

Last Words

Ahead of History: Marcus Raskin and the Institute for Policy Studies

THE PIANO PRODIGY CLASHES WITH THE POLITICAL THINKER

I first met Marcus Raskin at a high school party on a sweltering summer night in Milwaukee in 1949. Someone called out: "Marc, play something!" Unaccountably wearing woolen pants and a long-sleeved oxford shirt, the fifteen-year-old sat down at the piano where, I assumed, he would bang out "Tea For Two" or a little boogie-woogie. He played Beethoven's "Appassionata" sonata. For most of us, it was our introduction to classical music.

When Marcus Raskin was a child, it was discovered that he had absolute pitch and could pick out notes without looking at them on the piano the family managed to keep in their modest flat above his father's plumbing business. He learned the first year John Thompson instruction book in a week, played the Grieg piano concerto at twelve. At sixteen he was accepted by New York's Juilliard School as a special student where he became a student of Leland Thompson and Rosina Lhevinne, who would become Van Cliburn's teacher.

A year later, he abruptly changed course to study at the University of Chicago college and law school with such preeminent scholars as Rexford Guy Tugwell of FDR's Brain Trust, and Quincy Wright, one of America's leading international lawyers, for whom he served as assistant while in the law school. (The student would become a lifelong friend of the two mentors.)

Why throw away a promising career as a concert pianist? "Too many fine players of my generation ended up giving piano lessons to children who had neither interest nor talent," Marc once explained. "I cared deeply about other things beyond playing the piano and had always loved thinking and reading about political theory and politics." (But he never really gave up the piano. Fifty years later, he was selected to play in the Van Cliburn Foundation's first International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs in Fort Worth. "I wasn't too bad," Marc mused.)

Indeed, even in high school, Marc Raskin *knew* about the people and events that made 1949 arguably the pivotal year of the twentieth century, reshaping our country, the world, and our lives as much or more than the Second World War, which we had eagerly followed on newspaper maps as our brave troops beat back the hated Nazis and “Japs” (as they were then called by the press) to protect our freedoms. We never considered what those freedoms meant, but intuitively we believed that we had them.

One day I asked Marc some questions about China and the Korean War, which was then in its early stages. He promptly gave me a hefty volume titled “The State Department White Paper on China”—“a good overview of the issues,” my friend solemnly advised. On another occasion, when we were discussing the Army-McCarthy congressional hearings, Marc growled: “My God, we desperately need a new freedom in this country!” then quoted Justice Louis Brandeis (not a name Marc’s friends were familiar with) on “the right to be left alone.”

On long walks in the working-class neighborhood of Milwaukee where the Raskin family had once lived, Marc’s junior high classmate, Jerry Silberman (who would change his name to Gene Wilder when he became an actor), remembers: “It wasn’t music or art (or girls) that drove Marcus, but rather how, if he were ever in a position of power, he wanted to change the world so that people, like these poor families around us, would have decent homes to come home to.”¹

To repair the world—*tikkun olam*, the great Hebrew concept of righteousness, justice, or fairness—by Marc’s own design has been his task ever since.

MR. RASKIN GOES TO WASHINGTON

In 1958, Marcus Raskin arrived in Washington DC with his new wife, Barbara Bellman Raskin, who was still years away from becoming a best-selling novelist. Marc has three children from his marriage to Barbara Raskin, who died in 1999: Erika, a novelist; Jamin, a law professor at American University, author, Maryland state senator, and one of the country’s leading experts in repairing election and campaign finance law; and Noah, former assistant dean of American University Law School and businessman. He is also the father of Eden, his twenty-year-old daughter with his second wife, Lynn Randels. “Lynn has the analytic capacities of a Scottish philosopher,” Marc says proudly, yet adds wistfully, “This omniscient woman with charm and inner and outward beauty has decided, like the most interesting in her generation, to eschew interest in government for business.”

Marc and I were born during the first years of FDR’s presidency and came of age imbued with the New Deal’s idea that government could help to resolve public problems through the application of intelligence and passion. In 1959, Marc found work as a legislative counsel—to a number of

congressmen *simultaneously*. A few days into the job, he sent a memo to every liberal House Democrat that sounds as if it were written about the twenty-first century:

One may make certain generalizations about Americans and American life in the past six years. Americans are bored. They are apathetic about politics. They are afraid. They see no way to exercise control over their own destinies. They see insurmountable problems. They are alienated from the vast commitments their government has undertaken in defense of certain vague abstractions. They do not understand the technology of science, which seems more and more to control their very lives, and their very existence on earth. They have withdrawn from the awesome complexity and almost hopeless dread, which is the general social and political scene. The American people have hoped that their leaders playing the role of "Big Daddy" would take care of the many problems which presently grip the world, so that they themselves might withdraw from the necessity of social and political action.²

