

June 13, 2019

**MARTIN FELDSTEIN**

Dear Kate, Margaret and Janet, colleagues, friends –

It's an honor, although an extremely painful one, to talk today about my dear friend – my colleague, my advisor, my mentor, in many respects a role model to me as well as to many of us here today, but above all my very dear friend – of more than half a century. When Marty and I first became friends, he was all of 28. I had just turned 24. Our friendship spanned most of his adult life, and almost all of mine up to now. Kate, Margaret, Janet, I grieve with you at our loss.

Everyone here today is already well aware that Marty was one of the most outstanding economists of our time. All of the highest honors our profession in America has to offer – the John Bates Clark medal, the presidency of the American Economic Association, and many more besides – went to him, and deservedly so. His scholarly contributions richly merited the acclaim he received. There will be another time, and place, to recall in a substantive way what Marty added to our knowledge of economics, and how he shaped our thinking as economists as well as the thinking of the broader public about matters of economics and economic policy.

Today I want instead to highlight Marty's remarkable personal qualities – qualities that made him uniquely effective and influential in the varied settings to which he applied his extraordinary energy and talents.

Marty was a doer, a person who made things happen. To be sure, many people are doers. The world has lots of entrepreneurs, executives, and policymakers. But a large element of what was unique in Marty was his ability to *do* things, to make things happen, from a seat normally

occupied by thinkers. The point is worth pausing on. Marty spent his professional life – more than fifty years of it – as a Harvard professor. And that was important to him. His devotion to our beloved university ran deep, and he influenced it for the better in many ways. Yet despite being a professor – an academic, as many of us would put it – Marty continually made things happen. He influenced individuals, and he influenced institutions. And he influenced events.

The key to Marty's ability to exert this degree of influence, I think, was his courage of conviction that what he thought was right was, actually, right. Whether the matter at hand was the best way to analyze a question of economics, or the best direction for public policy, or the best person to appoint to some position, or the best way to structure anything from a course to a conference to a large organization, Marty thought carefully, decided what he thought was right, and then unflinchingly pursued the path to get there. He was one of the quietest people I've ever known, but one of the firmest – and therefore one of the most effective. What was right was right.

One consequence was Marty's ability to influence other people. At Harvard this was most visible in his students. I don't mean simply the students who happened to come his way. I mean the enormous number of talented individuals who, precisely because of his remarkable personal qualities, *became* his students. The roster of those whom he attracted to the study of empirical, policy-oriented economics, over his many years in our department – graduate students, undergraduates, even people who were just visiting temporarily – is astonishing, both in quantity (Marty supervised nearly 100 Ph.D. dissertations) and in the quality of the work these people went on to do. Marty attracted them to this line of work in large part through his conviction that empirical, policy-oriented economics held out the promise to address the questions our economic way of life places before us, and thereby to make our country and our

world a better place. At the same time, he understood that few questions of practical economics yield to a single, silver-bullet solution. His approach was to keep working away at a problem, with one empirical study after another, making incremental progress at each step. What mattered was a cumulative body of well grounded empirical research. In larger part because of Marty, his students embraced that view as well

Marty was not a dirigiste advisor, however. He respected his students as adults and as professionals. He was interested in what their work showed and where their findings led. And he energetically supported his students as they moved forward in their careers, often acting behind the scenes, in ways of which even they were unaware. It is a testament to Marty that so many of his students from over the years are present this afternoon. It is a greater testament to him that we know the work that so many of them, present today or not, went on to do.

It was also part of Marty's character that influencing the thinking and the work of professional economists was not sufficient. It is no accident that Marty for decades taught the introductory economics course at Harvard, and other large-scale undergraduate courses as well. Nor that, again for decades, he wrote for popular outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*. The thoughtful, informed public mattered to him. His goal was to enable them to become *more* thoughtful, and *more* informed, about economics and especially economic policy.

As well all know, Marty's role as a doer was not limited to his one-on-one interactions with individuals, or even his influence on many individuals at a time, in the classroom or through his writings. Marty was also a builder and shaper of institutions, most prominently the National Bureau of Economic Research. Marty was 38 when he assumed the leadership of a long-standing and well respected, but small-scale and by then somewhat musty, New York-based research organization. Today the NBER comprises the heart of empirical, policy-oriented

economics, regularly attracting hundreds if not thousands of economists to its varied activities. I vividly remember a seemingly endless series of conversations with Marty (often late at night) as he was designing what the new NBER would do and how it would operate, with different programs, projects within programs, conferences, conference volumes and other publications, and of course the working paper series. I remember too the first year of the Summer Institute. I remember the first NBER trip to China. In every one of these efforts, Marty's goal was to redirect what people in our profession do. And he succeeded. I'm merely one example. I first went to China together Marty and a handful of other NBER economists – as well as Kate, and also Margaret and Janet, whom I recall on the trip as being perhaps 11 and 9; I've since returned many times, and interacted with Chinese economists and policymakers in numerous settings both there and here. I first went to India for the NBER's Neemrana conference. I've returned several times, and frequently interacted with Indian economists. So have many, many others who went on those trips. That's what Marty intended us to do.

Like his role in not only rethinking the NBER but then making his new design a reality, Marty's life as a doer famously included an active role in the making of public policy. His service as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors is well known. His informal activities, quietly advising countless office holders both here and abroad, with many of whom he was never publicly identified, is less so. One of my more bizarre Harvard Economics Department memories is of a regular meeting of our weekly macroeconomics seminar, some time late in 1976. Marty was presenting one of his many papers. About a half-hour into the seminar, one of the department assistants came in and handed Marty a note. He looked up somewhat sheepishly and said he didn't know quite what to do, but thought he'd better step out for a moment. The moment turned into ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, but we all waited. Eventually Marty returned

and resumed his presentation. After the seminar, he explained to me that he had received a telephone call and thought he had better take it – from President-elect Jimmy Carter.

No doubt there will be another time and place to talk about Marty's public service. But one further aspect of his approach to policy-oriented economic research bears mention. Yet another of Marty's personal qualities was an intense determination to focus on what he thought was important. Like many professional intellectuals, Marty was a man of broad knowledge and wide interests. But interesting was one thing, and important was another. I recall a conversation, at some point in the early to mid 1980s, about an economist whose work Marty especially admired. Someone asked what the person was working on. Marty replied "taxes." But he immediately went on to explain, approvingly, that that was simply because taxes were the number-one issue of the day, and that if the issue were something else, the person would presumably be working on that instead. That's how Marty thought about allocating *his* effort. At different times he was a health economist, a tax economist, a monetary economist, a trade economist, even a national security economist. In *his* thinking, he was simply an economist. He worked on whatever was important.

The last of Marty's personal qualities that I want to emphasize – and here I very much speak of Kate as well – was his remarkable capacity for personal friendship. He was my closest friend at Harvard. I suspect many others felt the same. He and Kate opened their house, and their hearts, to Barbara and me, as well as to countless friends and their families. Their friends' family events became Marty's and Kate's too. Their successes were also Marty's and Kate's to celebrate. Their family illnesses were also Marty's and Kate's concern. Their losses were also Marty's and Kate's to mourn.

Today all of *us* mourn with Kate, and with Margaret and Janet. Your loss is our loss – and Harvard's, and the economics profession's, and the country's. I've lost my dear friend of fifty-one years. None of us will find another like him.

Ben Friedman