and research to prepare himself to teach a much-needed course not offered by the department. He introduced his graduate course in production theory in 1970 and it quickly became one of the best-attended classes in the department. In 1973 he began teaching another course which he thought was badly needed. This was an upper-level undergraduate course in institutional economics. Old timers will recognize this course as one which generations of good students had taken from Clarence Ayres. The retirement of Professor Ayres in 1967 left a huge hole in the undergraduate curriculum of the economics department. Partly because Wendell had been influenced by Ayres and partly just because he was a good citizen, Wendell Gordon acted to plug this hole, and he struggled mightily to maintain the institutionalist tradition at Texas even after his own retirement. After all, the institutionalists had been at the forefront of the fight for academic freedom; and what course could symbolize this effort more than a course in institutional economics in a department that was growing more and more conventional?

In the latter part of his career Wendell took on a still larger teaching role in the department. Some essential undergraduate courses were not being taught for lack of competent teachers. Typically, Wendell volunteered, but he was unwilling to reduce his graduate teaching
load because his graduate courses also needed to be taught. Thus, he solved the department’s problem by adding additional courses to his customary load. In his last year, for example, Wendell taught two undergraduate courses and two graduate courses each semester, and, of the total of eight for the year, seven were separate preparations. Economics was *his department* and he had to do what was necessary to make it go.

Gordon’s return to the University was very fortunate for students and faculty interested in Latin America and for the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) which was established almost exactly at the same time. With his arrival economics became an important orientation in Latin American studies and, in that characteristic, the Institute distinguished itself from other centers for Latin American studies in the United States. His book, *The Economy of Latin America* (and later, *The Political Economy of Latin America*), which was used in his course on Latin American economics, became widely used on other campuses as interest in Latin America grew over time. Thus, his influence in the field of study grew over time as well. In addition to teaching and theses supervision, Gordon was consulted frequently by the editor of what was then the only scholarly journal dealing with Latin American economic conditions, *Inter-American Economic Affairs*.

Gordon served on almost every committee imaginable. He supervised freshman economics for many years and the “Teaching Fellows” who taught many of those classes. Aside from duties as Graduate Adviser, Chairman of Admissions, membership in promotion committees, the Graduate Assembly, the Faculty Council, and Graduate Studies Committee both within the department and university, he found time to serve on the Board of Directors of the Association for Evolutionary Economics, the editorial board of its journal (see below) and the
financial policy committee of The Southwestern Social Science Association. He spent hours preparing lists of books to be purchased by the University of Texas Library. He spent much effort and some of his own money keeping the now defunct economics department supper seminars going. These were monthly meetings at which faculty members and some graduate students presented their research in a civilized environment. He extended his service to the economics department on an informal level. He and his friend Carey Thompson used to walk to the university post office each morning to pick up the departmental mail when Carey was serving as chairman of the department! He had time for all of these activities because, as old timers insist, he came to work at 5:00 in the morning. One would have completely misjudged his boundless energy from his rather frail appearance.

Did all of these activities detract much from his research and additional learning? Not much. As will be seen later, he continued to publish at regular intervals and even managed to undertake a study of the Russian language. Why not? Russian was becoming an important language. So this true scholar added this language to what he once modestly claimed was a “working knowledge” of Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and German. Working knowledge, indeed! To see that he was a man of understatement one need only know that he taught in Spanish at the University of Buenos Aires for six months and another half year at Mexico City College, and had previously attended Universidad de la Habana and Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. He had worked in the U.S. Embassy in Lima in 1941. His pursuit of languages after college study also took him to Université de Paris (Sorbonne). And, don’t forget he spent several years interrogating people in Italy, France, and Germany in his counterintelligence work. But to Wendell, his knowledge of these languages was just “working.”
Despite all of the aforementioned activities he was a tireless supervisor of economics dissertations. His first student was Bill Glade who finished in 1955. Pat Blair was his fourth. Both went on to notable professorial careers at the University of Texas. In all, Professor Gordon supervised thirty-six dissertations. Add to that twenty-five MA theses supervised. No one in the economics department up to this time can claim such a high workload. More than two-thirds of his doctoral students found academic positions at universities and colleges throughout the country. He truly was the workhorse of the department and never complained about it. It was his department.

Another activity in which he was heavily engaged was at the national level. Wendell was an original member and very active in the Association for Evolutionary Economics (AFEE), an association of heterodox economic thinkers who are interested in economic policy and stress the evolutionary aspects of economic behavior. He served on the Editorial Board for *The Journal of Economic Issues* when this publication of AFEE first came to press in 1967 and was president of the association in 1983. He received the Association’s highest honor, the Veblen-Commons Award, in 1985. Anne Mayhew, current editor of *The Journal of Economic Issues*, noted that Wendell “served as advisor, friend and kind critic to editors and officers on many occasions, and above all contributed intellectual substance to what he understood to be the primary goal of AFEE and the *JEI* -- the understanding of real economies and real problems in aid of pragmatic improvement of the condition of mankind.”

He was not always happy. One disappointment in his life, as he was approaching retirement, was the failure of the economics department to hire an institutionalist despite his own relentless effort. His effort included more than the arguing and pleading with many professors
who did not like the way things were going. He did something quite unusual: he put his money where his mouth was. He contributed $125,000 after he retired for a graduate student scholarship, characteristically not named the Wendell Gordon Scholarship, but, rather the Scholarship in Institutional Economics. It has served a number of graduate students well.

