

The problem of constitutional choice

James M. Buchanan, RIP

James M. Buchanan, Nobel laureate in economics and Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Cato Institute, has died at the age of 93. We join his family, his many students, and scholars around the world in mourning his loss.

One of the greatest proponents of limited government and free markets in the 20th century, Buchanan reminded us that liberty



under a just rule of law is essential to a healthy society. Like Adam Smith, Buchanan was interested in the institutions that would allow individuals to pursue their own self-interest while benefiting others through a system of what Milton Friedman has called “free private markets.” Buchanan considered the principle of spontaneous order—that is, the harmony and wealth creation that emerges through vol-

untary exchange when government is limited and rights to life, liberty, and property safeguarded—to be “the most important central principle in economics.”

The primary question that occupied Buchanan during his long career is the problem of constitutional choice—the alternative rules that would best allow individuals the freedom they need to increase their range of choices and bring about social harmony. The proper balance between the state and the individual—or between coercion and consent—is at the foundation of constitutional political economy.

Although Buchanan made substantial contributions to the field of public choice, he was primarily interested in the choice of regimes and how alternative rules would influence behavior. He also strongly criticized both citizen and policy myopia. “Until and unless we begin to take the long-term perspective in our private and in our public capacities, including the adoption of new and binding constitutional constraints on the fiscal and monetary powers of government, we are doomed to remain mired in the muck of modern politics,” he once wrote.

Buchanan’s passing leaves a giant void at a time when Western democracies are expanding the size and scope of government and threatening the future of liberty. His vast body of work, however, will continue to live on. ■

Cato News Notes

MORE BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

The Cato Institute tops a new measure of think tank performance in the United States, according to the Center for Global Development (CGD). Cato bested all other U.S. think tanks in the main category of “Aggregate Profile per Dollar Spent,” which divides performance indicators (such as media mentions, scholarly citations, and web traffic) by annual spending. These results are “more practically relevant,” the report read, because donors are most interested in an institution’s ability to build a following per dollar spent. “I’m grateful to the CGD for showing that Cato gives its Sponsors something I wish government gave more of to taxpayers: bang for the buck,” Cato CEO John Allison said.

A DIGITAL DIOGENES

In December, the *Washington Examiner* referred to Jim Harper as “the digital era’s version of Diogenes the Cynic.” The article focused specifically on Harper’s quest to encourage the use of “distinct identifiers”—digital characteristics attached to every federal outlay that would help make Washington’s spending more transparent and accessible. “In a manner reminiscent of the ancient contrarian,” the *Examiner* noted, “the Cato Institute’s director of information policy studies walks around town figuratively carrying a lamp while searching for honesty.”

MOST INFLUENTIAL IN U.S. DEFENSE

Christopher A. Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, has been named



to *Defense News*’s “100 Most Influential People in U.S. Defense.” He is ranked #82 on the list, which includes the most prominent members of the U.S. defense community, from policymakers to industry executives. Preble’s entry on the list notes, “When some think tanks are arguing for a

larger defense budget, Preble brings his classically libertarian message to the debate: Defense cuts, he argues, will actually make America’s defense stronger.” Preble was selected for his prominence in two major spheres of influence: military funding and opinion shaping.