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Public Choice's Homeric Hero

Gordon Tullock (1922–2014)

— ◆ —

MICHAEL MUNGER

If you knew Gordon Tullock well, you liked him immensely. To be sure, there were those who found Tullock difficult, and difficult he sometimes was. You have to understand: Gordon, like some Homeric hero in the *Iliad*, devoted his life to *contest*.

The contests he chose were not physical. Gordon was slight and blinked myopically at the world. But the contest of ideas and contestation over ideas delighted him so much that just having lunch with him could be exhausting. No subject, no premise, and no conclusion was safe. Sometime it was hard to tell if he was serious or just trolling you as a joke. I'm not sure he himself always knew. He learned by arguing. He liked to be right—and one of his most annoying traits was that he *usually* was right—but he liked even more to be wrong. Because if he was shown to be wrong, he had learned something. And Gordon learned obsessively, about everything. His childlike enthusiasm for learning so charmed those of us who glimpsed it that it was easy to laugh at the jibes and insults that for Gordon were signs of affection.

Let me offer two anecdotes as illustrations of what life around Gordon was like. The first centers on a classroom experience, the second on a Public Choice Society meeting.

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Many students would say that Gordon simply did not prepare for class and that he just started an argument to hide that fact. That's not only wrong, but grossly wrong, a misunderstanding of Gordon's whole approach. I would say that Gordon had prepared for class his whole life, for forty years, by the time he started teaching at Virginia in 1962. When he came into class, he wasn't just prepared; he was *armed* for *contest*. Either he would teach by persuading students to share his views, or he would learn by finding out that one or more of his views was wrong.

I got a few chances to see him in action. After observing one class, when I was visiting at George Mason in the 1980s, I heard a student talking excitedly to a group of faculty in the hallway. "Dr. Tullock is mean to all the other students, but he's always nice to me. He doesn't correct me or ask me questions." I stared at the others, and they all shook their heads: "No! You're doomed! If he's nice to you, he thinks you aren't worth fighting with. You have to go back and challenge him!" Within two weeks, the student reported back that Gordon was now insulting and berating her on a regular basis. Disaster averted.

The second incident was in San Antonio in 2008 at the Public Choice Society meeting. It was, I believe, the last time I saw Gordon in person, though I later sent him some letters. He wasn't getting around very well, and his once strong voice had lost both its volume and its depth.

He walked up to me and stared at me partly sideways through his large glasses. "I don't think you make sense."

OK, here we go. "Why, Gordon? Why don't I make sense this time?"

"Because you have long hair." (It's true. I did.) "So you must be a leftist. But you are carrying an umbrella." (True again.) "So you must be a conservative. So I can't figure you out."

A crowd had gathered by this time, so I was trying to escape. "Yeah, well, Gordon, maybe I'm just complicated!"

Gordon turned to leave but said loudly in a final, pitying voice, the way you might talk to a wayward child: "No, no, no: I've read your work. You are incoherent." Then he walked away, shaking his head with exaggerated pity. We, as the British say, fell about.

A Life of Learning, Not of Degrees

Gordon claimed he was "the world's only independent scholar." That wasn't true; there were and are many independent scholars. But Gordon may well have been the world's *most* independent scholar. Charles Rowley put it this way in his introduction to *The Selected Works of Gordon Tullock*: "Gordon Tullock is an economist by nature rather than by training. He attended a one-semester course in economics for law students given by Henry Simons at the University of Chicago, but is otherwise self-taught. For most budding economists, such a background would be a handicap. In Tullock's case, arguably it has proved to be an enormous advantage, enabling him to deploy his formidable intellect in a truly entrepreneurial manner" (2004b, xii).

Tullock was born in 1922 in Rockford, Illinois. In 1940 at the age of eighteen, he entered the University of Chicago in a combined B.A./J.D. program that was supposed to take five years. In early 1943, he enrolled in his first (and last!) economics class, taught by Henry Calvert Simons. But later in 1943, before formally finishing the class, he was drafted into the army and was assigned as a rifleman to the Ninth Infantry Division (the “Old Reliables”). He landed at Normandy on June 13, 1944, and was immediately thrust into combat. He claimed that he did eventually cross the Rhine in a truck, though, he said, “I slept through the crossing” (qtd. in Rowley 2004a, 111).¹ Tullock typically minimized or even mocked his wartime service in later years, but it cannot have left him unchanged. After war, academic contests never held any fear for him.

He returned to Chicago early in 1946 and finished the requirements for the J.D. He had completed the requirements for the B.A., but because it cost five dollars to file for the degree, he gave it a miss. So he showed his independence as a scholar—not finishing the only economics course he ever registered for and then not finishing the baccalaureate degree that the course was no part of.

Gordon became a practicing attorney, a fact that is by itself quite amusing to those of us who knew him later. He quickly won his first case, though by rights he should have lost (in fact, a senior partner in the firm had suggested they should settle!). Then a few months later he lost a case he should have won easily, receiving a rebuke from the court for his poor performance (Brady and Tollison 1994, 2).

Fortunately for academic economics and public-choice theory (and probably fortunately for the litigious citizens of Chicago), Gordon learned to read and write a little Chinese, took the Foreign Service Exam, and passed it on the first try. He was assigned to Tientsin, China, in 1947, meaning that—in a coincidence worthy of Forrest Gump—he was physically present for the Communist takeover in 1948.

