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REFLECTIONS

Robert Higgs

A Personal and Professional Appreciation

— ◆ —

DAVID J. THEROUX

In 1996, Robert Higgs and I launched *The Independent Review*. We sought to create an interdisciplinary source of serious analysis challenging political correctness and the pervasive paradigms of positivism, scientism, reductionism, historicism, nihilism, militarism, dehumanization, collectivism, and statism—in short, a journal devoted to political economy, the ideas and institutions of liberty, and the critical analysis of government policy. As Bob explained in the “Editor’s Welcome” in the journal’s first issue,

Writing that would interest only economists or only philosophers or only historians—indeed work that would interest only the practitioners of any academically defined scientific or humanistic specialty—does not appear in this journal. Rather, it features writing that crosses the boundaries of a variety of disciplines, including all the social sciences, philosophy, history, law, and related fields. . . . Highly formal and technically challenging work does not appear in *The Independent Review*. . . . [W]hatever the merits of esoteric forms of communication in the various disciplines, my aims as editor dictate that the common language of this journal, as a rule, must be English. I reject the work of writers who cannot express their ideas clearly. Those who write with vigor, wit, and flair will be received with

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open arms. . . . But certain types of analysis require more than words. Authors who make appropriate use of mathematical or statistical analysis, as opposed to just showing off, will find these pages accessible to them. . . . *The Independent Review* provides an outlet for writers engaged in the development and extension of [the] classic tradition. However, I do not exclude papers written from alternative perspectives. Indeed, I hope to feature illuminating debates. In any event, many questions remain open; no one has all the answers. Normative as well as positive analyses will find a place here, and no attempt will be made to avoid the hard questions. On the contrary. (Higgs 1996, 5–7)

For seventeen years, Bob served as editor, overseeing all aspects of the content of the journal, infusing the journal with consistently high standards of content and readability, and ultimately producing sixty-six 160-page, on-time issues with 922 articles, reviews, and special features, including his ever-popular and insightful column “Etceteras.” Working with an excellent group of scholars, Bob edited every issue carefully and beautifully both for scholarly rigor and readability, a feature seldom evident in other journals. The privilege I have had of working with Bob goes back much earlier, however, to 1983, when the economist M. Bruce Johnson approached me with a proposal from Bob to complete a book manuscript on the political economy of government power and growth, entitled “Crisis and Leviathan.” Bruce and I were then at the helm of the Pacific Research Institute (PRI), which I had been hired to organize and where I served as president and Bruce as research director. Both of us could see the unique merit in Bob’s project. Despite my concerted efforts to attract modest funding for the project to enable Bob to spend a summer completing the manuscript, however, I could raise no interest from grant makers, who believed that, “with the election of Ronald Reagan, the battle of ideas has been won, and it is now time to govern.”

About to give up, I happened to be speaking with the economist and PRI Advisory Board member Murray Rothbard and mentioned my disappointing efforts. Murray immediately noted that he knew of Bob’s work and urged me to send a proposal to him that he could submit at the upcoming board meeting of the Center for Libertarian Studies. Several weeks later Murray phoned me the good news that the center had approved a grant of \$10,000 through its Ludwig von Mises Fellowships program, which was funded by the Sarah Scaife Foundation. Bob was able to complete the manuscript, I arranged for its publication through Oxford University Press, and we thus set a course of working together.

Murray’s involvement with the project also included his being a peer reviewer of the manuscript. As Bob has noted,

Murray’s review went far beyond what one might have expected, taking the form of a letter to Pacific’s Greg Christainsen, dated May 27, 1985. . . . Over the years, I have seen a lot of reports by referees and reviewers, but never

anything that came close to this remarkable epistle. The [twenty-six-page] letter began with two pages of praise for my manuscript. Had I stopped reading after the first two pages, I might have considered myself a certified damned fine scholar. Any such temptation, however, was decisively punctured by the next 24 pages. . . a minutely detailed yet broad-ranging critique, along with scores of suggestions for what needed to be added to my text and what additional books, articles, and dissertations I needed to read to correct my misapprehensions and flesh out my knowledge. . . . I can still recall the deflated feeling I had after finishing the letter. I knew that I did not have sufficient life expectancy to accomplish what Murray had indicated needed to be done. . . . Never before had I been shown my inadequacies as a scholar in such a well-documented way—after all, even the pathetic manuscript Murray was flogging had taken me five years to draft and rested to some extent on twenty years of study and research. . . . I made a number of revisions of my text and my footnotes along the lines suggested in Murray’s letter. . . [but] was not able to follow up on the great majority of his suggestions, and I have no doubt that my book was the worse for that inability. All I can say in my own defense is that the book, such as it is, did get finished and published in my lifetime. And my luck held. When Murray reviewed the book for *Liberty* magazine in 1987, he praised it extravagantly, breathing not a word about the shortcomings he had spent 24 pages detailing in a private communication written mainly for my benefit. (Higgs 2007a)

