Chapter 10
William H. Riker (1920–1993)[1]

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Introduction

William Harrison Riker, one of the founders of the Public Choice Society, arguably transformed the discipline of Political Science more than any single individual in the last half-century, creating the possibility of a genuine science of politics. It is difficult to measure the relative importance of his own scholarship, the vision of the scientific enterprise he imposed on the discipline, the training he gave a new generation of scholars, and the integration of this new understanding of political science into the social sciences. Each on their own was a legacy few achieve. Collectively, his contributions are, like the man himself, peerless.

Bill, as he was called, was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 22, 1920. He died on June 26, 1993. His beloved wife, Mary Elizabeth (M.E.) whom he married in 1943, passed away on March 14, 2002. He had two daughters and two sons, one of whom died 20 years before Bill.

Bill graduated from DePauw University in 1942. He deferred an acceptance to attend the University of Chicago, the leading graduate program in Political Science in the pre-War years, so that he could work in support of the war effort at RCA. In 1944, he concluded that Harvard University had emerged as the leading program, and left RCA to enter Harvard's Ph.D. program. He received his degree from there in 1948. He took a position at Lawrence College (now Lawrence University) that year, rising to the rank of Professor before he left for the University of Rochester in 1962, his home for the rest of his life.

Bill's training at Harvard was conventional for its day, although one must credit his contact with Professor Pendelton Herring for association with a scholar who, while not "scientific" in the sense Riker came to believe in, nonetheless was systematic in his analyses (Shepsle 2002). It was therefore only later at Lawrence

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College, learning and working on his own, that he developed his views on the nature of political science and its place among the social sciences.

Early Influences

In 1954, the leading journal of the discipline, the *American Political Science Review*, published "A Method for Evaluating the Distribution of Power in a Committee System," by L.S. Shapley and Martin Shubik. In it, they developed their "power index" and applied it to the bicameral U.S. Congress and to the U.N. Security Council. This Shapley–Shubik power index is a special case of the Shapley value, and the article provided citations to that original paper (1953), Von Neumann and Morganstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944, 1947) and Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1951). These works, Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), Buchanan and Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (1962), Duncan Black's *The Theory of Committees and Elections* (1958) and Black and R.A. Newing's *Committee Decisions with Complementary Valuations* (1951) provided Bill the rational choice theory through which he would seek to achieve a scientific study of politics.

Short-Term Consequences

These studies had three major consequences for his work over the remainder of the 1950s. First, his studies led him to think deeply about the nature of science, resulting in two papers in the *Journal of Philosophy*, "Events and Situations" (1957) and "Causes of Events" (1958a). Second, he began to consider the potential for rational choice theory, in general, and game theory in particular, to explain politics. He first did so by applying theories of others, beginning with "The Paradox of Voting and Congressional Rules for Voting on Amendments," published in the *American Political Science Review* (1958b). Shortly thereafter, these considerations also led him to revise an introductory text on American government he had written earlier (originally published in 1953), transforming it into the first rational choice book aimed at undergraduate audiences in Political Science (1965). He would soon develop his own theory of political coalitions, based on game theory. But first came the third major consequence of his theoretical development, one that included recognition from the academy, via becoming a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1960–61.

His thinking on how to study politics had now almost fully matured. In his application to the Center, he wrote (quoted in Bueno de Mesquita and Shepsle 2001, p. 8):

> I describe the field in which I expect to work at the Center as 'formal, positive political theory.' By Formal, I mean the expression of the theory in algebraic rather than verbal symbols. By positive I means the expression of descriptive rather than normative

> propositions... I visualize the growth in political science of a body of theory somewhat similar to... the neo-classical theory of value in economics. It seems to be that a number of propositions from the mathematical theory of games can be woven into a theory of politics. Hence, my main interest at present is attempting to use game theory for the construction of political theory.

His Fellowship year was devoted primarily to writing *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962) which served as the study that backed those hopes with results. This book marked a transition from applying the work of others to the creation of his own theory. He recognized his account as taking off from ideas in *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, but unlike Von Neumann and Morgenstern, he developed the "size principle" for the case of n-person, zero-sum games. At this point he believed that politics was best understood as being a contest about winning and losing, and thus about zero-sum games, although later he would see that winning and losing did not necessarily lead to the zero-sum property. *The Theory of Political Coalitions* was more than the first fully developed rational choice theory by a political scientist. The book had a major impact on traditional political scientists and was widely used by the contemporary profession in guiding their empirical work, perhaps most heavily in the analysis of governing coalitions in multiparty parliaments. It thus was the first choice-theoretic (to say nothing of being the first game-theoretic) study to shape traditional scholarship in his discipline.

