

Harvey Sicherman: A Celebration

by Walter A. McDougall

Walter A. McDougall is the Alloy-Ansin Professor of International Relations and Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is Co-Chair of FPRI's History Institute for Teachers and Chair of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West.

Abstract: The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian reflects on the rich intellectual fare enjoyed over weekly lunches with Harvey Sicherman. McDougall describes Harvey's mastery of traditional geopolitical analysis, as well as his deftness in adapting strategy to the late-Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

For sixteen years, beginning in 1994, I had the privilege of spending part of most Mondays in the company of Harvey Sicherman. His distinguished service as a strategic adviser and speech writer for three Republican secretaries of state had come to a sudden end when Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush's bid for re-election. That proved a blessing for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, founded in 1955 by Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, Sicherman's graduate school mentor at the University of Pennsylvania. It meant Harvey was free to return to Philadelphia in 1993 and assume leadership of the Institute at a critical juncture. (Reflecting on his puckish, rebellious career at Penn, Harvey doubtless considered it "returning to the scene of the crime.") He would serve as FPRI's president for the rest of his life during which time the Institute's profile, prestige, and influence reached unprecedented heights and its programs of research, teaching, and publication diversified, digitalized, and addressed the new global challenges of a new century. Sicherman's formidable personality, intellect, and physical presence became the beloved face of FPRI over those years. They also personified the strengths he built into the whole institution. His legacy will live on. So, too, will his legend.

When Harvey persuaded me to become editor of *Orbis*, FPRI occupied a second-story wing in Ralston House, a historic but gloomy old geriatric facility at 36th and Chestnut streets. The workspace was rendered gloomier still by the radical downsizing Sicherman and the trustees had to impose during the immediate post-Cold War years when funding for foreign policy work dried up. Indeed, my earliest vivid memory of FPRI is of a small assembly in an overlarge hall during which Harvey addressed the forlorn fellows and staff that

remained. I hardly knew him yet and had little stake in his mission given my secure “day job” as a chaired professor at Penn. Yet Harvey’s pep talk was so compelling – so *Reaganesque* in its eloquence, humor, candor, and optimism – that I spontaneously rose to my feet and admonished the staff to take heart. Under this dynamic new leader the institute had nowhere to go but up.

Sicherman’s decision to relocate the FPRI to a Center City office suite near 16th and Walnut streets epitomized the renaissance. It also changed my life, for although the institute was no longer within walking distance of campus it was now within walking distance of the Union League Club. Harvey began inviting me to lunch with him there on Mondays in what became an eagerly anticipated weekly mix of work as play: a meeting or (better yet) melding of minds; he called them our *séances*. After dining we always repaired to the club’s smoking room for coffee, a cigar, and conversation so long and lively that strangers sometimes put down their newspapers and bashfully asked if they might listen in. Harvey and I shared stories, anecdotes, spontaneous jokes, banter, and *bon mots*, while touching upon a vast, unpredictable array of topics. We would finish each other’s sentences, not because they were boring or obvious, but because we would excitedly catch the other’s drift. Above all, we exchanged, enriched, and cross-pollinated each other’s ideas to the point that later on we could not recall whether he got some idea from me or whether I got it from him.

Invariably we began by discussing the foreign policy crises *du jour* and the current events that had transpired since our previous meeting. In this phase I did all the asking and Harvey the answering. Whether the subject was the Middle East, Asia, Europe, U.S. politics and foreign policy, or economics and international finance (an impressive, self-taught expertise), Harvey invariably possessed more reliable and more recent intelligence about it than any news outlet. That was due in part to his vast network of former colleagues and cronies both inside and outside of government and inside and outside the United States. It was also due to the voracity and efficiency with which he ingested and digested data from the media and insider’s grapevine. All I needed to do was ask what to make of this or that event or official pronouncement and Harvey would explain, often in more detail than I could remember, but with such clarity that when the same subjects came up in conversations on campus I could “dine out” all week on what I had learned on Monday from Harvey.

Usually, after we covered contemporary world affairs, our conversations would segue into the history behind current events or else the historical subjects I happened to be lecturing on that week in my courses at Penn. During this phase, I did much of the talking, but less to instruct Sicherman than to try out interpretations and insights and solicit his feedback. For although his doctorate was in Political Science, Harvey really thought like a historian (the best scholars of International Relations usually do). Anyway, his breadth of knowledge far surpassed that of the narrow specialists credentialed as

historians these days. Hence, Harvey always had something interesting to contribute whether the subject was drawn from ancient, medieval, or modern history, and if the subject pertained to some prominent personage the chances were he would also have a delicious anecdote to relate. His storehouse of telling tidbits about historical figures was a by-product of his zest for biographies. He agreed with Thomas Carlyle that since history is nothing other than experienced life, biography is the truest form of history.

