
The Wisdom of David J. Theroux (1949–2022)

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BY ROBERT M. WHAPLES

Like you, I was deeply saddened to learn of David Theroux’s death on April 23, 2022. It is likely that many readers of *The Independent Review* knew Theroux—founder and long-time president of the Independent Institute—far longer and far better than I did.

I was surprised when David called me in June of 2012 and asked me if I was interested in considering an editorial role with *The Independent Review*. At that point I had published an article and a book review in *TIR* and did not know him well—having met him only once. However, after agreeing to take the position, I soon learned that David was a genuinely wise man.

David grew up mainly in suburban New York and earned three degrees from the University of California at Berkeley (two bachelor’s degrees and a master’s, in engineering and mathematics), followed by an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago. He left graduate school early to become founding Vice President and Director of Academic Affairs for the Cato Institute (then in San Francisco), following which he became the founding President of the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy. In 1986 he launched the Independent Institute. Although he started it on a shoe-string budget out of his basement in Oakland, under his leadership, the Institute flourished. Never as large as giants like the American Enterprise Institute, Brookings Institution, Heritage Foundation, or Cato, the Independent Institute clearly punched above its weight under David’s leadership. One rating selected it as the thirtieth most influential think tank in the U.S. in 2021.¹

1. See <https://thebestschools.org/magazine/most-influential-think-tanks/>.

This success rested largely upon David's qualities as an intellectual entrepreneur—with emphasis on *both* these terms. David was a serious intellectual and an enterprising organizer. His entrepreneurship is well known—you can see it in the institutions he built, the teams he pulled together, and the projects they brought to fruition—so I will focus mainly on his ideas.²

David's breadth of knowledge was simply remarkable. I learned this when I spoke with him in person, during bi-weekly conference calls, and in our numerous emails (I count over 1100 emails in the past decade). He was exceptionally well versed in all the ideas and thinkers related to liberty—and knew a great deal about the enemies of liberty, as well. He could quickly and ably explain ideas from economists like Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, and Ludwig von Mises or philosophers like John Locke, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick—*adding value to them as a seasoned college professor would*. In the middle of a discussion, he would cite arguments and findings of more obscure thinkers—an article published thirty years ago, which no one else remembered or something published recently by a newly-minted scholar. He was well read in economic subfields from natural resources to education to health policy—but was ultimately a generalist fluent in the canon of Western ideas and literature, ever mindful and appreciative of the intellectual and cultural heritage of mankind. I found the breadth of his knowledge and understanding daunting at times.

As I learned, David's ideas in all these fields rested on the core belief that mankind is made for self-government. After all, human beings are created in the image of God and are hard-wired with the objective moral ideas knowable to all mankind (the natural law) and the ability to reason. Therefore, people must be free to pursue what is good and must act as responsible centers of moral decision-making while developing their own practical judgment. This is what it means to be human. Accordingly, David was a determined foe of Leviathan, or any imposed, centralized “solution.” He knew that the overweening state would seek to take people's resources and their liberties but—more importantly—it would try to crush their souls, as well. It would try to make people dependent, to think for them, and act for them—and seemed to hope that they would worship it. David put it this way in an interview: “Collectivism is not just anti-social, pathological and dysfunctional, it is essentially immoral. Our purpose should be to create a society that is based on voluntary, cooperative behavior, where institutions are based on peaceful human choice, contract, and the rule of law” (Theroux, 2000, 5).

2. For example, under David's direction, the Independent Institute published over 140 scholarly books, which received more than fifty awards, including three Eric Hoffer Book Award Grand Prizes, the Templeton Freedom Award, two Mencken Awards for Best Book, eight Sir Antony Fisher International Memorial Awards for Best Book, three Benjamin Franklin Awards, ten Independent Publisher Book Awards, the Peter Shaw Memorial Award, and three Choice Magazine Awards for Outstanding Book. Another notable project was the creative and engaging YouTube video series—Love Gov—which satirized the folly, cost, and intrusiveness of big government. To date the combined Love Gov series has garnered more than 40 million views and earned more than 40 film festival awards and laurels. David was at work on pre-production for Love Gov3 at the time of his death.

A central component of David's distrust of Leviathan was its propensity for war. David was a cadet at the Air Force Academy during the Vietnam War but withdrew after three years. He recounted that: "During the Vietnam War, I became increasingly disillusioned over the official claims regarding the war and how these could be squared with basic civilized values. Clearly, communism was a great enemy of liberty, but killing innocent people and collectivizing American society was no answer. Quite the contrary, it only served" to convince "many that freedom was dysfunctional and some form of central control was necessary" (Theroux, n.d., 4). His insight, often seen on the pages of *The Independent Review* and in Robert Higgs's authoritative *Crisis and Leviathan* (2012 [1987]), was that the projection of military might beyond our country's borders often harms people around the globe, but of equal importance it feeds Leviathan and corrodes liberty at home.