By early 1986, Bruce Johnson and I had left PRI to organize the Independent Institute, and when Bruce retired, Bob agreed to serve as research director, a post he held until 1994. Bob then became senior fellow in political economy and in 1995 founding editor of *The Independent Review*. By that time, he had already firmly established himself as a respected scholar in economics and economic history, and we had published his pioneering, collected volume *Arms, Politics, and the Economy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (1990), which reflected his deepening interest in the political economy of the U.S. defense complex.

From an early age, Bob acquired a strong sense of personal integrity, work ethic, moral principles, and devotion to excellence in the pursuit of truth, and these exceptional traits have marked his career. He was born in 1944 in Muskogee County, Oklahoma, to William Jess and Doris Geraldine Higgs, hard-working, tenant farmers living in a shack with no electricity. His family moved to Fresno, California, in 1951, where they initially lived in an agricultural labor camp. Bob’s parents greatly influenced him. He has noted, “Anyone who knows me well also knows that I revere my father. . . the most important man in my life, the kind of man who might well inspire others, as he inspired me” (Higgs 2011). Having only a minimal grade-school education, his father was “thrust at a tender age into the position of the family farm’s

chief worker by the death of his father and later by the death of his stepfather [and so] lived in the world of work. And he was very good at working: when I was growing up, I never knew him to miss a day of work” (Higgs 2009b). About his mother, Bob similarly noted:

I have come to believe that in an extremely important regard she influenced me in exactly the same way that my dad influenced me—which is to say, she gave me an appreciation of the joy of working, and of doing one’s work readily and well, rather than grudgingly and carelessly. Most important, perhaps, mom set a good example: she was a hard worker in her own daily life. . . . Cooking, cleaning, and washing, however, hardly composed the whole of her work. As a young woman, she had “felt the call” to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and by the time I was four or five years old, she had become the pastor of a backwoods Pentecostal church somewhere beyond McAlester, Oklahoma, the town near which we lived at the time. Later, after we moved to California in 1951, she was again a pastor at several different churches in succession. (Higgs 2011)

Becoming a model scholar was natural for Bob as someone gifted with a great mind, literary skills, careful attention to detail, courage, humility, and imagination. On this journey, he spent his freshman college year at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, then transferred to San Francisco State College, where he received his B.A. Cum Laude (economics) with All-College Academic Honors and the Most Outstanding Student in Economics Award in 1965. He went on to graduate school for a year at the University of California at Santa Barbara and then transferred to Johns Hopkins University, where in 1968 he received his Ph.D. with distinction (political economy) and Phi Beta Kappa. Economist and future economics Nobel laureate Douglass C. North immediately recruited him to join the economics faculty at the University of Washington (Fishback 2007, viii).

In 1983, Bob became the first William E. Simon Professor of Political Economy at Lafayette College, and in 1989 he returned to Washington state as the Thomas F. Glead Professor of Economics in the Albers School of Business and Economics at Seattle University. Since 1994, he has worked with the Independent Institute.

In the course of his career, Bob has authored nine books, edited six, written more than one hundred articles and reviews for scholarly journals, and contributed essays to twenty-five collected volumes. But his output stretches even farther, including six hundred articles in newspapers, magazines, and blogs; interviews on Fox, NPR, NBC, ABC, C-SPAN, CBN, CNBC, and elsewhere; and lectures at more than one hundred colleges and universities as well as dozens of professional academic organizations.

Bob’s presentations to students at the Independent Institute’s Challenge of Liberty Summer Seminars and elsewhere have won him a devoted following as he

has taught and inspired young people based on his vast reading and knowledge, incisive analysis, personal warmth, and endearing wit (see, for instance, Higgs 2012c).

Of this vast output, his most salient work includes his scholarly volume *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865–1914* ([1977] 2008), on the black experience in market competition versus government coercion after the Civil War, which was nominated in 1977 for the Beveridge Award from the American Historical Association, and his trilogy that begins with *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* ([1987] 2012a). The influential economist Price Fishback, formerly one of Bob’s students, correctly notes in the festschrift he edited in Bob’s honor, “In *Crisis and Leviathan* he documents a ‘ratchet effect’ in the scope of government authority associated with the major crises of the twentieth century, the world wars and the Great Depression” (2007, viii).

