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Tribute for John H. Jackson

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I'm told that John Jackson was the world's foremost scholar on the law of international trade policy and institutions. Since all that I know of trade law I learned from John, I can only trust the opinions of others on that. But I know that John had an excellent understanding of, and appreciation for, the economics of international trade. And he put those together in both his writings and his advice to policymakers, through which he had a profound influence on the development of the institutions of trade policy that we enjoy today.

Many years ago, John invited me to give two lectures on comparative advantage to students in his large course on international trade law. It must have gone well, for he continued to invite me each year from there on. And before long he also invited me to co-teach his small trade law seminar and to invite a few of my own students from economics and public policy to join the seminar. This was a formative experience for me and, I'm sure, for them.

Each year in that seminar, John would select a different topic to pursue in depth with the students. Topics that I recall included safeguards, subsidies, and intellectual property protection. In each case, I learned a great deal from John, and also had to develop my own understanding of the economics of these topics beyond anything I would have done otherwise. Indeed, several of these seminars led me to write papers that I later published, and I would never otherwise even have given these topics any thought. I'm sure, too, that my understanding of and writing about these topics were fundamentally different for having explored them together with John and our students.

Most distinctive about these seminars were our visits each year to Washington, DC for meetings with several of the acronymic US government trade agencies – USTR, USITC, ITA – as well as practitioners in law firms and embassies. It was obvious that John had all of these people in his debt due to the advice he had given them over the years, and they were enthusiastic hosts of our group of students. Most, understandably (though I'm not sure that's the right word), were lawyers, and I quickly learned that not all lawyers had the good understanding and appreciation for the economics that John displayed.

John was not an uncritical consumer of economics. Early in our interactions he asked me what empirical evidence there was to support our theories that there are gains from free trade. I don't think he doubted that there are gains, but rather was

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hoping for a strong positive answer that he could quote to others. Unfortunately, I had to admit that, at the time, we did not have much compelling evidence. There were plenty of empirical studies quantifying the gains from trade, but these were all based on theories that built the gains into their assumptions. Since then there has been at least a little progress on that front, but not as much as John or I would have liked.

John also was very attentive to the assumptions that we economists often make that remove or neglect some of the harmful effects of international trade. I don't think he was disappointed in me, but I know that he was disappointed in my discipline for assuming away some of the effects that he and his law colleagues have to deal with every day. Again I think some progress has been made recently on these fronts, but it is slow going.

Prior to one of our visits to Washington, I had found myself envying my economics colleagues in other fields, such as labor and development, whose work seemed to be of greater importance for the well-being of needy people in rich and poor countries. In comparison, our quantifications of the gains from trade seem to be very small and of almost negligible importance. I mentioned these doubts to John as we had breakfast together in our hotel.

His response has buttressed me ever since: To him the importance of liberal trade lies not so much in the economic gains, but in the political gains. It is increased trade that has contributed most to peace in Europe and much of Asia ever since the World War II. I remind myself of this today whenever I find the theoretical beauty of international economics losing its luster as a motivation for teaching and research.

All of this has influenced me hugely. My teaching in both economics and public policy is more informed about the realities of trade policy and institutions than it would ever have become without John's help. After he retired from Michigan Law and moved to Georgetown, I continued to see him on our occasional visits back and forth, and I e-mailed him frequently with questions about trade law. He was always, of course, forthcoming.

I will miss him intensely.

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