

In Memoriam: Tributes to George Priest

George had a strength, a way to say things as they were, and a way of inspiring change that made me feel he would always be there. When he was gone, I found myself grasping at memories, wondering which one mattered most. Was it that class or lecture that left me in awe? The passion in his voice when he spoke about my country? Or the piece of advice that quietly changed the course of my life?

But there is no doubt. It was the hugs—the unmistakable, warm George hugs—that he always gave my parents, my children, and me.

Alfredo Bullard

Founding Partner, Bullard Falla Ezcurra+

I met George in May 1980 at a conference for budding Law & Economics scholars sponsored by Liberty Fund and the Center for Libertarian Studies. George was one of several established scholars who criticized our research proposals. I was ABD in Economics at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and I had just completed my first year as a John M. Olin Fellow at the University of Miami Law & Economics Center. I spent a lot of time talking with George about my research proposal, but even more about his love of the great outdoors of the Colorado Rockies and the Pacific Northwest. I worked on backcountry trail crews in Rocky Mountain National Park in the summer of 1973 and Glacier National Park in 1974. Mount St. Helens—one of George’s most favorite backpacking areas—exploded during that conference. He and Kathy loved to escape to their family compound on the North Fork of the South Platte River in Colorado. We were always honored to have George participate in Law & Economics Center programs—but I was a bit slow in figuring out that it was a lot easier to get him to join us if the programs were held in Colorado.

Henry N. Butler

Henry G. Manne Professor of Law & Economics

Chairman, Law & Economics Center

Dean, Antonin Scalia Law School (2015-2020)

George Mason University

I would like to add to the chorus of praise by acknowledging a particular debt to George Priest. I am not referring to my personal indebtedness to George as a mentor, teacher, colleague, and friend, even though that is great in itself. My years at Yale as a student and then faculty member are filled with a rich array of wonderful memories spent with George and his incredible family. But here I also want to emphasize the debt that the entire field of law and economics owes to George for the pivotal role he played in the creation of the American Law and Economics Association, which is not known as widely today as it should be.

In the late 1980s, the sentiment emerged that a formal law and economics association should be established but there were competing visions of the appropriate structure of the association and its annual meeting. Henry Manne, then Dean of George Mason Law School, argued for small annual meetings held in attractive resorts while inviting selected academics, judges, and attorneys. The competing vision, championed by George, Steve Shavell at Harvard, and Mitch Polinsky at Stanford, was a more purely academic association along the lines of the American Economic Association. The annual meeting in the Priest-Shavell-Polinsky view should have open attendance by academics with presentations of submitted papers in convened panels subject to open discussion.

Manne was an energetic entrepreneur with access to funding and a track record based on his experience in convening his style of conferences for many years. These factors initially seemed to ensure that the association would formalize his prior practice with Manne as President. But George's enormous political skill (ultimately backed up by his tremendous administrative talents and relentless energy) succeeded in overcoming this momentum and implementing the Priest-Shavell-Polinsky conception that has blossomed into the current American Law and Economics Association. The presidency was wrenched from Manne, George became the first President, and the first meetings of the Association were held at the University of Illinois in May 1991, in which Ronald Coase, Richard Posner, Guido Calabresi as well as Manne were honored as Founders of Law and Economics in a Plenary Session chaired by George.

While the inaugural meetings were rather small with just ten panels (one of which I chaired on the Law and Economics of Discrimination with presentations by Ian Ayres, Richard Epstein, and Nobel laureate James Heckman), the Association has grown enormously with roughly 500 papers submitted for recent annual meetings. For those of us who made this Association our intellectual home, as well as for all of whom have benefitted from the research and scholarship that the Association has nurtured and fostered, we are all greatly in George's debt.

John J. Donohue

C. Wendell and Edith M. Carlsmith Professor of Law
Stanford Law School

Tributes to George Priest

George Priest was an iconoclast: an intellectual giant, a charming truth-speaker, a beloved teacher, and a fierce and funny mentor.

He had a larger-than-life impact on students and colleagues alike, and his decency and integrity led him to help those around him shine. He was a great scholar, to be sure — but also a great human being. As Professor Sokol put it, “[t]hey just don’t make them like George anymore.”

Innumerable lawyers, academics, and leaders around the world can explain their success at least in part with one simple statement: “George believed in me.”

