

Wilbur J. Cohen

1913–1987

An Ombudsman for America

NO LIVING AMERICAN HAS DONE MORE TO CHANGE the face of our nation than Wilbur Cohen.

An arguable proposition, until one realizes that there is not an American who is unaffected by the programs he helped build. He participated in the design of the Social Security Act, a measure that addressed unemployment compensation, old age assistance, aid to dependent children, maternal and child health, child welfare services, crippled children's services, federal appropriations for public health—and, of course, old age insurance, the program most of us think of today when we say "Social Security." He was present and helped develop the extension of many of those programs, notably the addition of survivors' benefits in 1939 and disability insurance benefits in 1956. He worked to enact that which had been omitted in earlier years: Medicare and Medicaid (not one of his favorites, he'd have preferred national health insurance) in 1965. He was actively and intimately involved in legislation of federal aid to education, student loan programs, building the National Institutes of Health, improving vocational education, strengthening vocational rehabilitation . . . the list goes on.

He came to Washington as a junior person (but one who sat in on every executive session of the congressional committees that dealt with the Social Security Act). He left (but never really left) after serving as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Wilbur Cohen was there from the beginning of the federal government's participation in social insurance and public welfare programs. For over 50 years every piece of legislation in these arenas benefited from his attention. The America we know, we know because of Wilbur Cohen. He had a hand in shaping all that has been created over these years to deal with human problems.

That, too, is arguable until one realizes that he helped create at

the federal level the foundation for public programs in welfare, health, education, and social insurance on which we place the building blocks of community and voluntary action. Our private efforts are made possible not only because, as individuals, we have the personal security that we can share with others, but because, given that base, the task is not a hopeless one. Every private organization in the field of social and human services is stronger because it has a public partner.

Wilbur Cohen's legacy to America surrounds us. But beyond the programs that are his monument are the lessons we can draw. His effectiveness derived from three important attributes: respect, vision, and commitment. Of course, he was a superb politician. Of course, he had boundless energy. Of course, he was surrounded by able colleagues. But respect, vision, and commitment were the keys and the attributes we all could try to emulate.

He respected other opinions. He didn't agree with his adversaries nor did he compromise his views. But he treated all as if they had something to say, as if he understood why and how they came to their views, what their concerns were. He listened and what most often emerged was not some wishy-washy middle ground but a way of accomplishing his goals while taking account of the concerns of others. What some called "compromise," he viewed as the necessary component that made possible effective administration of a program. He knew his adversaries in the private and public arenas would remain to fight other battles. He knew his programs couldn't be administered without their support (however grudging). Respect and sensitivity, making others feel that he wanted their views and would do all he could to accommodate them (without compromising his goals) enabled him to move forward.

He had a vision and a consistency. He believed in America, its people, and their government. Government was not "they" but "we" coming together to help each other to meet human needs and wants, to help make possible lives of greater dignity and quality. He had a firmly held framework and set of guiding principles. To him "incrementalism" meant a series of planned steps by which to attain a goal he could, and vigorously did, specify in advance. He knew when to shift ground, when to retreat, which battle was worth fighting at which time. But he also knew what the next battle should be and when he'd fight it. He knew all that because he understood his ultimate objective—a stronger social welfare system, a more humane

America. Wilbur Cohen could not and did not become a “neo” this or that. He could take account of changing attitudes and constraints, but he would not change his vision, his essential and basic values. He was authentic and didn’t adjust his beliefs to suit his audience.

Finally, he understood that as necessary as the broad vision was the grasp of details, that indeed without the detail the vision would be no more than fantasy. Laws are not constructed out of “whereas” clauses. The whereases justify the legislation and are the translation of the vision into concern, but the details of the law, of eligibility, benefits, coverage, tax rates, administrative structure, are what determine whether the law will address those concerns effectively and equitably. Wilbur knew that detail. He felt he had to know everything and, though it was disconcerting to his colleagues, he did so. For him the victory was not the superbly crafted speech or the welcome articulation of policy, not even the enactment of a piece of legislation. He measured success by the way the program operated in the field.

Of course, there was more and some of us were fortunate enough to work with him and experience some of the more. Was there anything more remarkable than his treatment of younger people who knew less than he? I remember well the sweaty palms and almost sense of fright I had the first time I entered his office. I remember, too, how different I felt as I departed. I discovered he knew more than I (about a subject I thought I knew quite well). I was certain he, too, had discovered that was the case. And yet he made me feel at ease, shared his ideas and asked me to share mine as if the opposite were true. And thus he and I developed a relationship that I assume was not unique to me: I remained in awe of the legend and relished spending time with the person; I was excited when he asked me for my views, elated when he liked something I’d written, and quite at ease when we disagreed. Perhaps that relationship is what defines a great teacher. I know that we were all his students.

In these days in which individuals are assessed in terms of name recognition, Wilbur’s name is not well known. Yet, over two hundred million of his neighbors of all ages and occupations, divided by income, religion, or ethnicity but united by America and its dream, know the programs that he helped build. The AFDC family, the student in whatever grade in school, the unemployed steelworker, the doctor and the nurse, the retiree whether at home or in a hospital, all these and all Americans share in the programs he helped develop.

There is an old Chasidic story of the Rebbe who, wanting a better world, used to go into the forest, to a specific tree where he sang a particular prayer in a particular melody. As time passed and he was no longer able to go, his followers went to the forest. They did not know the tree but knew the melody. In the next generation even the melody had been forgotten. But all was not lost for the successors knew the story that there had been such a Rebbe and that he had done such things. And even that was helpful.

Wilbur Cohen's melody is gone and different melodies will be sung by the next generation. I don't believe that he would be satisfied with us if all we did was know the story that there had been a Wilbur Cohen, an ombudsman for America who tried to make his nation better. He would insist we sing our own songs. But to do that we must remember and teach others about Wilbur, about his melodies and their significance. Only then will we and others know we should create our own. That will give us a start and give our efforts some standing.

Rashi Fein