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In Memoriam: Dr. Robert G.F. Spitze and the Legacy of a Farm Policy Expert

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February 6, 2020

Gardner Policy Series

Recommended citation format: Coppess, J. "In Memoriam: Dr. Robert G.F. Spitze and the Legacy of a Farm Policy Expert." *farmdoc daily,* Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, February 6, 2020.

Permalink: https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2020/02/in-memoriam-dr-robert-g-f-spitze-and-the-legacy-of-a-farm-policy-expert.html

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University of Illinois agricultural economist and policy expert Dr. Robert G.F. Spitze passed away on January 20, 2020 (http://www.heathandvaughn.com/spitze,_robert.html). Born on a dairy farm in Arkansas in 1922, he was inspired to pursue a career in education by his high school vocational agriculture teacher. His path would take him from high school valedictorian in 1940 to a bachelor's degree from the University of Arkansas in 1947; the first in his family to earn a college degree, his studies were interrupted by more than three years of service during World War II. His service included as a lieutenant on Landing Ship Tanks (LST) and the amphibious campaigns of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. During this time he also met and, on furlough in 1944, married his wife of 65 years, Hazel Taylor. Together they would go on to pursue graduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin; Hazel earned her master's in 1948, Bob his Ph.D. in 1954. After nine years on the faculty of the University of Tennessee, Dr. Spitze joined the faculty of the University of Illinois in 1960, where he would serve for the next 32 years retiring in 1992. His move coincided with Hazel earning her doctorate in education from the University of Tennessee and her successful competition in a national search to also join the faculty of the University of Illinois, College of Education, where she would serve until 1987.

Dr. Spitze's move to Illinois was part of an effort by the Department of Agricultural Economics to increase analysis of public policies that impacted agriculture, particularly federal policy responses that were being developed to address public problems. At Illinois, Dr. Spitze partnered with Dr. Harold Guither to combine extension and teaching, developing a public policy program that was partially assisted by funding from the Farm Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dr. Spitze "pioneered work to establish methodology for evaluation of farm policy proposals" and led nationally-recognized efforts for every farm bill written from 1970 to 1990 (Miller 2007).

Dr. Spitze was a prolific writer on farm policy. His work is full of insights into the specific directions in farm and food policy over decades, as well as the larger public policy picture; policy analysis, he once wrote, was "[p]robing for the known in an unknown future" about policies which were "deeply rooted in the past, but shaped in the present by knowledge and current or expected problems, neither of which is stagnant" (Spitze 1981). Public Policy, he acknowledged, represents "a political decision" that "result[s] from the choices—embodying not only economic but also social, political, ethical, and other values—of individuals and interests groups" who are working through the process "to resolve their problems"; in short, "public

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policy is more than economic behavior" (Spitze 1992). Looking ahead to the 1981 farm bill effort, for example, he noted the impacts of stagflation and the Soviet grain embargo such that "[p]resent policy is cradled in an environment of tense national and international economic uncertainty that has both shaped it and will likely shape its future characteristics" which was also a reminder that "most of the forces molding the agricultural and food sector are not driven by price and income policy" (Spitze 1981). A sampling of his work is reviewed here to highlight themes running through his analysis and writing.

The first theme in Dr. Spitze's farm policy writing is an important understanding of, and respect for, the institutional nature of policymaking. In 1968, he wrote that "[p]olicy-making in a democracy carries a familiar ring of compromise and reconciliation" (Spitze 1968). It is "important to recognize that control by government in the United States is a product of compromise" and that the American system of representative government creates policies that "generally represent a mix of the desires of many interest groups" (Spitze 1972b). Later, Dr. Spitze wrote that the difficult debate creating the landmark Food Security Act of 1985 reflected "the commitment of our society to allowing, and even to encouraging, diverse interest groups to participate in policymaking" through a process that "realize[d] the value of diversity" to enable Congress to produce a "composite judgment of all of the participants" and "an integration of our nation's differences, values and preferences" (Spitze 1986). The farm bill provided a great example of how the American legislative process "involves negotiations, compromises, and settlements between political parties in each branch of the legislature, between the House and Senate of Congress, and between the separately elected Congress and Administration" (Spitze 1992). He stressed that the final policy product is never the same as complete agreement about it, nor acceptance of it in the future, warning that "we dare not fail to understand the difficulties in achieving the compromise that stands as existing policy" (Spitze 1986).