When the horrific attacks occurred on September 11, 2001, Bob’s analysis in *Crisis and Leviathan* formed the basis for the Independent Institute’s immediate warnings (see Independent Institute 2001) and subsequent critique of the U.S. government’s “war on terror” (see Lustick 2008), which unleashed massive new powers, spending, and debt; trampled civil and economic liberties; launched invasive wars and occupations now lasting more than ten years; and increased the size of the federal government by 50 percent. The predictions we made were initially attacked and dismissed, but each and every warning has sadly been proven correct, leading directly to the gigantic, dangerous, and indeed unimaginable growth in federal powers visible today. Bob was there to chronicle these developments in numerous articles in *The Independent Review* and elsewhere, some of which formed the basis for his book *Resurgence of the Warfare State: The Crisis since 9/11* (2005).

The second volume in his trilogy is *Depression, War, and Cold War: Challenging the Myths of Conflict and Prosperity* ([2006] 2009a), on how the U.S. government generated, prolonged, and deepened the Great Depression by creating massive uncertainty regarding the rule of law and a virtual shutdown of capital markets as well as on how economic recovery did not occur until *after* World War II and the abandonment of New Deal measures.¹

The third volume, *Neither Liberty nor Safety: Fear, Ideology, and the Growth of Government* (2007b), illustrates the false trade-off between freedom and security by showing how the U.S. government’s economic and military interventions reduced Americans’ civil and economic liberties, prosperity, and genuine security in the twentieth century. Bob illuminates not only many underappreciated aspects of the Great Depression, the two world wars, and the postwar era, but also the government’s manipulation of public opinion and the role that ideologies play in influencing political outcomes and economic performance.

1. The keystone chapter for this volume first appeared in *The Independent Review* (Higgs 1997).

My wife, Mary, has joined me in tremendous admiration of Bob's work and principled commitment to the cause of liberty, especially during the tumultuous past decade. We were thus overwhelmed and delighted when we saw that Bob's most recent book, *Delusions of Power: New Explorations of the State, War, and Economy* (2012b), bears a dedication to the two of us.

In the course of his career, Bob has also completed seminal work on such issues as health care, regulation of drugs and devices, defense procurement and spending, natural resources and the environment (including fisheries, mining, and land use), political theory, law and economics, U.S. economic history, urban development, race discrimination, property rights, agriculture, immigration, war and peace, economic development, government spending and debt, political and intellectual culture and ideology, welfare and entitlements, socialism and government central planning, money and banking, presidential power, civil liberties, the Great Depression, the modern American wars (World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the war on terror), conscription, moral ethics, scientific methodology, intellectual history, theology, unemployment and labor markets, totalitarianism, and more.

In his contributions to the Independent Institute's blog *The Beacon*, he has further delighted readers by interspersing timely economic analyses with such wide-ranging, creative postings as political commentary, haiku, song lyrics, prayers, satire, and biographies. At weekly staff meetings, he also never failed to enliven the discussion with his self-disparaging wit.

Of the many awards Bob has received,² in 2011 the Independent Institute was privileged to express a small token of admiration and gratitude by presenting him with our Alexis de Tocqueville Award at the institute's twenty-fifth anniversary dinner.³ Bob's stunning acceptance presentation was a brilliant, inspiring, and heartfelt defense of liberty.⁴

In *Government and the American Economy*, Price Fishback describes Bob as "many things to each of us: a close friend, a mentor, a teacher, and a student" (2007, v). I would add that Robert Higgs is a true treasure on every level, and my colleagues and I at the Independent Institute are deeply privileged to have the opportunity to work with him. We look forward to his expanding influence, as he moves to the position of *The Independent Review's* Editor at Large and hands the editorship off to Christopher Coyne, Michael Munger and Robert Whaples.

2. Bob has also been placed on the Templeton Foundation's Honor Roll for Colleges and Universities (1989) and has achieved the following awards. Distinguished Scholar Award, Association of Private Enterprise Education (1993); Friedrich von Wieser Memorial Prize for Excellence in Economic Education, Prague Conference on Political Economy (2006); Thomas S. Szasz Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Cause of Civil Liberties, Center for Independent Thought (2006); Gary G. Schlarbaum Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Liberty in the Tradition of Ludwig von Mises, Ludwig von Mises Institute (2007); and Doctor en Ciencias Sociales (*honoris causa*), Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala (2011).

3. For more on this dinner, see Independent Institute 2011. We also honored Nobel laureates Lech Wałęsa and Mario Vargas Llosa at this dinner.

4. For a video of Bob's presentation, go to <http://www.independent.org/multimedia/detail.asp?m=196>.

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