The Institutional Builder

The 1960s was a time of even more dramatic changes in Bill's career. In 1962, not only was *The Theory of Political Coalitions* published but he also accepted the position of Chairman at the University of Rochester, beginning a fifteen-year tenure as department chair. His task was to create a new Ph.D. program in Political Science that reflected his understanding of what a science of politics could be. He took what was essentially a small-to-medium sized liberal arts college's department and expanded it considerably—all the way up to 13 members a decade later!He did so by adding young scholars such as Arthur Goldberg, Richard Niemi, and John Mueller, who were trained as close to the vision Riker held of the discipline as was then possible, to the more traditional scholars already on hand. Of these young scholars, Jerry Kramer most fully embodied this vision with serious mathematical capabilities, well beyond those of anyone else then in the discipline, tied to a deep interest in matters political.

Perhaps the most remarkable first achievement of his chairmanship was the ability to graft a new political science on to a standing department, and the greatest fruit of this tree was the long-running, intellectual, and collegial departmental leadership coalition of Riker and Richard Fenno. This pairing created a remarkable training ground for new scholars almost immediately upon formation. The new program went from unranked to one ranked as number 14 in the nation by the end of the 1960s, that is, in under a decade of existence, and then to a "top ten" ranking the

next time such comparisons were made a decade later. At the end of its first decade, Bill's program already had or was in the process of training scholars who would play a role in the Public Choice Society, would be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and/or would join Riker and Fenno in the National Academy of Sciences. These included such scholars as Peter Aranson, Morris Fiorina, Richard McKelvey, Peter Ordeshook, David Rohde, and Kenneth Shepsle (as well as this author).

The Intellectual Entrepreneur

The 1960s were, for Bill, fruitful not only in institutional creation, through the Ph.D. program he created and his role in forming the Public Choice Society, but also in terms of his own scholarship. In 1964, Little-Brown published his *Federalism: Origin, Operation, Maintenance* which some consider his greatest work. He, often with his graduate students, launched what are believed to be the first laboratory game experiments in political science (e.g., his "Bargaining in Three-Person Games," [1967] and with William James Zvoina, "Rational Behavior in Politics: Evidence from a Three-Person Game," [1970] both in the *American Political Science Review*). His 1968 article with then graduate student Ordeshook, "A Theory of the Calculus of Voting" (also in the *American Political Science Review*), remains controversial, heavily cited, and, it is fair to say, seminal over three decades later.

In some ways, it could be said that this intellectual decade ended with the publication in 1973 of his and Ordeshook's *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*. This last book has associated with the actual title on its dust jacket the informal subtitle, "A synthesis and exposition of current trends in descriptive political theory based on axiomatic and deductive reasoning." It stands as the first graduate-level text of the application of rational choice theory to political problems, reflecting how much work had been completed in the area Bill had launched in the discipline less than two decades earlier.

To be sure, much of the original work considered had been done by social scientists in other disciplines (still mostly, but not exclusively, economics), but a substantial amount was done by political scientists. More to the point, the book covered a much wider variety of topics common to politics, especially democratic politics, than would have been possible a decade earlier. These included chapters on political participation, voting and elections, legislatures, and regulation and other aspects of bureaucracies.

While Bill had a truly far ranging intellect and therefore worked on a remarkable array of topics, he made unusual contributions to the study of three more questions that seem in retrospect to evolve naturally from what he had accomplished by 1973. Rational choice theory made its first and greatest impact (largely through Riker and the department he created) in the study of various aspects of the democratic process. In 1982a, his *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (W.H. Freeman) brought the increas-

ingly wide-ranging and deepening set of formal results to bear on the normative foundations of democracy. His basic claim was that the results from social choice theory essentially rendered democracy as a choice between or among competing platforms (or what he meant by "populism") meaningless. He found in the results, however, the basis for justification of Madisonian liberalism, by which he meant elections as a referendum on the incumbent office holders.

