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**A Personal Recollection  
of an Extraordinary Teacher,  
James Q. Wilson, 1931-2012**

*Regulatory Policy Commentary*

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In 1977, as a second year student in Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, I lived that nightmare of showing up for a final exam only to discover that something has gone inexplicably and horribly wrong. My professor was the political scientist James Q. Wilson, who died last Friday. The course was called, I think, “Bureaucracy,” although his famous book by that title would not be published for several more years.

I started the course thinking I was prepared. That summer, I had taken my first job in Washington at the Environmental Protection Agency, and the stars had aligned to make it a great experience. One assignment was to develop an interagency agreement to coordinate health and safety regulation across the EPA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). With the late Andy Breidenbach as my mentor, I plunged in. Over many beers at the Tune Inn on Capitol Hill, I drafted an agreement outlining eight areas of cooperation and creating the Interagency Regulatory Liaison Group (a horrible name and acronym; this group later expanded and became the Regulatory Council). In the course of the summer I met several times with all of the agency heads, and finessed a number of gnarly obstacles. I managed to find a way for Chairman Byington of the independent CPSC, with the concurrence of his co-commissioners, to enter into an agreement with Executive Branch agencies. After reviewing the documentary record, I deduced that Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Califano would never allow an underling to sign an interagency agreement – even as capable and distinguished an underling as FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy. Others raised strenuous objections when they saw the signature block, but Kennedy waved his hand and said, “I can’t sign it; Joe insists.” When the agreement finally was executed in August, I wrote a press release detailing all of the benefits that would flow from this sweeping and innovative initiative. By the end of the summer I did not quite feel like a Master of the Universe, but I did feel like I had mastered bureaucracy. Then I went back to school.

Listening to lectures by James Q. Wilson was breathtaking – in one sense, literally so. He spoke in fully formed paragraphs, collected into chapters. If you have seen Richard Epstein speak, even extemporaneously, you know what I mean; except that Epstein starts to fade when he forgets to take a breath, which Wilson never did. I struggled to understand him because, coming from a background in the physical sciences, I found that my economics courses made perfect

sense. But Wilson was wired differently; he commented that “I will never understand why economists think they can get real insight into a complex public policy problem by reducing it to a stack of dollars.” Not that Wilson wasn’t rigorous, numerate, and precise. From data he was able to draw on a wide range of real-world experience. But to my unformed mind at the time, as theory it all felt too unstructured; and as practice, well, it felt too abstract compared with the thrill of being in the thick of things.

Then came the final exam. To my shock, it consisted of my press release of the previous August, followed by the question: “How likely is it that any of these things will actually bear fruit? Explain.”

Professor Wilson could not have known that one of his students had written the press release; it must have simply caught his eye as a particularly naïve bit of nonsense from our government. I opened the blue exam book and began my answer by confessing to authorship of the release, and then – in a terrible lapse of judgment – I proceeded to use everything I knew to write a multi-page defense of it. When I got the exam back, his rebuttal was withering, and was longer than my answer. But I can boil it down to the essentials. *Me*: This is a sensible plan, embraced by the agency heads, who are sincerely committed to achieving the promised reforms. *Wilson*: You appear to have learned nothing this semester.

Now I can report that he was right; little of lasting value came of that IRLG agreement. In retrospect the whole exercise is best understood as part of the bureaucracy’s predictable response to Congress’s grant of presidential reorganization authority to Jimmy Carter in April of 1977. ([http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/exec\\_reorg.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/exec_reorg.html)) In effect, these four agencies were saying: “See, everything that needs to be coordinated amongst us is already being coordinated. There’s no need to reorganize.”

What James Q. Wilson taught me is that effecting intelligent change in public policy is not impossible, but it certainly is a difficult challenge.

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