The Foreign Service assigned him to do advanced study in Chinese back in the United States, after which he returned to China and later worked also in Korea and for the intelligence service in Washington. He resigned from the Foreign Service in 1956 and then knocked around, working several jobs. But he was also working as an independent scholar even at this early date, publishing papers in the *Journal of Political Economy* and the *American Economic Review* before he ever had an academic appointment (see Campbell and Tullock 1954, 1957).

But then he got an academic appointment, a one-year postdoc (or in Tullock's case, a nondoc) at the Thomas Jefferson Center at the University of Virginia in fall 1958. The Jefferson Center, of course, had been founded by Tullock's famous (later) collaborator James Buchanan, along with Warren Nutter, in an attempt to reconnect economics with its roots in moral philosophy, so this first contest between Tullock and academic economics proved very fruitful for all concerned. He moved to the

1. For more personal material about Tullock, see Brady and Tollison 1991; Rowley 2004a, 2004b; and Buchanan 2007.

University of South Carolina and published a flurry of important papers before returning to the University of Virginia in February 1962, just before the University of Michigan Press published *The Calculus of Consent* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962), one of the ur-texts of the public-choice movement.

And so began one of two great periods of intellectual productivity and ferment in Tullock's life. In the years between 1962 and 1967, Tullock authored or coauthored more than a dozen journal articles, some of which have been seminal (e.g., Tullock 1967a, 1967b) in several fields. But it was also a sad and difficult time for him because the university community turned against the Jefferson Center. In some ways, this reaction was due simply to ideology—namely, Buchanan, Nutter, Tullock, and others' commitment to the free market. But it was also because Tullock himself provoked contests and went out of his way to look for contests. He would attend seminars *in other departments* and then either interrupt the speaker or ask the first question after the talk, and he would persist in pressing his claims until he realized he was wrong (rare) or the speaker lost his temper (much more often).

The result was an injustice by any standard. The University of Virginia refused to promote Tullock to full professor and organized committees charged with punitive investigations to look at hiring, spending, and research practices at the Jefferson Center. It was an obvious witch hunt in which two future Nobelists (James Buchanan and Ronald Coase) were driven out by nothing other than bigotry.

Tullock moved to Rice, but only for a year. I always think of the next year, 1968, as like the beginning of the movie *Blues Brothers*, when Jake and Elwood travel to dives around Chicago and say, "We're getting the band back together!" because that is what happened at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) in Blacksburg, Virginia. Buchanan was called back (a year later) from the University of California at Los Angeles after Charles J. Goetz collaborated with Tullock to create the Center for Study of Public Choice at VPI. And here began the second period of frenzied activity for Tullock, in this case influenced by Buchanan's premonition that the world was on the verge of anarchy and by "Georgia redneck" (in Buchanan's words) Winston Bush's technical abilities as a Washington University-trained microtheorist (Buchanan 2007). The result was a book that Tullock edited (1972b) and a provocative essay that he wrote (Tullock 1972a).

By this time, Tullock was established, and the "contest" norm for seminars was in full swing. If anyone visited Blacksburg to give a talk, it was quite likely that the speaker would learn a great deal, sometimes more than he or she desired to learn, about the problems and failings of his or her argument. Tullock's intellectual activities ranged from editing the journal *Public Choice* (originally *Papers in Non-market Decision-Making*) for twenty-five years to serving as president of the Public Choice Society (1965), the Southern Economic Association (1980), the Western Economic Association (1995), and the International Atlantic Economic Society (1998) and to teaching and working in law, public administration, and military history.

His most important achievements, as I see it, are the establishment of three fields of study that are today unimaginable without his contributions: (1) analysis of non-market institutions ranging from bureaucratic agencies to military discipline; (2) rent seeking and contests, including the “Tullock Contest”; and (3) bioeconomics. His contributions in these areas are so broad and so numerous that I can’t begin to review them here, but it is plausible to argue that any one of these contributions could have served as the justification for serious consideration—at least—for a Nobel Prize.

Final Words

For many years, Gordon lived in Arlington, although he worked in Fairfax. The drive was considerable, despite being “against traffic” given the patterns of D.C.-area commuting. He loved his home in Arlington, which was on the heights above the military cemetery, mostly so he could say (he never tired of saying it and then slapping his knee), “From my house, I can look down on government!”

Tullock’s contributions were more than the corpus of his academic work, though that influence is enormous. He has more than fourteen thousand citations in many fields in Google Scholar. Not surprisingly, given my description of his approach to life, one of his most-cited works (more than two thousand citations even though this essay was published in an edited book) created a concept now called the “Tullock Contest” as a way of understanding “efficient rent seeking” (Tullock 1980).²

Such a contest really does make sense to those of us who were fond of him because what got Gordon up in the morning was his zest for encounters with error. You always learned something from Gordon because every conversation was a contest. Either you learned some obscure fact that he knew, or he would gleefully prove false some fact you thought was obviously true.

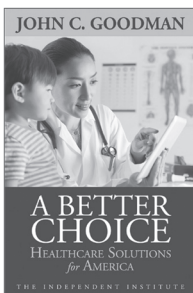
In the end, I am reminded of Hector’s last words when he resolved to go meet Achilles in the Trojan War: “My doom has come upon me; let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter” (*Iliad* II.22.232). We will be telling of Gordon’s great works for a long time.

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2. A Tullock “contest success function” is the ratio of $R_1/(R_1 + R_2)$, where the R_i are expenditures of effort, resources, or campaign funds. “Efficient” rent seeking would then require that each participant in the contest spend no more than the expected value of the benefit or rent, where the contest success function serves as an endogenous probability of success.

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