

In Memoriam: Tom Carsey

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When you have a free summer evening in Thousand Oaks, California, and the Dodgers are not in town, there is really only one thing to do: Go to an Angels game. That is the situation we found ourselves in when, in the spring of 2014, we traveled out to the headquarters of Sage Publications to get an orientation into the world of journal publishing just prior to taking over as editors of *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* (SPPQ) from the fantastic Tom Carsey. Tom was there, too, to assist in the handoff and provide us much-needed guidance. So the three of us bundled into a rental car to traverse Los Angeles County from north to south. We spent several hours in that car battling traffic but, more important, getting a master class in how to run a journal from Tom. We asked questions, he gave advice, and we asked more questions. Those who knew Tom will be unsurprised to hear he was wise, generous, and kind. Tom frequently interrupted doling out wisdom to tell us, in his usual self-deprecating way: “I don’t know. That’s what I did. You know what you are doing. Do what you think is right.” Tom made space for us, but he gave us excellent advice on that car trip.

With Tom’s passing, all of us in this community are now caretakers of his wisdom and his memory. We think that one way we can honor Tom is to pass on some of the wisdom we learned on that long freeway ride. Much of it applies to running a journal, but a lot of it is just about how to be a good and decent person first, and an excellent scholar second. We do not want to forget his advice, so we are writing it down. For those who knew Tom, we hope our sharing might lend some comfort as we work through this loss together. For those who did not, we hope it can just a little bit make up for the fact that you missed out on knowing one of the greats. Here are, from our recollection, Tom’s Road Trip Rules for Running a Journal:

Do Not Worry about the Criticism

Tom spent a good deal of our editing master class sharing stories about angry authors. There were not many for Tom, and there are not many for us, but we think he probably shared his experiences so we would know that angry emails come with the territory. And we did. So when, for example, a particularly miffed rejected author unfairly disparaged Bonneau’s mother (Kanthak has met her and can confirm she did not deserve this kind of talk), we were ready. Tom took criticism well, but he knew that making people (including friends) mad was part of the job, and he accepted it. Part of what made him a great editor and a great scholar was that it was always, always about the work for Tom.

Know where You Stand

Tom was an expert on his own strengths and his own deficiencies. He gave us a list of things he thought he did well, and things he thought he did not do well. This meant that Tom knew he was a good editor, which is important. But he also thought we could be good editors, too, and it would not be in exactly the same way he was a good editor. He was generous with his advice, but he was also generous with his willingness to let us do things our own way. There is not just one way to do this job. Tom picked the one that worked best for him, and he wanted you to do the same.

Ask for Help

Tom told us he often went to others for advice on tough cases, and he invited us to do that, too. Whenever we had a hard decision or an ethical consideration, he was always the perfect sounding board for us. We would outline the problem in an email, and soon enough, there would be a response outlining the six ways he thought of to handle the issue, telling us which one he liked best, and signing off with an “I don’t know. That’s what I did. You know what you are doing. Do what you think is right.” Beyond that, he encouraged us to talk to others in our extremely supportive community. He knew he had good advice, but he knew others did, too. He felt strongly that *SPPQ*—and research in general—was a collaborative effort. Asking for help made the work better, and it is always, always about the work.

Use a Light Touch with the Desk Rejects

We very rarely desk reject papers, and in fact, we have heard from some of our reviewers that we ought to desk reject more. But we do not, and that is largely down to the fact that we took Tom’s advice here. Tom believed that the mission of *SPPQ* went beyond putting out a good journal; it was also about helping people who are just entering our community. *SPPQ* commonly asks graduate students to review, far more often than most other journals. They have a lot of energy, Tom taught us, and they think hard about their reviews. Sometimes they are the best, most thorough reviews a paper gets. We also send out papers that we do not think are quite ready for prime time. Tom had a keen sense that not all students had mentors of his caliber. But they still had a lot to offer the discipline, and they should be brought in. It would make their work better, make them more likely to make the grade next time. Besides, some of these papers end up reviewing very well. Tom did not know everything, and if Tom did not know everything, the two of us sure do not. The community can see promise in a paper that we might miss. This is a generous community, and we have seen a number of situations in which more established scholars provided a careful review to a weaker paper and helped to make it enormously better. They do not always make it into print at *SPPQ*, but they probably will somewhere, and that is good for the state politics community, for which Tom cared so deeply.

Sometimes You Just Have to Make a Decision

One of the things Tom told us on our road trip that left us surprised was that about 80% of the decisions we make are easy. It turned out, of course, to be true. Split reviews are really fairly rare. Usually, all the reviewers either like a paper or they do not. It is not often we get, say, two very good reviews and one very negative one. But when we do, we read the paper, read the reviews, and make a choice. Editorial decisions are high stakes for nearly all authors. Tom knew that and so do we. But at the end of the day, he told us, all you can do is make the best judgment you can. Just make it about the work.

Take on a Few “Projects”

Tom did not just straight up accept bad papers, and neither do we. Rather, sometimes you find in that 20% gray area is a paper that you think could really be good. And maybe it is because the author is a junior scholar who is pushing the literature in the right direction, or asking new and innovative questions you find interesting. As an editor, you get to make that choice. You can write a longer decision letter, with very specific advice, to help a junior scholar move the paper in a stronger direction. You do not have the time or the page space to do this every time, but sometimes it is OK to give an invitation to revise and resubmit when a rejection is perfectly justified. Tom could spot a good idea a mile away, and it did not matter if it was well-constructed or not. He could see it is potential. We are pretty confident we are not as good at spotting the diamonds as Tom was, but we think it is important to try.

Our community has lost an intellectual giant and a dear, dear friend. It is a hole that cannot be filled. But here at *SPPQ*, we will keep publishing papers that tread down the intellectual paths that Tom broke over the course of his impressive career as a researcher. Tom’s students will continue to populate our editorial board. And 30 years hence, we will still be citing Tom’s work and it will be the students of Tom’s students who will be populating the *SPPQ* editorial board. As for us, we are forever grateful for the trust Tom put in us and the gentle guidance with which he mentored us. We can only hope to emulate him as well as we can. And although our advice will only rarely reach the sagacity of that of Tom, we hope it will always include a generous helping of “I don’t know. That’s what I did. You know what you are doing. Do what you think is right.”

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Chris W. Bonneau and Kristin Kanthak are co-editors of *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*. To continue Tom’s legacy as a mentor, the State Politics Section has established the Tom Carsey Award fund. This fund provides financial scholarships to graduate students to allow them to attend the annual State Politics and Policy Conference. Contributions to this fund can be made here: <http://www.apsanet.org/section22>