As a determined foe of unchecked government, David recognized that the Independent Institute must steer clear of politics and focus its efforts at the pre-political stage: "My aim ... was to create an institute that would be well-received and influential within mainstream intellectual communities—in the academic world, in the media, and many other intellectual markets" (Theroux, 2000, 3). The Institute couldn't be financially beholden to interest groups. It couldn't be partisan, for that often means that truth must be The Party's truth. "The reason [other think tanks are] in Washington is because they want to influence Washington politics ... [where] there are enormous pressures politically to compromise ... and to make deals" (Theroux, 2000, 11). Rather than compromise principles, David sought to *harmonize*—to get everyone to realize the harmony of interests that arises when free people voluntarily interact. This harmony, echoing Adam Smith, allows human flourishing.

"The problem is that most pro-free market groups believe that the *only* battle is the one in Congress and it is this error that has greatly handicapped efforts to defend freedom for decades" (Theroux, 2000, 4). David wanted to build a culture of independent, responsible people and recognized that the root problem is a public that is "enamored with government" that promises them "free lunches" (Theroux, 2000, 15). Liberty is pre-political. As one of Ignacio Silone's characters explains in *Bread and Wine* (1937, 32), "Liberty isn't a thing you are given as a present.... He who thinks with his own head is a free man.... Even if you live in the freest country in the world and are lazy, callous, apathetic, irresolute, you are not free but a slave, though there be no coercion and no oppression."

In 1996 David founded *The Independent Review* to expand the reach of the Independent Institute. Like the Institute itself, the aim was unpoliticized scholarly excellence. The journal's subtitle is *A Journal of Political Economy*, but it could easily have been *A Journal of Political Economy, Law, History, Philosophy, Sociology, and Culture*, because he—and his editors—recognized that all of these topics must be considered jointly to understand the world and make it a better place. He "wanted the journal to be more exciting and enjoyable than standard academic journals. Scholarly journals are, by and large, unreadable and unread," and he didn't want

TIR to suffer this fate (Theroux, 2000, 6). One reason *The Independent Review* hasn't suffered this fate is that David had a brilliant eye for marketing. For example, visually interesting images stare out from *TIR*'s front covers—usually selected by David—but he left its content to its editors, knowing that its academic integrity rested on editorial independence and peer-review. Authors and editors would painstakingly craft a monograph or collection of essays, and David would greatly expand its readership by giving it a title like *Pope Francis and the Caring Society* and arranging dozens of media appearances. He cleverly boosted demand, while his authors and editors focused on supply.

After one of the blogs that I follow posted a tribute to David announcing his death, someone who had probably never met him added a comment saying “surely he must have pondered if his life's work and intellectual output had any real effect on society generally or the direction of American government. Sadly, the answer is no.” This comment sorely misses the mark on two accounts. First, David's life work clearly had a positive effect on society and the direction of American government—a noticeable marginal impact. However, even if David's work or my work or your work has had no impact on society at large, our worth as moral beings hinges on putting in the best effort to fight the good fight—to be on the right side. We will ultimately be judged by how we have resisted the evils of this world and aided the good. This point is exemplified by David's favorite author, C.S. Lewis, in his extraordinary book *That Hideous Strength*. The story involves an academic couple—Mark and Jane Studdock—who are swept up in an attempt by an ostensibly scientific institute, which is a front for sinister supernatural forces, to control society. Because the Studdocks faced forces far beyond their own powers and could not really affect the outcome, their most important decision was to discover what was good and what was evil and choose the good over the evil despite any costs to themselves—even if they could not prevail. “Supposing the Straight was utterly powerless, always and everywhere certain to be mocked, tortured, and finally killed by the Crooked, what then? Why not go down with the ship?” (Lewis, 2003 [1945], 334).

“The struggle for liberty is fundamentally a war of ideas” (Theroux, 2000, 6): “Our mission is to win the war of ideas, and we utilize every available means to do so” (Theroux, n.d., 1). Every means, fair but not foul—as David was careful not to shade or stretch the truth and was unfailingly kind to friends and foes (and even telemarketers).³ One tribute called David “an old-fashioned gentleman of the first order.” He certainly was.

David memorialized the deaths of several friends of the Independent Institute—among them Fred Singer, Michael Novak, and P.J. O'Rourke—with the beginning of a traditional prayer: *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine* (Eternal rest grant unto him, Lord). I will close with the rest of this blessing to convey my gratitude to him: *Et lux perpetua luceat ei* (And let perpetual light shine upon him).

3. Mary Theroux—perhaps David's more important partner in building the Independent Institute—provides this detail about David's kindness here: <https://www.mountainviewcemetery.org/obituaries/DAVID-THEROUX?obId=24702829>

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