

# In Memoriam: Curt Cardwell

Calling someone “larger than life” is often easy and corny, but I guess that phrase exists for a reason, and it surely applied to Curt Cardwell.

In early January I was stunned and saddened to get an email from his wife Stephanie Cardwell telling me that Curt had died suddenly. She remembered our connection from the past and wanted me to know. When I was asked to write about him for this newsletter I began to think more about Curt, with whom I had a close relationship during his time as a graduate student and early in his career. I thought of the words of a senior professor from long ago, when I was in graduate school, who told me that some people write a lot of books or write about something splashy and become well-known, but we should aim to write something that tells people something new and endures. And that was Curt’s work. He wasn’t prolific, but what he wrote, and what we talked about, was as important as anything I’ve read from people who wrote a lot more than him, or than me.

Professionally, Curt’s book, *NSC 68 and the Political Economy of the Early Cold War*, should be known by every scholar of U.S. Diplomatic History, Political Economy, or the Cold War. It took on one of the most important documents in U.S. history, National Security Council Paper #68, which I consider as important as Hamilton’s *Report on Manufactures* in the creation of an American capitalist empire, and explained it not in the typically facile way—as a doctrine to challenge the Soviet Union in the Cold War—and explained it intricately as a blueprint for postwar political-economic-military hegemony. It is magisterial and will remain so.

Other historians, especially New Left scholars like Gabriel Kolko, Walter LaFeber, William Appleman Williams, and others, had presented NSC 68 as an economic document, but not with the precision and depth that Curt did. In his depiction, more than anyone else who’d written on it, he showed how NSC-68 expanded the Cold War to the entire globe. Wherever alleged communists existed, the U.S. would get involved to stop them, usually by offering large amounts of aid to the governments in those countries to kill off [often literally] the opposition. Less discussed, but more vital, NSC-68 created a program of permanent and increased military spending, and that was essential for the economy.

Remembering that World War II had begun when the U.S. was still suffering from the Great Depression, and it was the government’s massive war spending that finally ended it, American leaders understood that it was thus necessary to have a major program of public spending to keep the economy prosperous. But it had to be careful in its spending habits. It accepted the basic ideas of Keynes, who said that government spending, even if it created deficits, was essential to put people to work and enable them to get a paycheck.

This government spending, however, had to be done carefully. If the state spent money on public programs—like schools, roads, health care, education, and so forth—then it would likely be called “Socialist” by Republicans and

conservatives, and the Democrats just as firmly believed in private ownership and had no affection for Socialism in any event. But if the state spent public money on the military—which would be considered necessary because of the fears created by the NSC-68 analysis of the “good” Americans and the “evil” Russians and would be contracted out to private firms—then politicians and the public would be far more likely to support it. So NSC-68 became both a military and an economic program.

NSC-68 made it possible to spend vastly larger amounts of money on the military. In 1950 the military budget was \$13 billion [which would be \$126 billion today, or about 20 percent of actual 2014 military spending]. The Korean War broke out that year, so it was inevitable that military spending would grow, but it went up to over \$65 billion by 1953, the year the war ended. And then, after the war, when one might expect a significant decrease, military spending remained quite high—in the \$35-40 billion range. Rather than spend money on politically risky things like clinics or schools, it would spend them on weapons and intervention.

In what I think was his most important contribution, Curt detailed how, along with this growth in military funding at home, NSC-68 led to a series of foreign military aid programs, where the U.S. would provide money to other countries for them to defend against Communists, a term used against the leaders of virtually any nation that disagreed with or criticized U.S. policies. As with the Marshall Plan, however, these military aid programs had another purpose. Other countries needed money—it was called a dollar gap because they lacked the funds to trade—so the U.S. would provide them with aid that they would use to purchase military goods, usually from American firms.

NSC-68 thus enabled the government to support weapons makers at home with much larger military contracts [think of Halliburton in the Iraq War] and to send money abroad so that other countries would have the dollars they needed to buy goods from the U.S., another example of Military Keynesianism. From 1950 onward, that idea grew, so that military spending continually went up [today, the U.S. spends almost more money on the military, nearly \$700 billion, than the rest of the world combined] while “public” programs like education and health care fight for scraps.

About a decade before his book was published in 2011, I met Curt and began talking with him about this subject. We met through his M.A. advisor and mentor, the late Frank Kofsky, who introduced us. Tragically Frank died not long after so Curt and I began to work together, informally, more closely. He gave a paper on this at a SHAFR conference and asked me to chair it, and I was a Curt Cardwell fan from that point on, and every time after that that I read the phrase “dollar gap,” I thought of him, and still do.

At that point, his academic and personal career intersected with mine. He was applying to graduate schools and, at Frank’s urging, talked to me about working with me at the University of Houston (and also with Frank

Costigliola at UConn, who also remained a friend and mentor). He went about it professionally, talking to me, studying the program, talking to other graduate students, and staying in frequent contact. At the end of the process, he decided to work with Lloyd Gardner at Rutgers, as he should have. But when he made that decision, Curt called me on the phone to let me know that he would be going to Rutgers and was almost apologetic about it. After several minutes I had to tell him that he could come to Houston and I'd go to Rutgers in his place. But that was Curt—professional and caring about others.

We stayed in close contact from then on, and when he'd gotten his job at Drake he continued to talk to me for advice. I was proud to recommend him to Cambridge and proud to blurb his book. I discussed the tenure process with him and I believe I wrote in support of his promotion at Drake. We continued to discuss his work on the post-World War II economy and military budgets, and he continued to work on that topic until his death.

But as much as I respected and valued his scholarship, it was his personality, his kindness, that stood out. One of the testimonials from Drake made it easy to understand—"he was utterly respectful of their opinions all while never hesitating to make his own convictions clear. You couldn't walk out of one of his classes without understanding the American world better than before."

And he was a big guy, hence "larger than life," and everyone at Drake loved him based on the testimonials I've seen. As one colleague said, "his personality could fill a room." He was a vet, serving in Germany as the Cold War ended, and a chef, so we also talked about food a lot. I think we had a kinship because neither of us came from a privileged or Iviid background, so we saw the world differently than most academics and I think that drove us both toward studying class struggles and economic oligarchs. He often asked me for advice, but I'm sure I learned as much or more from him as vice versa.

I also recall clearly that, not long after my son died and Curt found out, he called me one night to talk about it. Some people shy away from a conversation like that, but Curt stayed on the phone for probably two hours asking me about Kelsey and offering empathy and clarity. I'm still touched by his concern and the love he showed toward my son, someone he'd never met. And every time we talked after that, he'd ask me how I was doing. He was a "stand-up guy," which coming from my background is probably the highest compliment I can offer.

Curt Cardwell, friend and comrade, rest in power!

—*Robert Buzzanco*  
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