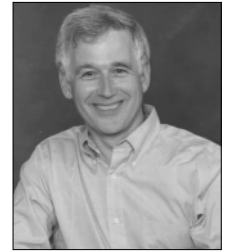


Milton Friedman: A Personal Tribute

BY DAVID R. HENDERSON



So much has been written about Milton Friedman's many contributions to economic research and analysis and to the struggle for economic freedom. My appreciation for him is more personal: He helped change my life.

Like many young people who read and loved Ayn Rand's works, I adopted not just her ideas, but also some of her baggage. The problem was that it was hard for me, at 17, to decide what was baggage and what wasn't. Rand sometimes went overboard but not always. Her denunciations as "evil" of certain people and ideas were justified: Hitler and Nazism and Stalin and communism come to mind. But what about my great Aunt Ruby, one of the neatest old people I knew? Was she evil for voting for the New Democratic Party, Canada's socialist party? For a while I thought so. I don't think that distorted thinking would have lasted long had I never heard of Milton Friedman. But Friedman hastened my transition.

In the summer of 1968 I was paging through *Newsweek* and noticed a column titled, "The Public Be Damned." At the top was a grinning bald guy with glasses named Milton Friedman. I recognized the statement as one that an Ayn Rand hero had used in *Atlas Shrugged*, and I started reading. The column was both disappointing and delightful. Disappointing because Friedman didn't denounce the public; delightful because he gave a logical clear case for allowing competition with the Post Office and turned the statement on its head: "The public be damned" was not an attitude businessmen could afford to have, but was the attitude that the Post Office had. Who was this guy?

I hastened to find out. Realizing that this must be a regular column, I went to my university's library and started working my way backward through his columns,

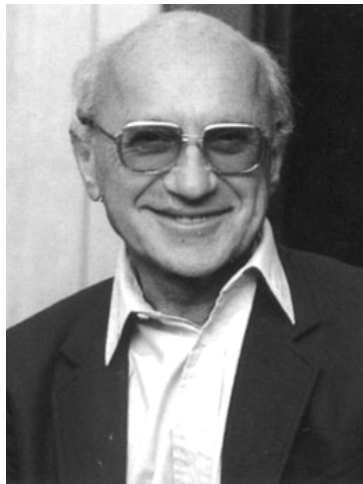
quickly figuring out that I could skip every two—those by economists named Paul Samuelson and Henry Wallich. Only months later did I learn that he had written a book, *Capitalism and Freedom*.

Here's how *Capitalism and Freedom* begins:

In a much quoted passage in his inaugural address, President Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." It is a striking sign of the temper of our times that the controversy about this passage centered on its

origin and not on its content. Neither half of the statement expresses a relation between the citizen and his government that is worthy of the ideals of free men in a free society. The paternalistic "what your country can do for you" implies that the government is the patron, the citizen the ward, a view that is at odds with the free man's belief in his own responsibility for his own destiny. The organismic, "what you can do for your country" implies that the government is the master or the deity, the citizen, the servant or the votary. To the free man, the country is the collection of individ-

uals who compose it, not something over and above them. He is proud of a common heritage and loyal to common traditions. But he regards government as a means, an instrumentality, neither a grantor of favors and gifts, nor a master or god to be blindly worshipped and served.



Milton Friedman (1912–2006)

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Wow! Remember that Friedman wrote this in 1962, when the worship of Kennedy, in the United States and in Canada, where I lived, was close to its pre-assassination peak. This guy, I thought, has a lot of guts. And he said it so well.

I read on. I loved the whole book, although I had a few disagreements—which I still have—that I won't get into here. There were so many good sections. One of my favorites was his step-by-step analysis of how the American Medical Association had prevailed on the government to restrict the supply of doctors and how we could have quality assurance without licensing of doctors. I found it so persuasive that I followed my mother around our small apartment, reading it at her.

All that year I went to the magazine stand every three weeks to get Friedman's latest column. I stood there reading it because I had budgeted so tightly for college that buying it was a luxury. The next summer I worked in a mine in northern Canada to earn money for my last year of college. I made a lot of overtime money and felt flush enough to actually buy an occasional *Newsweek*. So one weekend, when I calculated that Friedman's latest column would be on the stands, I hitchhiked 40 miles from my mining camp to Thompson, Manitoba, to buy the latest copy. Imagine my disappointment when I opened the *Newsweek* and saw that the article was by Wallich. *Newsweek* must have had a different summer rotation.

A few times in the 1960s I saw Friedman on TV, and I read everything about him I could find. This guy seemed special. Although he was a good writer, Ayn Rand was better and Murray Rothbard was at least as good. So that wasn't it. What was it?

Niceness Underrated

He was nice; and he didn't isolate himself among those who agreed with him but, instead, stepped out in the bigger world. I know that niceness doesn't mean much to many people who spend their lives steeped in ideas, but it meant a lot to me. I had already

sensed, from reading and reading about Rand and Rothbard, that there seemed to be a package deal in libertarianism: to hold the idea of freedom in the world, one needed to attack those who disagreed and surround oneself with those who agreed. I didn't want to be that way. I had always wanted to be nice and, except for the few months after I read *The Fountainhead*, when I announced to my mother that I would no longer go to the supermarket for her because that would be self-sacrifice, I *was* nice.

I also wanted to avoid the kind of isolation from intellectual and generational equals that Rand and Rothbard had chosen, and to be in the bigger world. I later saw, when watching Friedman's TV series *Free to Choose* in 1980, just how well Friedman did at disagreeing without being disagreeable. He welcomed all comers, no matter how they disagreed, and he never hit below the belt. I was becoming this way too, but he helped me get there faster.

None of this is to say that Friedman was a cream puff who would never speak truth to power. Two of my three favorite stories from his and Rose Friedman's book *Two Lucky People* illustrate that. The first was his challenging General William Westmoreland when Westmoreland, who favored the draft, referred to volunteers as mercenaries. Friedman countered that if Westmoreland insisted on calling volunteers "mercenaries," Friedman would insist on calling draftees "slaves." Many people in recent months have repeated this story and I quote the story at length in my article, "Milton Friedman: A Tribute" (at <http://antiwar.com/henderson/?articleid=10042>).

The second is told less often but is even more impressive. In September 1971 Friedman and his former University of Chicago colleague George Shultz, then the administrator of President Nixon's price controls, had a discussion with Nixon in the Oval Office. As Friedman was about to leave, Nixon said the price controls would be ended soon, adding, "Don't blame George for this monstrosity." Friedman answered, "I don't blame George. I blame you, Mr. President." 