Sicherman's command of geography was just as complete and must have gratified Robert ("You can't argue with geography") Strausz-Hupé. Born before World War I in the twilight of the Austrian Habsburg Empire, Strausz-Hupé emigrated to America from crowded, divided, militarized east central Europe in the same manner as the families of Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Morgenthau, and Harvey Sicherman. Their "old countries" had become a region where Thomas Hobbes' theoretical "war of all against all" was too often reality. The region most like it today is the Middle East. In such dangerous neighborhoods geographical awareness and geopolitical strategy are not the luxuries they are for lucky Americans. So whereas Harvey undoubtedly learned a great deal from Strausz-Hupé, he probably arrived at Penn already sharing his realistic perception of an anarchic international system in which anxious, competitive sovereign states ruled by flawed human beings brandished dangerous weapons and played dangerous games on a geopolitical chessboard that one ignored, even for a moment, at one's peril.

Sicherman's mastery of traditional geopolitical analysis, deftness in adapting strategy to the changing worlds of the late-Cold War and post-Cold War eras, and skill in "selling" strategy to American "customers" both ignorant and uncomfortable with power politics made him an invaluable national asset. I first witnessed his genius in 1995 when the civil wars following the crack-up of Yugoslavia were in full fury. Richard Holbrooke was trying to broker a truce based on a partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina between the Serbs and Croats. When I inquired one Monday whether *any* line of division might prove acceptable to the warring parties, Harvey exulted, "I've done the map!" He proceeded to sketch on a paper napkin the complex boundaries and features of that wild part of Europe and then the very line of demarcation that later emerged in the Dayton Accords. When subsequent crises erupted I always made it a point to ask Harvey if he'd "done the map" on Chechnya, Kosovo, the Spratly Islands, Tora Bora, Kurdistan, Lebanon, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iranian nuclear sites, *ad infinitum*, and the answer was always yes.

Geography is one of those inescapable variables that allows and indeed obliges would-be strategists to draw distinctions. No ideology, agenda, slogan, aspiration, or policy can be applied unthinkingly in dissimilar geographical, cultural, or political settings, or even in the same setting at two different times, without courting major blunders in statecraft. Alas, political scientists, journalists, special pleaders of all sorts, and simple-minded or self-serving politicians are too often tempted and even trained to ignore

distinctions. For instance, the U.S. occupation of Japan after 1945 had little if any relevance to the occupation of Iraq after 2003. Nor do the 1989 popular uprisings in eastern Europe have much relevance to those in the Muslim crescent today. Nor, for that matter, do words such as freedom, democracy, justice, virtue, and law mean the same thing to peoples living in different times, places, and cultures. Yet most Americans, in their ignorance of geography and history, are suckers for the peddlers of bromides distilled from facile analogies. No wonder U.S. foreign relations have been rife with examples of what Sicherman called, with slightly bitter tongue-in-cheek, “diplomatic malpractice” and “monkey business.” In fact, he kept a hilarious toy monkey in his FPRI office to remind himself not to expect too much from his fellow man, and not to take others, or himself, too seriously.

By the time the ash on Harvey’s cigars (I called them “all-day suckers”) at last neared their bands and our Monday marathon neared its end, we often turned to a third subject we both revered and studied: the Bible. My own spiritual mentor, an Anglican bishop in Berkeley, California, had taught me that at bottom all questions are theological, notwithstanding the “American pragmatism” of William James, John Dewey, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. That is, questions of law, business, morals, war and peace, crime and punishment, taxing and spending, marriage and family, health, education, and welfare all hinge ultimately on (usually unspoken) assumptions and (usually planted) axioms about the nature of God, the nature of man, and the relationship between the two. As an Orthodox Jew and brilliant, erudite interpreter of the Torah, Harvey not only knew that truth but lived it as few in the laity ever do. On a given Monday he might regale me with a critique of the botched exegesis that some unfortunate rabbi had made in his presence. Or he might joyfully tell of an insight that came to him while poring over the Torah passage assigned for the previous Sabbath. Or he might ask for my explanation of some aspect of Catholic or Protestant doctrine or practice. Or I might ask him to explain some feature of ancient Jewish faith or custom encountered in my own Bible studies. Sometimes our discussion of religious themes would lead us into moral theology and back to contemporary issues of law and policy. It was immensely gratifying when the political stances we derived from our religious first principles coincided, which was nearly always the case. To be sure, given our respective faiths there was a theological elephant in the room we silently agreed to be silent about. But that was not pretense, as some might suspect. It was the deference and mutual respect that distinguish gentlemen from boors and beasts, and so make civility possible.

