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## **John Elliott: In Memory of a Classic Scholar**

Richard H. Day *University of Southern California*

*This tribute to John Elliott was given at a memorial service held at the University of Southern California in 2002.*

At times like this, one thinks of John Donne's memorable lines.

No man is an island, entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were . . . . Any man's death diminishes me . . . .

When John Elliott passed away several months ago, we were diminished. When each of us passes on to the other side, the world we leave will be diminished. Though each of us will have given something that adds to the main, each of us will have had more to give—if only our meager energies and brief hours allowed it. We know that John had much more to give and we are diminished by his passing.

Nonetheless, while we mourn that loss, we celebrate what he gave.

And he gave a lot.

Others will speak here of John's family life, of his contribution to university teaching, administration, and civic affairs. In each of these areas John gave much to many. He is justly remembered and honored because of those contributions. I want to speak of two other aspects of John's life that inspire us now, and that can reverberate through us and on to those who come after us. These are his scholarship and his visible character.

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In his academic work John was both a classic scholar and a scholar of the Classics. By a “classic scholar” I mean one who studies the texts, discerns, absorbs, distills, and interprets their meaning so as to enhance the ability of others to comprehend work that they might not otherwise grasp or appreciate. By a “scholar of the Classics” I mean one whose scholarship is addressed to those great works of such towering excellence that they are remembered generation after generation, century after century.

Indeed, a work becomes a classic in part because of the work of scholars, and in some cases, primarily because of them. A great work may be subtle, complex, abstruse, comprehensive, adding up to such a great intellectual challenge that entire lives of scholarship are devoted to a single work—one thinks in literature of James Joyce, in philosophy of Immanuel Kant, or in economics of Adam Smith or Karl Marx. All of these have attracted the concentrated attention of scholars. Much is owed to the classic scholar who masters these great works, details their essence, and passes that knowledge on to successive generations.

John’s work as a scholar was devoted in part to this task. He studies the economic classics, especially Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Joseph Schumpeter, John Maynard Keynes, and he continued to inspire students with the insights of the great thinkers throughout his career. He was good at it. Students were in awe of his erudition and his ability to articulate such complex ideas. Indeed, I often kidded John that he was the only person I knew, or had ever known, who could actually think and speak in Churchillian prose.

The culture of a given time is based on and grows out of the accumulated knowledge of the past. Much of it is passed on through the written word. Without the work of the classic scholar, however, much of it is lost forever. Due to the competing demands of mathematical and

econometric theory, it has been increasingly difficult to find a place in the economics curriculum and faculty for the study of the Classics. We have been lucky at USC—to have been one of the few (as well as one of the best) places where that study continued to exist throughout John’s career. Indeed, had our department as a whole been ranked by our peers as highly as scholars in the History of Economic Thought ranked that specialty, our department would have placed in the top 10. John was single-handedly responsible for that. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to replace him. Perhaps it will be enough if we are inspired to enrich our own teaching and our own work with the insights that are inherited from the great minds of the past.

Even more than in his scholarship, however, our memory of John’s character will continue to inspire our own thoughts and actions. I came to USC a quarter century ago. John had already contracted the illness that would be his increasingly heavy and debilitating burden. As I observed John through the succeeding years, my respect and admiration grew. With each passing year his physical strength atrophied, his pace through the halls slowed until one could see that each step was an effort to overcome the mounting pain, each step a triumph of the will. Through this agonizing battle I never heard John complain, never failed to receive a friendly and pleasant greeting, never heard a hint that he wished to give up the good work of his life.

There were other commendable attributes of John’s character, but these especially command our respect and admiration: his dedication to the noble task of classic scholarship, his unflagging courage in the face of mounting adversity, and his steadfast commitment to the life that would soon be taken from him. For these attributes we celebrate John Elliott’s life and give thanks that people like John have lived amongst us.

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Contact Information:

Richard H. Day  
Professor of Economics  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90089  
Email: [rday@usc.edu](mailto:rday@usc.edu)

## **THE CRISIS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

Warren J. Samuels *Michigan State University*

### ***I. Varied Accounts of the Past***

The United States is in a crisis of immense proportions in its relations to the rest of the world, which is to say in its foreign policy. In part, the crisis has been building for years; in part it has been thrust upon us; and in part it is the result of decisions made by the administration of George W. Bush. To comprehend the nature of the crisis, we must consider historical U.S. foreign policy.

The United States, it was once felt by many, could have a different foreign policy when isolated by two oceans in comparison to the later period when modern technology destroyed its isolation. Foreign policy is thus a function of geography modified by technology.

The United States had a further choice, commencing some time after the first third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It could live up to its self-image as a liberal constitutional democracy and follow a foreign policy of live and let live, in both respects serving as a role model for the rest of the world. Or, like the monarchical dynasties of the past and other regimes of more recent times, it could pursue an aggressive foreign policy in pursuit of what it considered its interests, engendering enmity in various quarters.

The United States has done both.

In the first category, it has preferred isolationism, reluctantly joining the two World Wars in defense of its autonomy and the idea of liberal social democracy.

In the second category, it increasingly either engaged in the practices of conventional imperialism, often at the behest of entrepreneurial interests, or flexed and deployed its muscle in pursuit of national interests either on its own initiative or in response to threats from and capabilities of other countries.

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