
Tom Schelling at Maryland

I. M. (Mac) Destler and Peter H. Reuter

Early in the fall of 1989 Michael Nacht, the dean of the Maryland School of Public Affairs (which has since been renamed the School of Public Policy), told our small senior faculty, about eight in number, that Tom Schelling might be joining us. Tom had decided to leave Harvard, but had not yet decided where to land. The west coast seemed probable, but the University of Maryland was in the running. This provoked excitement, but also anxiety. We were a cozy, collegial group of moderately prominent scholars in our forties, aspiring academic stars. It was more than a little scary to contemplate the arrival of a genuine superstar. What sort of personality would he add to our mix?

Exalted though he might be, we still followed protocol. We invited Tom to come give a job talk. Asked for a title, he responded, "Current Events." Could he be more specific? "I don't know, ask me next week." These cryptic responses reflected the fact that the surprise revolution east of the Iron Curtain was then in full swing. Schelling chose to talk about the Russians, and Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Activists in the Soviet satellite countries, Tom observed, were pushing and testing the new limits. But Russians were holding back.

Why did they need Gorbachev to pull them toward greater freedom? Tom provided two nice, Schellingesque hypotheses. Both assumed that most members of the Soviet elite felt that the Communist system was bankrupt, but one assumed that each believed he was alone in this view, or one of a very small number. For any one of these lonely few to act on this belief was to risk all. The second hypothesis was more complex - most elite Russians knew that

I. M. (Mac) Destler is the Saul Stern Professor of Civic Engagement at the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland in Park. His e-mail address is mdestler@umd.edu.

Peter H. Reuter is a professor at the of School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. His e-mail address is preuter@umd.edu.

others also knew the system was bankrupt, but given the top leaders' determination to retain their power, the punishment would be severe for those who spoke out first. Only when the leader Gorbachev declared that the system was in deep trouble, that the emperor had few if any clothes as it were, would others feel able to act.

Tom went on to suggest why it made a difference for future prospects which hypothesis was correct. The whole talk was, we came to learn, typical Schelling. An original question drawn from a concrete situation, pursued to a logical conclusion others had not (yet) thought of. It was a nice start.

He came as a professor in the Department of Economics and the School of Public Policy. One factor that perhaps influenced his choice of the University of Maryland was his close connections with senior faculty on campus. The economics department was headed by a former student of his, Mahlon Straszheim; the department's most distinguished member was quite likely Mancur Olson, who had been Tom's first Ph.D. student at Harvard; and Dean Michael Nacht was a former Kennedy School colleague and an arms control colleague as well.

Before appointing him, the university also required that the department and school obtain three letters of reference. All three were from Nobel laureates. Paul Samuelson's letter consisted of one sentence. "Tom Schelling is the best economist I have known."

Some faculty anxiety remained: what would Tom be like as a colleague?

Would he be arrogant, disruptive, all-knowing? We had been mercifully free from the sort of internecine politics that plagued all too many faculties. What would happen now? Or perhaps this Tom Schelling would simply stand aloof, too important to engage in our collective work, cultivating a separation to which his awesome lifetime academic achievements entitled him.

The answers came not long after he joined us in fall 1990. Tom the analyst was quick to note that on small faculties the "service tax" on individual members was substantial because important committees (to conduct faculty searches and develop the curriculum, for example) required a minimum number of professors even when the pool of those available was relatively small. Tom the citizen moved quickly to pay at least his share. When Michael Nacht took leave to join the administration of President Bill Clinton, Tom gave full support to one of us (Mac Destler) in his unaccustomed role as acting dean of public policy, and astute advice as well. He also assumed the burden of chairing the search committee that brought us Dean Susan Schwab, who would later become U.S. trade representative. When we suddenly needed someone to direct our new program in social policy, Tom took that on as well. When Acting Dean Destler suggested to him that he might need to spend more time in the economics department (his *was* a joint appointment), he replied, "I think I am more useful here." And, increasingly, he spent his campus time at our school.

Tom made no bones about his lack of sympathy for the style of contemporary economics. He said that his ideal seminar spent ten minutes on the motivating question, five minutes on the approach, five minutes on the technique, and the balance of the hour on results and their meaning. The standard empirical paper of the 1990s, with its crushing attention to detail about technique, did not excite him.

When Tom joined us, he was 69 years old, and the university had age limits for appointments to the tenured faculty. So he was given a term of five years, renewable at the university president's discretion. Early in the academic year 1994-1995, he gently pointed out to Destler that his term would soon expire. He asked: was it likely to be extended? He wanted to remain at Maryland, but above all he wanted to remain professionally active, and if extension was not in the cards he wanted to know in time to pursue options at other institutions. Destler went to the provost, who was managing painful budget cuts. Provost Dan Fallon smiled, saying it was nice to have an easy decision for a change. Shortly thereafter, Tom received a warm handwritten note from President Brit Kirwan saying how valuable he was to the university and extending the appointment indefinitely. (By that time, the age limit had been lifted.)