One of the Congressmen Marc worked for, Robert Kastenmeier of Wisconsin, eager to organize House liberals into an effective voting bloc, formed the Liberal Project. Marc was appointed group secretary and told to contact any scholar and creative thinker he felt could establish common ground with liberals and prepare suitable policy papers. He quickly lined up philosopher Hannah Arendt, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, sociologist David Riesman, and cybernetics pioneer Norbert Wiener. Kastenmeier, assuming his young aide knew everybody under the sun, said, "I wouldn't have had the nerve to do it."³ Marc Raskin knew none of these celebrated intellectuals. "I simply called up anyone I thought would be useful. I saw no reason not to have discussions with people who I viewed as people I wanted to know." One of the people he sought out was a visitor to the Kastenmeier office, scientist Leo Szilard. A few years later, Szilard's influence would change Raskin's life—and liberalism.

On election night, 1960, Marc was giving a lecture at Harvard in Riesman's freshmen seminar. The Kennedy-Nixon race was in doubt, but it was clear that the election would be a disaster for the Congressmen Marc worked for. Half of them lost—half his base in Congress and half his wages.

"So the question is: what am I going to do?" he says. "I'm twenty-six, I have a wife and child. Dave Riesman thought that I should work in the White House and recommended me to McGeorge Bundy as his assistant on national security affairs and disarmament. My own views were not those of Kennedy's New Frontier, but I believed that I would be able to press my ideas much better within the White House."

An enthusiastic Bundy wrote to Riesman: "Marc Raskin has a remarkably powerful and lively mind. We shall probably have some disagreements, but I shall feel a lot better for knowing that certain problems have passed by his critical eye on their way to resolution."⁴

On the day of Marc's first National Security Council (NSC) meeting, President Kennedy had privately admitted to his closest aides that

Fidel Castro's army had routed the administration-backed Cuban exiles attempting to invade the country at the Bay of Pigs. Putting on a game face, Bundy told his NSC staff: "I guess Che [Guevara, Castro's number two] learned more from Guatemala than we did." Everyone except Marc laughed.

"We were meeting in the office of Bundy's deputy, Walt Rostow," Marc remembers. "On the table is a huge bowl of fruit. Everybody's devouring the fruit—Mac, Walt, Arthur Schlesinger, Dick Goodwin, others. It was like a scene from the Roman Empire. The talk was bullshit laced with the juices of overripe fruit. The problem was that those Cuban exiles who weren't lying dead on the damn beaches were about to be captured. And the United States had a *policy* issue: are we going to give the exiles air cover? And the United States said no. That was the issue in Guatemala in 1954, when the United States overthrew Jacobo Arbenz, the Guatemalan president who tried to redistribute holdings of United Fruit to landless peasants. Guevara held a minor post in that government. So I bluntly asked Bundy, 'It's interesting that Che learned from Guatemala, but what have we learned?'"

Bundy, a New England patrician, believed in debate up to the point where it challenged the existing values of the system. He took Marc's question for what it was: a dissenting statement. Marc got a terse call from Bundy's administrative assistant: "Mr. Bundy would prefer if you didn't come to the staff meetings. He would prefer that you just come in at the end of the day and meet with him alone to talk."

"My first day!" Marc says, reflecting on the putdown. "It was a very, very clear statement: they are *here*, and you are *there*." It was also very clear to him at that moment that the New Frontier was not the New Deal.

But if he had been appointed to be a minority of one, it still seemed perfectly reasonable to him to argue policy positions with Bundy and the others even though that was not something a young staff person was supposed to do, especially one who had differing positions on such Kennedy notions as a program of civilian defense shelters. In fact, Marc wrote so many policy papers that ran counter to the administration's policies that Bundy once heatedly asked him, "Are you working for me or am I working for you?" Marc continued churning out his early-warning papers.

