

William A. Nierenberg

Memorial Tribute

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"They will think we're detectives."

Bill stated this to me as unarguable fact as he and I set off for the South Bronx one spring day in 1990. The neighborhood police station, known as Fort Apache, had recently been the subject of a bloody popular movie in which gangs warred outside and against its doors. The streets were still giving birth to rap and hip-hop culture.

Bill was a regular visitor to New York City, of course, enjoying the Metropolitan Opera, the museums, and an eclectic selection of restaurants. After sifting through new results of my environmental research at The Rockefeller University, an ivory tower even within its fancy Upper East Side neighborhood, Bill and I would often set off on cultural and culinary excursions.

During the 1970s and 1980s, I put many hours into a never-ending project to walk or bicycle down every street in the five boroughs of New York. I covered dangerous neighborhoods cautiously, avoiding Friday nights in July, which have crime rates 20 times higher than Tuesday mornings in February. Anyway, I had been reporting to Bill on the Bronx, and my gaps that remained there, which included the crackling streets where he had grown up. He announced that rather than visit the Bashford Dean Collection of Arms and Armor at the Met, we would visit the Bronx addresses where his family and his wife Edith had lived, the schools, synagogues, and

movie theatres he had attended, and the parks where he played. After all, one of the great presidents of The Rockefeller University and a patron of Bill's career had been Detlev Bronk, from whose family farm the Borough derived its name.

My first reaction was, this is not sensible. Here is a man about 70 years old, with a family, important duties, and a head full of military secrets, heading for one of the most violent places on Earth, in my custody. Bill was wearing his characteristic khaki outfit, with a pocket protector lined with a rainbow of pens. My expression betrayed my misgivings, and he responded simply, "They will think we're detectives. We're absolutely safe." Absolutely was a word Bill liked. So off we went.

Some of the addresses were piles of rubble, and some were standing but looked like burnt toast. The present owners of Edith's house had kept it neatly intact. We tramped around, Bill blurting out his characteristically exact recollections: prices of particular candies, titles, authors, and publishers of books he borrowed from the public library, movies that showed in different theatres. Occasionally we stopped to talk with people on the street to ask about the fate of a business or to take a photo.

Bill also wanted to visit a small park where he and his friends had hung out. On my map of the Bronx it had a name Bill did not recognize. Anyway, we strode into the park, where a new gang of teenagers was hanging out, skipping their high school physics class, I guess. To the surprise of the gang, Bill walked directly over to them and started speaking in his gruff voice. They lowered the volume on their boombox, which was, I recall, playing the rap group Public Enemy. In actuality, Bill competed easily with Public Enemy. He asked "What do you guys call this park?" They answered with the same name that the Jewish kids of the 1930s had used. Very, very pleased, Bill got into an animated discussion about the neighborhood. With Public Enemy chanting "Fight the Power" in the background, the rangy youths shared with us some of the features they liked, such as streets ending in stairs where cars could not follow.

The day turned out great, typifying Bill's style: bold, curious, and focused on the essential. I had come to appreciate these qualities during 1981-1984, when I worked basically full-time for Bill on several of his Washington-centered projects, most importantly, the first-ever soup-to-nuts

assessment of the issue of human-induced changes of the climate, a National Academy of Sciences study the Congress had mandated from the White House.

Usually NAS committees only review and synthesize existing literature. But Bill informed me in no uncertain terms at the outset of the study that most of the investigations to date were wrong and that there were big gaps in the story. Therefore, we should prepare, in the style of the JASONS, to define and solve the problem ourselves. Beginning at the beginning, Bill cleverly challenged one of the committee members, William Nordhaus, to do a new and better projection of future greenhouse gas emissions. Nordhaus did a brilliant job, which Chairman Nierenberg praised effusively in front of the other committee members, thereby initiating a competition inside this talented group to display their analytical prowess. My pleasurable job was to keep the little creative orgy going.

At the end of 2 ½ years the report, titled Changing Climate, was complete and a landmark, the first "integrated assessment," to use the present jargon. The report also contained a fistful of original components, including the first proposals for the so-called "fingerprint" for detecting human-induced climate change, the first estimate of possible sea level rise incorporating both lost ice and thermal expansion of the oceans, a thorough consideration of the role of greenhouse gases beside carbon dioxide, an analysis of possible release by warming of methane hydrates from the slope sediments, the first modeled estimates of effects of climate change on US agriculture and water resources, and the first history of studies of the greenhouse effect. Although Bill did not warm to the idea, the report was also the first to analyze carbon taxes.

In a way, I believe working with Bill on the NAS climate study made me Bill's last student. And after I learned to connect the dots of Bill's conversation, he was unfailingly generous to me. He gave me hard, authentic problems to work on and abundant credit when I did something well.

During the past three years I had the good fortune to have Bill's zest and practical help in bringing together researchers to launch the now likely worldwide Census of Marine Life. Bill and Richard Rosenblatt organized the very first meeting of the Census, here at Scripps in the spring of 1997. Bill was fascinated at the prospect of identifying thousands of new species of fishes, and discovering and assessing marine populations that models of animal behavior and

energy flows suggest must exist, such as squids in the midwaters of the open ocean. The challenge of constructing the entire ocean in this case its biology from our ridiculously few clues never ceased to excite Bill.

In the end I came to realize Bill Nierenberg was at bottom a detective, one with a tough New York style, hungry for unsolved cases, independent and sometimes shockingly direct in his mode of investigation and seizure of evidence, and a knack, like that day in the South Bronx, for reasoning fearlessly to the right answer.