



Milton J. Esman

September 15, 1918 – February 7, 2015

Milton Esman was a devoted teacher and advisor of students, a distinguished public servant, and a truly creative thinker. His was an exemplary life with deep Cornell roots. He leaves three children, Judy, Michael, and Oliver, four grandchildren, Elisabeth Esman, 30, Emily Esman, 29, Daniel Finegold, 25, and Sarah Finegold, 22, his brother, Aaron, and his devoted wife of 66 years, Janice (née Newman). Of his relationship with Janice, his friend John Montgomery wrote: “I could never get him away from Janice for very long at a time, a choice that was easy to understand.”

Milton was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and began his long association with Cornell as an undergraduate in 1935, where he majored in Government. He earned his Ph.D. in Politics at Princeton in 1942, before training in Military Government at Harvard and serving as a Civil Affairs Officer in the Government Section of General MacArthur’s headquarters in Tokyo, where he participated in the drafting of the current Japanese Constitution. His ideas for the reform of the civil service, the role of political parties, and democratization in general, were eventually recognized by both American and Japanese constitutional experts.

Returning to the U.S. after his military service, he worked as a Program Planning Officer and a Research Officer at the U.S. Civil Service Commission and the Department of State between 1947 and 1954. While serving in these government positions, Esman was a part-time lecturer in political science and public administration at the George Washington University.

Milton’s life was woven into the history of Japan and Southeast Asia. He returned to the region’s affairs, first with the International Cooperation Administration in Washington and then as head of a program office in Vietnam between 1954 and 1959; he moved back to the US and served as Director of the Economic and Social Development Department of the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Public and International Affairs from 1959 to 1969. For two of these years he was on leave, serving as Senior Advisor in Public Administration for the Prime Minister of Malaysia. In 1969, he returned to his alma mater, Cornell, as Director of its Center for

International Studies. He served as director for fourteen years, holding the John S. Knight Chair of International Studies.

Milton came to Cornell not only to direct CIS, but to teach development administration – the formulation and execution of development plans, programs and projects and the development of administrative institutions, mainly in third world countries. He also made broader contributions to teaching, branching into subjects like ethnic studies and conflict resolution. While at Cornell, he was also a visiting professor at the Hebrew University, the University of Leiden, and the Osmania University in India. His teaching continued well after retirement, offering the Government Department's basic course in Comparative Politics for a number of years.

Professor Esman was adept at bringing colleagues from many disciplines together to work on issues of cross-cutting interest. In the early 1970s, at Esman's initiative, the Center organized a series of multi-disciplinary courses designed to introduce undergraduates to the social sciences from the viewpoint of a problem rather than that of a single discipline, as social science intro courses were then organized. Examples were a course on the causes of war and peace taught by social science, natural science and engineering faculty members in the Peace Studies Program, and one on Third-World rural development entitled 'Peasants, Power and Productivity,' planned by the Rural Development Committee and taught by an anthropologist, a political scientist, and an agricultural engineer respectively, approaching social science analysis from micro, macro and technical perspectives. Esman's bold cross-disciplinary teaching initiatives rattled traditionalists in the College of Arts and Science, who thought that all teaching had to be linked to specific disciplines.

At Cornell, Milton was more than a talented teacher. He mentored younger colleagues, like Peter Katzenstein, Sidney Tarrow, Shibley Telhami, and Norman Uphoff. "For me," remembers Telhami, "Milt was not only an inspirational and supportive senior colleague, but also a father figure. He was kind and caring in ways that meant much to me when I arrived at Cornell. After I left Cornell, I don't recall a year during which we didn't talk by phone or I didn't receive a commentary from him on an article I had written."

Milton's research initiatives at CIS were equally interdisciplinary. For example, with Uphoff and Gil Levine, he established an active, interdisciplinary Rural Development Committee (RDC), which brought together faculty and students from the colleges of Arts & Sciences, Agriculture & Life Sciences, Human Ecology, and Art, Architecture and Planning, to address the problems of enhancing productivity and security for the many millions of smallholding households in Asia, Africa and Latin America who were not well-served by prevailing development strategies, research and investment. The RDC provided documentation, theory and recommendations for what came to be known as participatory approaches to Third World development. With Uphoff, he published a book analyzing experience and performance with *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development* (Cornell, 1984/88).

Professor Esman's activities ranged nationally and internationally. He organized and was the founding director of the Inter-university Research Program on Institution Building, a consortium of four university centers studying the institution building process in developing countries. He also consulted on development administration for the World Bank, USAID, the UN Food and

Agriculture Organization, the ILO, the Ford Foundation, and the UN Development Program. His contributions to the study of development administration were honored in a volume of essays, *Puzzles of Productivity in Public Organizations*, published in 1994 by the Institute for Contemporary Studies under the editorship of Norman Uphoff.

After decades of working on public administration and rural development, Professor Esman was drawn to the field of comparative ethnic politics. His first book in this field, *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (Cornell, 1977), drew on the work of a group of distinguished scholars of ethnicity, and included his own original work on the Scottish nationalism. He then turned to ethnic conflict in the Middle East in a collective volume edited with Israeli expert, Itamar Rabinovich, *Ethnicity, Pluralism and the State in the Middle-East* (Cornell, 1988), and to a sweeping analysis of *International Organizations and Ethnic Conflict*, co-edited with Telhami (Cornell, 1995). He wrote two synthesizing books on the subject, *Ethnic Politics* (Cornell, 1994) and *An Introduction to Ethnic Conflict* (Polity, 2004). In a book co-edited with Ronald Herring, *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict: Rethinking Development Assistance* (Michigan, 2000), Esman came full circle, knitting together his interests in ethnicity and development efforts.

Milt was engaged with scholarship until the end – “a scholar’s scholar,” in Telhami’s words. His final two books were on American politics: *Government Works* (Cornell, 2000) and *The New American Garrison State* (2007). In the first he argued that Americans still need an activist federal government; in the last he argued that the constitutional structure of the American federal government is no longer providing responsible and effective governance.

Milton Esman was a truly wonderful colleague, a fine thinker and teacher who was also wise in the ways of the world because of his direct and personal engagement with problems of public administration, economic and social development, ethnic relations, and governance around the world. We at Cornell were blessed by his presence here over more than a half a century and are diminished by his passing.

Sidney Tarrow, chair; Gilbert Levine, Norman Uphoff