In a memorandum to Bundy written a year and a half before the United States detected the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, Marc suggested that

the United States should not withdraw from Guantanamo [U.S. naval base in Cuba] since such a move would appear as an indication of weakness both at home and to the Communist world. However, fundamental changes in our relations to that base could still occur. We might endeavor to turn it into a series of hospitals and technical institutions for the Cuban people, staffed by U.S. personnel. This will change the nature of the threat toward Cuba and make our presence there more palatable.⁵

On the arms race, he philosophized:

Given the explosive nature of the twentieth century, and the fact that man is both good and evil, rational and irrational, we should not expect the arms race to go on at the present level or as it is being projected into the future without something going wrong. Proliferation of nuclear weapons will occur, population increases will occur, the revolutions of the twentieth century will continue (one which we started, not the Communists), and intense pressures of an economic sort will cause political unrest. Any and all of these are enough to cause U.S. involvement in a military conflict of gigantic proportions—without having resolved the problems after involvement.⁶

Anticipating the problems of globalization, a nonexistent economic concept in 1961, Marc urged the Kennedy administration to

begin a study of the relationship of international corporations to U.S. foreign policy with specific recommendations for ways of changing those relationships where the national interest of the United States is adversely effected.⁷

As the months passed, tensions between Bundy and his young assistant went well beyond disagreements over policy. Bundy had valued Marc as “a brave and independent thinker.” Now Marc had become a little too independent and determined in his own ways of thinking to suit Bundy.

As if that were not enough, Marc became an administration liability after the publication of *The Liberal Papers*, an outgrowth of the Liberal Project. “I was the staff advisor—FDR’s son, James Roosevelt, was the editor—and the Republicans were out for blood,” he recalls. “After all, sixty thousand copies had been sold, not an inconsequential number in those days or now.”

Few Republicans had read the book, but they knew a hot issue when they saw it. Republican Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen railed that this “Democratic-sponsored book could well be renamed ‘Our American Munich.’” A Republican National Committee press release urged “All Republicans To Make A Major 1962 Issue Of Democratic Book Which Goes Beyond The Communist Line.” That was enough for Bundy. He moved Marc over to the Bureau of the Budget to advise on education, not realizing that education was one of Marc’s passions.

Marc plunged into his new work, writing pioneering papers anticipating critical problems in education that are only now beginning to be dealt with, like the consequences of technology:

The interest of a free democratic society in education is roughly consonant with enabling the citizen to control his fate and together with his fellow citizens theirs. Operatively, this means that democratic societies or republican/democratic governments function on the ability of the citizen to know...to make rational political, social, and moral choices for himself and his society. The sad but true state of affairs is that technology and change have resulted in people of all ages not knowing what the few know nor

understanding how what is known by the few affects and changes the many. Continuing education becomes the only way to bridge the gap.⁸

THE WISE MAN INSTITUTE

Always in the back of Marc's mind was the dream of his new mentor, Leo Szilard, collaborator with Einstein and an important theoretical physicist for the Manhattan Project, which built America's first atomic bomb. But after Hiroshima, Szilard became so concerned about the dangers of nuclear war that he envisioned an institute *in* Washington, but not *of* Washington, where wise men would come to work on the great issues of the day but not be part of government.

Late in 1961, Marc asked another young intellectual, Richard J. Barnet, to help him develop what would become the Institute for Policy Studies. Dick Barnet, a summa cum laude from Harvard, had joined the new Arms Control and Disarmament Agency after the publication of his first book, *Who Wants Disarmament?* But he grew frustrated when he was required to hand out large grants of money to people like Herman Kahn, the controversial thermonuclear war strategist, for research projects for new, more destructive weapons systems.

Marc and Dick knew from their government experience that there were two distinct official Washingtons. In the first Washington were consultants to the government who knew enough about what the government was doing to have an influential voice in its criticism but were on the government payroll and therefore were unlikely to criticize it. In the second Washington were those who were not consultants to the government because they had the wrong politics and therefore did not know what was going on and could not even give good criticism because they were too ill-informed about the whole thing to be taken seriously.

The Institute for Policy Studies—or IPS as it would alternately come to be called by friends and by those Marc and Dick never imagined would become their enemies—would be a place where creative thinkers (called “fellows”) would examine the great and often controversial issues of American policy, conduct exhaustive research, offer alternatives to what government should and should not do, and show how society could be organized to overcome America's chronic problems of war and intervention in the affairs of other nations, economic and social disparity, racial injustice, and ignorance. The IPS project would not be to educate servants of the state, but to help the servants and the citizenry *question* the state.

In the spring of 1963, Marc and Dick, wearing long faces, stood on the steps of the Supreme Court, holding a draft of their vision for the Institute. They had just shown it to Justice William O. Douglas, one of the Court's great liberals, hoping for his blessing, but there was a sadness in the man.

“It's a good idea,” Douglas lamented, “but reason and truth are out of fashion in American life. If I were your age, I would not start an institute

in Washington. I would start it in the Himalayas," the noted mountain climber told them. "But you won't pay any attention to me and probably shouldn't. So you'll go around this country trying to raise money and you will probably succeed, but you will find that you will be witnesses at an inquest of a dead society."⁹

Six months later, the Institute for Policy Studies opened its doors.