Heather K. Gerken

Dean & Sol and Lillian Goldman Professor of Law
Yale Law School

George Priest was an incomparable teacher, mentor, colleague and friend. He made every subject the most fascinating, and was the most open-minded and generous with students no matter their points of view. His antitrust course inspired my first summer law job and first published paper. His engagement with my nascent research on local government launched me into a three-year study of cemetery economics that shaped my career as a healthcare and state government lawyer and scholar. To this day, I cannot think about insurance without thinking of George. The joyfulness of our backs-and-forths is a primary reason I wound up clerking for his dear friend, Ralph Winter, who, like George, had a laugh that equaled only the size of their huge intellects. It was George’s encouragement that was among the few essential to my leap into law teaching, convincing a young woman she could do it. And it was one of the great joys of my professional life to return home to Yale and call my great teacher a cherished colleague.

Abbe R. Gluck

Alfred M. Rankin Professor of Law
Yale Law School

I loved George Priest. I loved him as a scholar, as a teacher and as a friend. As a scholar he followed ideas where ever they went, and was never afraid of where they might lead him. As a teacher he helped his students to take chances and follow their own ideas whether they coincided with his or not. And as a friend, he was always loyal and affectionate, which made it as great a joy to disagree with him on any issue as it was to agree with him.

Does this sound exactly like what one should seek in an academic colleague? Of course, and it is what made George so great and so irreplaceable!

Guido Calabresi

Senior Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit
Sterling Professor Emeritus of Law and Professorial Lecturer in Law, Yale Law School

Those who have worked with George may know him as a brilliant legal scholar. Those fortunate enough to have taken his classes know him as an unforgettable teacher with sharp wit and a natural sense of humor. Those who had the privilege of calling him a friend know George as an utterly decent and selfless human being who treated everyone with dignity. He had a rare gift for making those around him feel valued and heard. He saw the best in you, even when you didn't see it in yourself. It is that quality of George I shall miss most.

Yoon-Ho Alex Lee

Howard Friedman '64 JD Professor of Law
Director, Center of Law, Business, and Economics
Northwestern Pritzker School of Law

George was an incredible scholar, teacher, and friend. He was generous with his time and mentorship despite being at the top of his field with many more compelling demands on his calendar. His love of insurance, antitrust, and law and economics was infectious, and he leaves a legacy of the generations of others he inspired to continue exploring the central issues he teed up with his characteristic insight and clarity.

Peter Molk

John H. and Mary Lou Dasburg Professor of Law
University of Florida Law School

The September 2024 conference to honor George as a teacher, mentor, scholar and friend was an eye-opening experience for me. I was well aware of George's wonderful qualities as a scholar and friend, but I had no idea before this conference that he also was an astonishing teacher and mentor. The tributes to him by his former students, from around the U.S. and abroad, were heartfelt and humorous, reflecting characteristics of George that I will remember and cherish.

A. Mitchell Polinsky
Josephine Scott Crocker Professor of Law and Economics
Stanford Law School

Something about George that always intrigued me was his warm friendship with Owen Fiss. I thought it spoke well for both of them—but it was intriguing because George's libertarian views seemed so contrary to Owen's emphatically public-facing insistence on equal justice. I saw them challenge each other at many Yale-sponsored conferences with Latin American legal scholars, where most participants followed Owen's lead. I remember well when one complained that matters other than economics should matter in law. George's genial response? "It's all economics." For George, maybe it was all economics, but with a wide lens and a big heart for all kinds of friendships.

Carol M. Rose
Gordon Bradford Tweedy Professor Emeritus of Law and Organization
Yale Law School

I met George in the 1970s at the beginning of our careers in law and economics. We became instant friends. An endeavor of ours that I remember well was working to establish the American Law and Economics Association. Over the years, George produced a stream of influential works for which I have enormous respect; I frequently find myself referring to his ideas.

George's death is an especially sad event for me, not only because of my fondness for him as a person, but also because it means that the small world of scholars who helped to usher in our field of interest is disappearing.

Steven Shavell
Samuel R. Rosenthal Professor of Law and Economics
Director, John M. Olin Center for Law, Economics, & Business
Harvard Law School

As fellow participants in Chicago's Law & Economics Workshop, I recognized George on the basketball courts in Bartlett Gym, which featured stained glass windows and a fire escape that provided access for guys from the neighborhood. I encountered George many times in the four-on-four pickup games. We often guarded each other, which led to constant battles for rebounding position. Decades later, when he introduced me to his antitrust class, he described me as a vicious player. He was indeed a tough (but fair) competitor and, as I got to know him, a warm, confident scholar.

Ted Snyder

William S. Beinecke Professor of Economics and Management
Yale School of Management