



economic perspective

by Gene Steuerle

A Tribute to Al Davis

Al Davis. Al Davis. Where are you, Al, now that we need you more than ever? Many tributes are going to be made about Al, who died on Friday, May 30, as a result of injuries from being struck by a taxi. (For related coverage, see p. 1450.) Still, I feel compelled to add my own accolade, not just in gratitude for what he did for me over the years, but to challenge all of us who engage in tax analysis and policy to try to live up to his standards.

Anyone who worked with Al knows that he was a master at putting together information and disseminating it in easily digestible nuggets. He loved data and would reconfigure and recompile it until the stories hidden in the numbers came out and hit you over the head as if they were apparent all along. He fed all of us information about actions we had missed — especially if they involved some sleight of hand, some manipulation of the numbers, or simply some little noticed special interest provision snuck into a bill late at night. In this endeavor he was ceaselessly bipartisan. Those for whom he worked, Democrats on the Ways and Means and House Budget Committees, may be well aware of his biting edge when he thought Republicans were running amok, but I can assure you that he was equally informative, honest, and skeptical when Democrats were dodging or ignoring principles of tax or budget policy.

Al was a national treasure. He knew more quirks of the tax and budget process than most of us will ever hope to guess at, much less understand. He could translate confusing rules, jumbled numbers, and incomplete actions, with a keen awareness of just how they were going to affect the policy process. He would spend whatever time was necessary to educate his bosses and his colleagues in the tax and budget community, even if it meant that he had to work 18 hours instead of 12 to get other parts of his job done.

Al and I go back to graduate school days at the University of Wisconsin long ago. We both had returned to school after a military tour of duty, and we both had a keen interest in issues of public policy. Al was quickly disaffected by some of the arcane aspects of economics — those that might be great for tenure

but had no applicability to the real world. Al wanted to solve problems and his interest from the start was in public policy. How could it be made to work best for the public? From beginning to end, I don't think there was ever any other motivation that so drove him. He was an exemplary public servant, the embodiment of the concept of service.

At the same time, he was fun. Sometimes when action was fierce, battle lines drawn, and staff abuse the order of the day, Al would smile brightly and plunge harder than ever into the morass to try to come out with information that was straightforward, sensible, and influential. And always timely. He had a special smirk for much of the silliness that always prevails in the legislative process, and when you saw it come over his face, you got ready for a good story — the same way you anticipated a Bob Hope punch line. I think Al's energy cells were fueled by the action going on around him.

Integrity largely defines Al's approach to work and policymaking. There's something about our system of government that makes it dependent on people like Al, the ones who tell it like it is and are willing to bear the consequences. There's a story that circulates in government about the many staff persons in Congress and the Executive Branch who either stare at their shoes or simply tell their bosses what they want to hear. The shoe staring arises when an elected official says something outlandish or wrong, but no one has the nerve to correct him or even put better information into the conversation. Al's failure to play these games may have foreclosed certain career options, but he was usually in his element in the jobs he took, always just below the surface visible to the public but right at the heart of policy.

It's hard to convey fully the loss to the policy community, much less to Al's friends and loved ones. I do know this. Al's death warns us once again that those who would serve must do it now, not later after some power has been obtained or some career ambition achieved. Thanks, Al. And every time I see still more silliness in the tax or budget process, I'll sense your outrage that it couldn't have been done better and your humor at how it all happened. I'll try to maintain hope that, with people like you to grace our lives, maybe, just maybe, we can muddle through once again.