Douglas was right about money; Marc and Dick would spend a great deal of their time raising it because they insisted IPS had to be wholly independent. The institute would refuse government contracts and would not be answerable to political parties, corporations, single-issue causes, or donors with pet projects.

Relieved of having to use their brains to justify fashionable policies, the fellows were free to challenge conventional wisdom and orthodoxy from the Right and center—and from the Left when they thought fellow liberals had it coming. Their blueprint was to put into practice philosopher John Dewey's theory that ideas were agendas for action. In this way, Marc, Dick, and their new colleagues hoped to break through barriers that had traditionally separated thinkers from doers. Not only was this unheard of in Washington at the time, it was *revolutionary*.

The notion of setting up a think tank of intellectuals outside of government that would come up with both imaginative and pragmatic policy ideas is common today, but "there was nothing like the Institute for Policy Studies in the early 1960s," says Christopher Jencks, an original IPS fellow, now professor of social policy at Harvard.¹⁰ There was nothing like IPS in Washington, America, or the rest of the world.

U.S. V. COFFIN, FERBER, GOODMAN, RASKIN, AND SPOCK

While planning IPS, Marc had said, "It is not enough to analyze problems and propose neat theoretical solutions. The fellows themselves must be actively engaged in creating change. Taking personal risk is the way of maintaining relevance to one's intellectual work."

Risk became dangerously personal for him in January 1968. President Lyndon B. Johnson was escalating the war in Vietnam while trying to suppress dissent at home. Marc—an early organizer of the antiwar movement, which he took into the halls of the Justice Department—was the principal writer with Arthur Waskow of "A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority," an influential antidraft manifesto signed by prominent intellectuals and ministers who publicly refused to support what they termed "an immoral and illegal war." Along with four other men, including Dr. Benjamin Spock, "the baby doctor," Marc was charged with conspiracy (though the men barely knew each other) to "counsel, aid, abet, and hinder the operations of the draft."

Dubbed by the media "the Boston Five" because of the trial's site, they faced five-year sentences in federal prison and ten-thousand-dollar fines. Marc—represented by former Nuremberg prosecutor Telford Taylor and

distinguished Boston lawyer Cal Bartlett—was acquitted, but the others were found guilty. Eventually, Dr. Spock and graduate student Michael Ferber were also acquitted. The appeals of Reverend William Sloan Coffin and Mitchell Goodman were reversed and remanded, but they went free when the government dropped the case.

Unchastened, Marc, with Barnet and colleague Ralph Stavins, organized a study to explain to the American public for the first time how the Vietnam quagmire had happened. “I felt that the United States had had its good name dragged through the mud by its leaders who I viewed as war criminals,” Marc reflects. “They put into harm’s way young Americans to commit these crimes and allowed for the destruction of literally millions of people in South and North Vietnam for no obvious apparent reason in the context of that time in terms of U.S. interests and certainly not in terms of the Vietnamese people.”

But Marc’s friend Hannah Arendt argued, “In order to make this stick you have to have proper names of people; you have to find out what X and Y did, that X ordered this and Y signed this order.”

For several years, Stavins, Barnet, and Marc, aided by a team of students, conducted some three hundred interviews with top advisors to presidents Kennedy and Johnson, generals, admirals, and middle-level officials who occupied strategic positions in the national security bureaucracy. Most talked openly. Some informants backed up their oral statements with documents they possessed. The finishing touches came from some Department of Defense materials that gave background information supplied by Vietnam analyst Daniel Ellsberg.

At the time, Barnet prophetically said that our “military’s delusions” in Vietnam would twist America’s foreign policy for years to come. Indeed, since the Institute’s founding more than four decades ago, Raskin, Barnet, and their IPS colleagues have been ahead of history. Garry Wills wrote in *Esquire* that the institute has “a feel for what is coming up next”; its fellows work to “their own odd and independent rhythm, proleptically, one step or two ahead of everyone else.”¹¹

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WORK OF IPS FELLOWS

Ten years before President Ronald Reagan was credited with ending the cold war, Raskin and Barnet met in Moscow with Mikhail Gorbachev’s senior advisors and learned, contrary to CIA estimates, that the Soviet Union was an overgrown third world country, its military threat was wildly exaggerated, and communist solidarity was a myth. Raskin passed their insights to the State Department, which paid no heed.

Several fellows have made huge innovations. Among Richard J. Barnet’s many prescient books on globalization and foreign affairs are *The Roots of War* and *Intervention and Revolution*. Barbara Ehrenreich has been writing pathbreaking books on women, families, work, and poverty, including *Nickel and Dimed* and *Bait and Switch*, for more than

twenty years. Three decades before the acolytes of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich peddled their idea of decentralization (mostly to benefit the well-off), Paul Goodman showed in theory and Milton Kotler demonstrated in practice how decentralization could help the poor and defenseless. Christopher Jencks's warnings in the 1960s presaged today's crisis in education.