From the beginning, Tom was brought to Maryland as a "university professor," with a teaching load of one course per term, initially alternating each semester between economics and public policy. Students flocked to the course in our school, which centered on the logic of decision making. His student evaluations were always enthusiastic, leading to his designation in 1994-1995 as one of five "distinguished scholar-teachers" campus-wide.

Doctoral student Robert D. Lamb, who later founded a Washington think tank, recalled, "It was a great class," which "changed in a significant way how I look at the world; suddenly able to see patterns in behavior and hidden structures in systems, in a way that makes it possible to solve otherwise intractable problems." "At some point during the semester," he continued, "he mentioned that he had never seen or held a Sacajawea dollar coin. So the class gave him a framed Sacajawea coin as a thank you and retirement gift. Whenever I would see him in later years, he always mentioned how touched he was by that gift. He was simply a terrific professor and a great human being."

At Maryland, each "distinguished scholar-teacher" gives a public lecture. In 1995, Tom chose to talk about nuclear weapons and specifically their non-use in warfare for the past half-century. With every decade, he declared and documented, their use became more unthinkable, even though nations (including ours) often eschewed "no first use" declarations. Ten years later, Tom was able to strike the same note in his address as Nobel laureate in economics (see elsewhere in this issue).

Winning the Nobel Prize of course lengthened the list of speaking invitations that Tom received from around the world. At age 84, he began five

years of extensive travel in which he tried to use his fame to address the policy issue that then engaged him the most, namely climate change. He had been involved with that topic since the early 1980s when he served on the first National Academy of Sciences panel on climate change. From Iran to China to Australia he was tireless in his effort to increase understanding of what was driving the phenomenon and the possible paths of negotiation by which it might be mitigated.

One of Tom's contributions on the challenge of climate change was to emphasize the uneven distribution of its consequences across nations and generations and the uncertainty of projections about its impacts. These two factors made him a skeptic of the notion, then fashionable amongst economists, that nations should be allocated some share of cumulative emissions and implement a "cap and trade" regime (Schelling 2005). In particular, he thought that sanctions were unlikely to be applied either to powerful countries, because of the complexity of their engagements with the rest of the world, or to poor countries because they would be unable to actually pay the penalties imposed. Instead, he pointed to the post-World War Two Marshall Plan, in which allocation of funds was achieved through the development of an informal set of norms among professionals, as a better model. As always, his simple style of presentation made him an effective speaker to a wide range of audiences.

Tom did not abandon the subject of arms control when he thought there was an opportunity to make a useful contribution. In particular, he made a trip to Iran in 2007, arranged by a Maryland Ph.D. student from that country, using the opportunity to talk to senior officials (off the record) about the strategic considerations that would come with that nation's acquisition of nuclear arms. He also showed his usual skepticism for propositions that were "obviously" true by raising some important concerns about the 2007-2008 push by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, among others, for an end to nuclear weapons. A polite but powerful critique in the journal *Daedalus* pointed out that nations might rid themselves of nuclear weapons but were unlikely to rid themselves of the capacity to build new ones (Schelling 2009). Without nuclear weapons, a major power war was more likely and while such a struggle might start without nuclear weapons, it was probable that the antagonists would quickly arm themselves with them. After all, he pointed out, the only time that the atom bomb was used was in a war that began without such a weapon.

He could have "retired" by then, but he remained engaged with us in multiple ways. He agreed to hold, with students, several "Conversations with Tom Schelling," covering topics he had helped illuminate such as nuclear strategy, climate change, and racial segregation. He also helped us recruit several Schelling Visiting Professors who came for a term or a year, taught a course, and gave a lecture.¹

For more than twenty precious years, we at Maryland had among us a genuinely great man who shared our burdens, a colleague in the full sense of the word, as well as an inspiration. And, for some of the lucky among us, he was a friend. We labor in vain for a phrase that captures the quality of his service, to us and with us. But we could do worse than look to the alternate title of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *Pirates of Penzance*. For Thomas Crombie Schelling was truly "the slave of duty." We are all the better for that.

NOTE

1. These were Mark Kleiman, William Dickens, and Phil Cook.

REFERENCES

- Schelling, T. C. 2005. What makes greenhouse sense. *Indiana Law Review* 38: 581-594.
— — —. 2009. A world without nuclear weapons? *Daedalus* 138(4): 124-129.