**Research**

Although he had a full slate of teaching, dissertation supervision and departmental service, Wendell devoted plenty of time to research. As mentioned earlier, his dissertation, *Expropriation of Foreign Property in Mexico*, was published in 1941. Expropriation, he argued, was a legitimate act by the Mexican government because the oil companies had been operating in a manner that violated the Mexican constitution. This controversial book received a lot of attention. *The Economy of Latin America*, published in 1950, was a pioneering work in Latin American development. It established Gordon’s international reputation in a field of study that has become increasingly important over time. His well-known textbook, *International Trade, People and Ideas*, was published in 1958 and translated into Japanese in 1965. This book was an early attempt to integrate economics and politics in international economic theory, a move quite in vogue today. His Latin American book was updated in 1965 and published as *The Political Economy of Latin America*.

After he took the lead in teaching institutional economics at the University of Texas, he devoted the remaining part of his life to research in that subject. *Economics from an Institutional Point of View* was written for his students in 1973, and it was published by The University of Texas Press in 1980 as *Institutional Economics: the Changing System*. His last two books were
published after he retired from the university. With John Adams he wrote *Economics as Social Science: An Evolutionary Approach* (1989). His last book, *The United Nations at the Crossroads of Reform*, was published in 1994. Because these two books were the culmination of Gordon’s thinking over a long period of scholarship, we comment briefly on each of them.

Economics (as a social science) cannot properly be separated from learning in other fields of the social and natural sciences as, Gordon thought, modern orthodox economics has attempted to separate itself. In his words economics must be evolutionary (dynamic) and holistic if it is to be a useful tool for improving social welfare. Abstraction is an identifying feature of modern economics, but economic activity takes place in societies in which institutional arrangements differ and in most instances serve as impediments to economic progress. Technology is the dynamic force in progress. According to the Veblen/Ayres approach to institutional economics, traditional habits of thought (institutions) could be major impediments to economic development (improvement in social welfare). Yet, one might acknowledge that technology is the engine of progress without thinking that all institutions are impediments to progress. Have not some institutions of modern society been useful in promoting social welfare and, thereby, passed the test of instrumental valuation? Gordon’s answer was “yes,” as he approved of social security, Medicare, Medicaid, public education, and institutions to ban nuclear war (or any kind of war). Any institution that promotes the democratic process must be judged to be useful and valued just as technology is valued as the principal sustaining force in the “life process.” A nation without social safety nets and with a highly unequal income distribution is unlikely to remain democratic and progressive. A social welfare function that places value on these arrangements created
through the democratic process is to be desired and, Gordon would have stated, if that is making a value judgment — considered an anathema to some modern theorists — then so be it.

In Gordon’s view, one modern institution that deserves much more support than it gets is the United Nations. Gordon was motivated to write *The United Nations at the Crossroads of Reform* probably because of his fear of the consequences of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Many social problems exist. Some are best dealt with at local levels; others, at national levels. Many problems, however, are world problems and cannot be handled adequately at levels lower than a world organization, such as the United Nations. The institution of national sovereignty stands in the way of resolution of such problems. Under the reforms proposed by Gordon, the U.N. would be involved not only in the regulation of nuclear energy but also in problems associated with natural disasters, spread of disease, migration, use of the oceans and atmosphere, and more. It would have authority to collect revenues to support these activities. That this book did not receive the attention he had hoped for was a cause of disappointment to Wendell Gordon. It was his last lost cause.

**Some comments**

What kind of man was Wendell Gordon? This question was put to some of his colleagues and former students.

When Steve McDonald joined the faculty in the Department of Economics he shared a “one man” office with Wendell. The lack of space and privacy with students “made for mutual annoyance.” Steve found out quickly that Wendell was “a very thoughtful and considerate man. I might have thoughtlessly annoyed him at times but he never annoyed me.” Steve observed that
Wendell’s “gentlemanly behavior extended to his students…[as] he listened to them with patience and instructed them with quiet authority.”

Hans Jensen remembers Gordon’s lectures as “exceedingly well organized and forcefully delivered.” Gordon was more than a “superb” dissertation supervisor. Hans sent Gordon a draft of his dissertation from Alaska. After correcting and approving it he hired a typist to produce the manuscript, picked up the copies, and distributed them to members of the committee. No wonder Hans could write, “His industriousness was legendary. His integrity and honesty were impeccable. He was a modest person. In spite of the fact that he hesitated to trumpet his own values in print and in the classroom, his work is undergirded and fortified by a never ending advocacy of freedom, decency, civility and peace.”

A former student and co-author, John Adams, called Wendell impish (he was!) and an “indifferent writer.” John commented that Gordon never “assumed” anything; he just “alleged.” One might speculate that Gordon was so annoyed by unrealistic assumptions of much economic theorizing he wanted to make it clear that he belonged to a different school. Adams commented, too, on Wendell’s generosity, decency, and “student friendliness.”

Milton Lower, an Ayres student at the University of Texas, commented that although Ayres may have provided inspiration, “it was Wendell Gordon who for many students provided a disciplined grounding in the specific issues of economic development, …international economics and Latin American economics.”

Eleven of his students presented original papers at a double session of the March 1995 Eastern Economics Association. These papers were to be published in a book dedicated to their mentor. To assure, perhaps, that this book would not be called a Festschrift, Wendell wrote an

Many of his students and friends at the retirement home where he (typically) served on committees, visited the sick and was generally just very useful, will be disappointed that they were not called upon to comment. He touched many lives. Most who knew this scholarly, shy, unassuming, generous man of understatement will also recognize a certain toughness, too. To his death on Christmas Day, 1997, there was no surrender in him.

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Larry R. Faulkner, President
The University of Texas at Austin

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John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of professors Douglas C. Dacy (Chair), Stephen L. McDonald, Daniel C. Morgan, and Niles M. Hansen.
Publications

Books


Economics from an Institutional Viewpoint, Austin: University Stores (University Co-op), 1974.


Articles and Other Contributions


“Simple Underconsumption,” Southwestern Social Science Quarterly, Vol. 31 (June 1950), 243-257.