Civility was the lodestone or *gravitas* in Sicherman’s sturdy soul. He was simply the most civilized person I ever met. While strolling the streets in Center City with Harvey (his stride was just that: a dignified stroll) I enjoyed watching people react to his magnificent costume. You never saw Harvey on the town except in a tailored, three-piece suit (cream white in summer) and accessories including a watch fob, bowler hat, walking stick, and two-tone

saddle oxford shoes. But if people thought this fellow a dandy or fop they were gravely mistaken. Harvey merely took pride in being “well turned out,” which ladies and gentlemen used to consider *de rigueur*. So Harvey’s sartorial style was simply the visible manifestation of an authentic, consistent, and congruent character. He would only use fountain pens. His handwriting was a rococo calligraphy that even he sometimes could not decipher. His prose and speech were Victorian in cadence, syntax, and vocabulary. He even enjoyed archaic pronunciations. If Harvey Sicherman could be said to be playing a role then the role he was playing was Harvey Sicherman. What you saw and heard were not a façade, but the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace that was just as evident in his intellectual, political, religious, and private life as in his public appearances. Harvey was a throwback in the best sense of the word, as if he were channeling Benjamin Disraeli. We shall not see his like again.

Can anything good come out of Scranton? Clearly the answer is yes. Harvey was not the least bit abashed to have hailed from a gritty declining city. Instead, he told affectionate stories about its provincialism, ethnic stew, and small-bore political corruption. In any case, it was where his father did business. Harvey greatly admired his father, who in turn must have inspired the son to honor and yet strive to transcend their marginalized Jewish middle-class life in a middling coal town. I never learned whether Harvey chose or was told to attend the Catholic University of Scranton, but he clearly enjoyed it to judge from the irreverent, rollicking tales he told of his college days. He evidently valued the schooling he got there as well, perhaps (as James Kurth has quipped) because the Jesuit emphasis on verbal precision and logic might be described as “a Talmudic education with Christian characteristics.”

In any event, Harvey arrived at Penn with all the knowledge and tools required to win the plaudits of the realist “FPRI faction” in the Political Science Department and to thwart the efforts that hostile faculty made to arrest his progress. The newly minted Dr. Sicherman became a favored protégé of Strausz-Hupé who named him Director of Research at the FPRI not long before General Alexander Haig, a native of suburban Bala Cynwyd, came home for awhile as a guest professor at Penn. Haig saw in Sicherman a brilliant, trustworthy, principled aide-de-camp. Sicherman saw in Haig a shrewd, loyal, and charming patron. When Haig returned to Washington, D.C., as President Reagan’s first Secretary of State, he urged Harvey to join him. . . even though, as Harvey explained, he would not be available to surmount any crises on the Sabbath. The rest is literally history as he went on to serve secretaries of state George Shultz and James Baker as well during the climactic decade of the Cold War.

Growing up a “fish out of water” in several respects might have nurtured Sicherman’s ingenious and irrepressible humor. If one had to pick a single comedian (with prop) to characterize Harvey’s wit the choice would have to be George Burns (with cigar). Recently the British historian Paul Johnson explained why he thought America would not fall into decline (*Wall Street*

Journal, March 5-6, 2011, p. A13). One reason was the creativity nourished by freedom of expression, but another was humor. “One of the great contributions that America has made to civilization,” he deadpanned, “is the one-liner.” Ben Franklin invented it; Mark Twain perfected it, and Ronald Reagan deployed it to reverse America’s earlier apparent decline. “Mr. Reagan had thousands of one-liners. That’s what made him a great president.” Sicherman, like Reagan and Burns, had quips on the tip of his tongue for every familiar occasion and the glibness to conjure originals for novel occasions. That made him a delightful raconteur and unsurpassed master of ceremonies. More important, however, is the fact that Harvey, like Reagan and Burns, never sought laughs or “scored points” at other’s expense. His satire often had political bite, but was not personal. Indeed, one of his most endearing traits was the use of silent facial expressions to substitute for words that might prove hurtful or impolitic. His unforgettable trademark *moué* expressed contempt for some dubious or dishonest remark. Harvey would dip his chin while raising his eyebrows, peering over his nose, and slightly crossing his eyes. The look screamed, “Likely story!”

Courtesy, restraint, precision, and discipline in the use of words are indispensable qualities in a diplomat; hence, Sicherman would have made a good one. In fact, he did, if only as a traveling companion and brainstorming adviser for his chiefs in the State Department. But upon taking over the FPRI, he displayed those same qualities in public relations and insisted the rest of us do so as well. During my six and a half years with *Orbis*, Harvey rarely questioned my editorial discretion, but when he did it was invariably because some article contained an *ad hominem* argument, a blanket condemnation, or a criticism that might be construed as a personal attack. He called such indiscretions “drive-by shootings” and (rightly) insisted they had no place in scholarly or, for that matter, political debate. Recognizing each other as kindred word smiths Harvey and I routinely vetted each other’s drafts. If some phrase or passage sounded risky, liable to misunderstanding, or just clunky, Harvey would say “this needs fixing.” As often as not we decided the way to fix it was to delete it. That is the literary equivalent of biting your tongue rather than saying something you may regret.