Liberalism Against Populism also included results about the second of the three topics, institutions. One of the things that made the formal study of government and politics different from the study of market economies, especially in this period of work under general equilibrium theory, was that institutions both structured political competition and were the result of that competition. In 1982b, he began to develop the theoretical underpinnings of what he considered to be about as close to a law-like regularity in politics as could be found in his essay, "The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science," (*American Political Science Review*). This, he suggested, was an institutional equilibrium resulting from the interactions of citizens and their political leaders taking place within a particular institutional context, in this case the context of plurality voting.

While Duverger's Law was therefore an institutional equilibrium, it was not a general one, because it was quite possible to change the institutional context. Political leadership unhappy with the two-party system need only change its elections from plurality to proportional methods, as New Zealand did in the 1990s, for example. As the theory would predict, that system changed from an essentially exact two-party system, with one of the two winning majority control of their legislature, to one with two larger parties but sufficient smaller ones to deny either party majority control.

This point about the "endogeneity" of institutions is general, he argued two years earlier. In 1980, he had made a devastating argument about the consequences of the general absence of voting (and other) equilibrium in politics (making politics, he claimed, the "truly dismal science"). In "Implications from the Disequilibrium of Majority Rule for the Study of Institutions" (*American Political Science Review*, 1980), he argued that the disequilibrium of voting was "inherited" by a sort of backwards induction onto the choices of rules. As a result, institutions were themselves as problematic as voting—the same problem that undermined "populism" in his thinking undermined institutions as well. He thus viewed institutions as little more than a temporary "congealing of tastes." They were no more a general equilibrium than was any other voting outcome, and they therefore carry no more moral weight.

Bill began his journey by seeking to establish a science of politics based on game theory. That journey led him and his fellow scholars to discover that the science of politics was very different from the science of economics, from which his ideas originated. The political analogy to the market is the election, but the analogy does not lead to a general equilibrium outcome, but one in which disequilibrium (or, its essential equivalent in these terms, a seemingly infinite number of equilibria) is common place. In addition, the problem of government is that of power, and

in particular that those who choose outcomes also choose large portions of the rules under which the government operates. The selection of these institutional features is just as fraught with instability (and lack ethical justification) as is the passage of ordinary legislation. Bill therefore turned to seek a new way to think about choice under disequilibrium (or a proliferation of equilibria).

He turned to acts of political leadership, looking at what he called political "heresthetics." This term was his creation to cover instances of manipulation of the strategic context to turn uncertain outcomes in one's favor. He first made this sort of argument in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association, "The Heresthetics of Constitution Making: The Presidency in 1787, with Comments on Determinism and Rational Choice" (published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1984). It was itself a heresthetical act of Riker to put this art of strategy to the academy first in that most "sacred" of secular locations, the founding of this Republic. He then collected a series of case studies to illustrate and develop this account in his *The Art of Political Manipulation* (1986). He continued the attempt to develop this part of the scientific explanation of politics to the end of his life, ending with a posthumously published account of the passage of the U.S. Constitution in the various states, *The Strategy of Rhetoric* (1996).

While Bill succeeded in redefining the discipline of Political Science, his work began, as it ended, in the larger realm of social science more generally. He began by drawing from Economics and from game theory. In the middle, his and Ordeshook's *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* (1973) was a rich application of the work of many social scientists, including those cited already and other prominent Public Choice scholars such as Mancur Olson. Indeed, it was often through the Society, its journal, and its annual meetings that this work grew. Twenty years later, he and his students in political science were developing theories of social phenomena of sufficient originality and importance to return the favor to Public Choice scholars in other disciplines.

Conclusions

In the end, then, William H. Riker succeeded in placing political science within the set of scientifically based social sciences. He was among the first social scientists to apply game theory systematically to any major set of problems in a sustained way. He extended this vision to the discipline through his own work and that of the students he directly trained at the University of Rochester and at the (increasing numbers of) graduate programs that have emulated his. He linked political science to the other scientific social sciences, once again through his own scholarship and through institution building, notably through the Public Choice Society. He then brought his considerable energies to bear on understanding the nature and ethical standing of democracy through implications of the scientific results of he and his students. He addressed the central problem of politics (who rules the rulers) by including the study of institutions and of leadership in that "formal, positive political theory" he had promised 40 years earlier.

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