Betty Tillman

Donald J. Boudreaux

Published online: 13 November 2013
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

Jim Buchanan's name will forever be linked with that of Gordon Tullock. Their jointly authored 1962 book, *The Calculus of Consent*, is one of the greatest tracts of modern political science and it remains the single volume that most obviously symbolizes the rigor, reach, and realism of public-choice scholarship.

Yet at least among those of us who are careful students of public choice and of the legacy of Jim Buchanan, another name, in addition to that of Tullock, will also be forever linked with Jim's: Betty Tillman.

To describe Betty as having been Jim's long-time secretary or assistant would be a grotesque understatement akin to describing Jim Buchanan as having been a public-finance scholar. The factual correctness of each statement causes the reader to miss the essence of each person's contributions.

No reader of this journal needs to be told of Buchanan's contributions or persuaded of their significance—a significance, of course, that extends far beyond the formal improvements that Jim made to the theory of public finance. But perhaps some younger readers—those whose youth prevented them from personally interacting in Charlottesville, Blacksburg, or Fairfax with Jim and other scholars and staff at the Center for Study of Public Choice—need to be told of Betty Tillman.

Betty did much more than type, schedule, screen calls and visitors, serve coffee, and perform the 1,001 other routine tasks that good secretaries do to increase a scholar's productivity. While she performed all of these tasks with unusual ability and unique grace, Betty's deeper contribution is that she became one of the two permanent faces of the Center for Study of Public Choice. The scholarly ambiance of the Center was set by Jim and Gordon; the attitudinal ambiance was all Betty's doing.

By "attitudinal ambiance" I mean more than the culture of efficiency—one most assuredly nurtured by Betty—that allowed all Center faculty, visitors, students, and staff to

D.J. Boudreaux (✉)
Department of Economics, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA
e-mail: dboudrea@gmu.edu

work more effectively than most of us likely ever dreamed of working. I mean chiefly the Buchanan-esque democratic ethos that Betty brought to the Center.

Betty was by nature the embodiment of the ideal democratic citizen that Jim so often wrote about and praised—the citizen that Jim envisioned when he spoke optimistically of people putting themselves sufficiently far behind a veil of ignorance to be able to bargain toward, and eventually to reach, unanimous agreement on a social contract. Betty was arguably the model-person that Jim had in mind whenever he wrote optimistically about the promise of flesh-and-blood human beings actually being capable of constructive constitutional rule making.

In proposing this hypothesis, I do not claim that Jim was aware that Betty was his model-person. Their productive half-century together, however, cannot have done other than make Jim—a man with absolutely no romantic notions about the human character or capacity—see in Betty Tillman the embodiment of those traits that make it plausible to believe that humans can indeed come together in good faith to bargain cooperatively and with clear eyes toward a reasonably good set of constitutional rules. Jim surely recognized Betty's deep sense of fairness, her regard for equal treatment, her honesty and integrity, and her refusal to count her own desires as deserving heavier weight than those of others.

These traits in Betty—traits undoubtedly instilled in her long before she met Jim—were on daily display at the Center. And their adoption at the Center owed largely to Betty's own words and example. The resulting attitudinal ambience of the Center was one of social equality, optimism, openness, fair play, and (of course) hard work. Jim hardly could have avoided absorbing this attitudinal ambience of the Center. He was surrounded every day by men and women of unmistakable ambition, each carrying a sizeable ego, yet all of whom cooperated with each other intelligently and productively.

In short, one reason why Jim could be optimistic about the possibility of consciously directed constitutional reform is that the woman he worked with so closely and successfully from the early 1960s until well into the 21st century had all of the personal characteristics Jim correctly understood to be required of people if his hope for such reform were ever to have a fighting chance. Also, largely because of Betty's influence, Jim was for nearly all of his full, long and productive career surrounded by such cooperators.

Archivists might one day count and record every one of the dozens of manuscripts, hundreds of papers, and thousands of memos and letters that Betty typed for Jim. These archivists might also tell us how many flight reservations she made for him, how much trouble-shooting she did for Jim and the Center, and how skillfully Betty protected Jim's quiet workspace and peace of mind from disturbances that would have slowed his now-legendary productivity. Yet any extraordinarily competent assistant could have done those tasks. What archivists will not be able to measure and record are Betty's indescribable charm and her welcoming presence at the Center. These exist now only in the memories of those of us lucky enough to have known her.

Most importantly, though, of all of the unrecordable and unmeasurable contributions Betty Tillman made through her joint work with Jim and other Center personnel was the creation in the Center of a civilizing attitude that was on display daily. This attitude quite likely played an important role in convincing Jim Buchanan that real-life human beings could indeed be sufficiently civilized and reasonable to make efforts at constitutional reform both possible and worthwhile. Absent this conviction, Jim's intellectual legacy today would be thinner and certainly much different. And so, if I am correct that Betty's influence on Jim and the Center ran much more deeply than that of even a hyper-efficient administrative secretary, we owe to Betty Tillman no small measure of gratitude for her part in crafting the intellectual legacy of Jim Buchanan and public choice.