Upon this institutional and political reality, Dr. Spitze built his numerous analyses of agricultural and food policies frequently concluding that they were generally evolutionary in nature; this the second theme in his writings. In 1986, he wrote that the "policy process is, for the most part, evolutionary, seldom undergoing abrupt redirection or reversal" and that "[e]very policy change is indeed a regeneration of some aspect of old policy even when it involves substantial revision" (Spitze 1986). This especially included farm bills, where the "[d]eterminants of public agricultural and food policy include past policies, the current and recent economic environment, the political setting, and the knowledge base, including past experiences with policies" (Spitze 1987). The Food and Agricultural Act of 1977, "signal[ed] a continued evolution of public price and income policy" for American farmers; a "stage in the evolution of policy" that was neither "a new direction" as heralded by its supporters nor a complete "re-siphoning of old vintage" claimed by its detractors (Spitze 1978). Similarly, the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 "was the culmination of another evolutionary stage in public policymaking" shaped by the increasingly difficult economic situation for farmers and an "increasing interdependence" and "growing dependence" on "foreign markets" (Spitze 1983). Of the Food Security Act of 1985, he wrote that it neither "chart[ed] a new revolutionary policy" nor was it "simply a rerun of an outmoded policy" but signaled a "continued evolution" that was "rooted in an agricultural history, in decades of price and income intervention, and in a political institutional foundation" (Spitze 1987). The 1981, 1985 and 1990 farm bills also demonstrated the significant shifts in the domestic political environment that followed the 1980 election of President Reagan and a Republican Senate majority. Among them were the ways in which budget concerns and political complications due to national deficits and debts could overshadow other political forces and alter the legislative process through reconciliation and other procedural changes.

A third theme was the need for, and vital importance of, research, analysis and other intelligence that can inform the public, policymakers and interest groups. He stressed the need for better investment in agricultural research that was focused on improving the "information-gathering, analyzing, and reporting system" for informing policymakers, which included "continuing study of alternate and innovative public policy approaches" that can help "devise policies both flexible and useful enough to serve the public interest" in an unknown future (Spitze 1978). He wrote that the "policy process still begs for better intelligence and dissemination of reliable knowledge about the ongoing structure of the agricultural and food system" as well as "analyses of the meaning and expected consequences" of the bill's provisions; that the 1981 Act, for example, "heralded no innovations may be an indictment of policy research" (Spitze 1983). The effort to craft the 1985 farm bill served as a strong example. Dr. Spitze wrote afterwards that "[n]ever before in the history of U.S. agricultural and food policy making had so much effort been given, nor so much information been prepared, to provide a knowledge base with which citizens, interest groups, and public officials could make rational choices about the 1985 policy" (Spitze 1987). And that "research

played a vital role in providing descriptive and predictive insight so invaluable for participatory public policy making" (Id).

The 1985 bill an exemplar; based on the 1981 debate, he had written that conservation was an "issue rising in public consciousness" that called for adjusting analysis to account for both trade and conservation (Spitze 1983). The result in 1985 was a bill that combined "a continued evolution of the expanding price and income policy" but also "launched" far-reaching conservation policies which were "substantial initiatives" designed to "reduce soil loss, clean up waterways of nonpoint sediment pollution, and reduce production of crops from erodible land" (Spitze 1987). These were policy developments evolving from previous efforts at cost share and technical assistance for conservation practices and were politically important; conservation policies were "universally supported by essentially all participants in the policy development" (Spitze 1987). As such, they were continued in 1990 because the "public clamored for more protection of the soil, the water supply, and food quality" (Spitze 1992). The 1990 Act built upon "the historic erosion control programs launched in the 1985 Act with the voluntary Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) by which 34 million acres had been withdrawn from production for 10 years, and with the erodible cropland conservation compliance condition for any program benefits" (Id.). From budget pressures to politics, the 1985 effort embodied these themes: evolutionary changes crafted as compromises among various interests on policies developed to address public problems, negotiated through a long, difficult process and informed by research and analysis.

Just as important, Dr. Spitze produced a legacy that goes beyond his research and writing through actions that demonstrated commitment to these views about public policy and service. He and Hazel endowed student scholarships and faculty Awards for Excellence at the four land grant universities at which they had earned degrees or were on faculty. At the University of Illinois they endowed an education fund supporting a faculty Career Excellence Award, as well as student scholarships for public policy interns and Jonathan Baldwin Turner Scholarships. To date, their efforts have rewarded seventeen faculty recipients based on performance and commitment to teaching, research, Extension and public service. Their first Jonathan Baldwin Turner scholarship student was funded in 1991 and they funded a student each year for the next 28 years. Funding for legislative intern scholarships began in 2003 helping more than 30 students gain experience through public policy internships. In addition, they funded a conference room in the ACES Library, Information and Alumni Center.

On a personal note, I had the honor of meeting with Dr. Spitze after joining the faculty at the University of Illinois. Whatever the claims upon him of age and time, including the loss of his wife to Alzheimer's in 2009, there was a clear, strong spark evident in discussions about farm policy and the legislative process; the light of memories about contributing to the debates in Congress, working with farmers and interest groups, and time spent in Washington DC. By all accounts, the same held true for the students who met with him to tell their stories after benefitting from his and Hazel's generosity. The news of his passing serves as a reminder of the shoulders upon which we stand, the connections between our work and the great contributions that came before, and the shadows of the immense legacies through which we pass each day upon entering the doors of Mumford Hall.

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