Diplomatic deportment that avoided making enemies needlessly both sheltered and strengthened whatever person or office Sicherman happened to represent, but it also served himself. He was a partisan, make no mistake, with strong, principled views and loyalties. But never, to my knowledge, did he indulge spite or otherwise burn bridges between himself and people whose views or loyalties differed. That made him unusually effective in government, as chief executive of a non-partisan think tank, and as moderator or interlocutor at high-level conferences bringing together Europeans and Americans, Japanese and Chinese, Indians and Pakistanis, or Arabs and Israelis. Perhaps his lifelong career as a bridge-builder rather than -burner explains why he said, back in the 1990s, that he was not looking to get back into government even if

the Republicans won back the White House. Harvey maintained so many close ties to so many people in both parties and most foreign policy “schools” that he did not need a bureaucratic title to get a hearing on U.S. foreign policy. The same conduits that supplied him with inside dope on breaking events supplied Washington VIP’s with Sicherman’s analysis, wisdom, experience, and operational recommendations. Too bad, for the United States and the world, that the powers-that-be did not heed Harvey’s counsel more often over the years.

A joke tells of the host of a church event who is at the podium listing the virtues of the guest speaker when the latter, a pompous Episcopal bishop, leans forward and whispers, “Don’t forget to mention my humility.” Casual acquaintances might have thought that to be one virtue Sicherman lacked, but that would be wrong. Obviously he took justifiable pride in his appearance, good taste, and good works, but he seemed not to have any need or desire for glory or even credit. Nor should that surprise anyone because humility is the virtue *sine qua non* of the speechwriter’s trade which consists of making *other* people sound heroic and wise. How many eloquent turns of phrase, shrewd policies, and wise decisions did Sicherman help to contribute, knowing that political figures would get all the credit while he remained invisible? Harvey understood that was part of the business and it did not deter or embitter him.

Sicherman coined the phrase “A Europe Whole and Free,” thereby providing George H. W. Bush with a genuine vision at the end of the Cold War. Sicherman coined the phrase “Two-Plus-Four Talks” to describe how to get the two German regimes, then the four Allied powers, to agree on reunification of Germany. In August 1990, less than a day after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, Sicherman submitted a brilliant, comprehensive memorandum that explained Iraqi behavior, described the threats to American interests, and recommended the very diplomatic and military measures that Bush and Baker later took. In the mid-1990s, when threats of war sounded from the Taiwan Straits, Sicherman (charmed by the Chinese penchant for reducing policies to proverbs) reduced America’s One China Policy to the “Two Noes and One Yes”: No to Taiwanese independence; No to Chinese use of force; and Yes to Cross-Straits investment and trade. After 2003, when it appeared the George W. Bush team had no plan at all for a stable Iraq, Sicherman provided the “Three Noes” formula: no Sunni dictatorship; no Shi’ite theocracy; no independent Kurdistan. Finally, given his close contacts in Washington, Jerusalem, and beyond, there is no telling how many key decisions Sicherman quietly informed or influenced over the decades with regard to U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Harvey never seemed hurt by the fact that few Americans beyond his own circle knew of his contributions. But I think he was touched, just months before his sudden illness, when a young scholar paid him a visit. She had been researching U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Cold War. She wanted to meet the little-known author of the many important memoranda she had unearthed in the State Department archives.

Sicherman shunned factionalism, partisanship, and prideful ambition. He supported and served Republicans, but did not belong to their neoconservative, country-club, libertarian, or evangelical wings. He was an American Orthodox Jew devoted entirely to country, religion, family, and friends. One might call him a High Conservative of the sort whose heyday was the era of Disraeli and Salisbury and whose last echo was, perhaps, Churchill. High Conservatives know that public virtue is almost always in short supply. High Conservatives distrust extremes of both hope and fear, interrogate progress, and abominate utopian schemes to improve human nature. High Conservatives respect the law of unintended consequences, appreciate the contingency of all things, and believe prudence is the essence of wise statecraft. High Conservatives design strategies to *conserve* what civility remains in the dealings among men and nations. Suffice to say that Harvey applauded a definition I coined myself: “A Conservative is someone who knows that things could be worse than they are – *period!*” I in turn applauded the principle Harvey made the FPRI motto, Talleyrand’s adage “Above all, not too much zeal.”

Maybe he first heard that quotation from me, or maybe I first heard it from him. I do know that every Monday for the rest of my life moments will come when I shall choke up or chuckle in celebration of Harvey Sicherman.