In the sanctuary of IPS, Ariel Dorfman, forced into exile by Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, wrote books and plays exposing the nature of dictators. The anti-imperialist critiques of Saul Landau and Peter Kornbluh proved to be tragically true in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Chile. Landau has made more than three dozen films and documentaries, including *Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang*, which received the George F. Polk Award for investigative journalism and an Emmy. He has also written several important books on Latin America. Kornbluh edited *The Pinochet File*.

In 1963, IPS predicted that a digital divide would be created if computers were denied to the poor and lower class. Current IPS Director John Cavanagh has coauthored books with Barnet and Robin Broad on global issues and fair trade, and with Sarah Anderson in 1999 he revealed the extent of the emergence of two nations in America: one prospering, the other slipping further and further behind in pay and opportunity. Phyllis Bennis's research before the U.S. invasion of Iraq showed how the war would ultimately harm both countries. Marc Raskin's prescient warnings throughout the Iraq War showed how illegitimate Bush II's authority was.

IPS remains a crossroads where the skeptical and the worried still come to write and teach, shape their humanistic agendas, and form coalitions with the great citizen movements. They help to make them click, always as scholars and grassroots organizers and frequently as leaders because they were first on the scene: antiwar and civil rights movements in the 1960s; disarmament, environmental, anti-nuclear power, and women's movements in the 1970s; anti-U.S. intervention in Latin America and anti-apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s; global fair trade (as opposed to so-called "free" trade), self-reliant communities, and environmental and economic justice in the 1990s; and, in the twenty-first century, fighting the out-of-control problems carried over from the last century by ignorance or design, including for the first time in history the all-too-real prospect of a world nuclear war in which there will be no winners.

Now the third generation guides IPS as it continues to build and sustain a political and philosophical culture that has produced thousands of books, articles, films, papers, pamphlets, lectures, seminars, and public discussions. None of this would have come about if not for Marcus Raskin's vision of what the Institute of Policy Studies would be.

THE TEACHER

Marcus Raskin in his early seventies is no stranger to cancer and heart bypass, "plus a little valve work, if you please," he is wry enough about

it to add. Yet he outworks men and women half his age. He divides his day between IPS, where he is the distinguished fellow, and George Washington University, where he is a distinguished and controversial professor of public policy. He is rumpled and usually in need of a haircut; it is very much how he looked when we were boys. (My dear mother thought Marc was faintly subversive, not because of his political views, of which she knew little, but because of his appearance.)

Marc would look tired even on the off chance that he actually decided to try for a good night's sleep. This is not an option, however, since he reads and writes far into the night. (Including this one, he has authored twenty books on international affairs, government, national defense, and political philosophy.) In between this schedule, he still waltzes and badgers potential donors to the IPS with the same vigor he had in his thirties, makes time for his eight grandchildren, and is a mentor to all kinds of people, even to those who have long since "made it," like composer Philip Glass. "Marc really got me started," Glass remembers. "I heard him playing the Berg Piano Sonata in a dorm lounge when we were students at the University of Chicago, and I got the idea that I wanted to study piano and music. For the next two years, Marc gave me lessons and technical exercises."¹²

Marc's longtime friend Gore Vidal, not uniquely, relies on him: "He knows where everything is, in and out of Washington, who everyone is, he's a good guide."¹³

Marc is a most *unconventional* guide, Christopher Jencks realized when he first met him in 1962. Jencks recalls, "One couldn't fail both to be charmed by the number of ideas he had and a little shaken by the number of them that seemed outside the range of things that anyone else I knew took very seriously, or that I did. He was just thinking about the world in very different ways."¹⁴

Yet, as Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, who has known Marc since the 1950s, observed: "Marc is as American as apple pie. He's profoundly a believer in humanity, the goodness of souls, the redemption—he could have been a good Catholic. He has a faith that's a very powerful faith when it comes to human character. So you can never get discouraged with Marc. He's like a rock. Tenacious. And a great, profound believer in the democratic values of this country."¹⁵

Indeed, Marc Raskin has always been there for me, no more so than when I was writing my first book, *The Duping of the American Voter*¹⁶ at a time when the stench of Nixon's corrupt presidency was still in the air. Marc urged me to probe past conventional wisdom and show how the dishonesty and deception of political advertising not only infects Republicans and Democrats alike but also mocks freedom of speech and, with it, the other freedoms Americans like to believe they are entitled to.

—Robert Spero