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In Memoriam

Robert E.D. (Gene) Woolsey

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On Monday, March 16, 2015, the operations research (OR) community lost a legend. After a battle with Alzheimer's disease, Robert E.D. (Gene) Woolsey passed away peacefully listening to classical music. Those of you who knew Gene or have read his extensive contributions to the OR literature know that listening to classical music was certainly apropos. Gene was a renaissance man, witty, brilliant, and a gifted writer with a relentless zeal for the *practice* of OR.

In academia, it is now in vogue to emphasize "experiential learning." Gene was 40 years ahead of his time. He was all about learning by doing. And by learning by doing, he didn't just mean learning linear programming by solving a real linear program for a real client. It was much deeper than that. Gene's position was that you, as an OR professional, shouldn't try to improve someone's process without getting experience with, and a good understanding of, that process. Consequently, Gene's students might find themselves riding along with Denver firefighters or working the late shift at a brewery (for the uninitiated, this is all documented in the literature). And while Gene's position on this, and often his delivery of the message, were sometimes (OK, often) considered offensive by some, I think it is instructive to consider part of his motivation for his approach. I really believe Gene felt it was offensive to those running the process for an OR person to think he (she) could immediately step in and teach them how to improve that process. Gene would be the first to admit that he was not a humble guy. Yet he had the humility to respect those doing the work we try to improve. That lesson of going into a project with a sense of humility and the need to learn is a lesson he gave to all his students and those of us who became his "students" by reading his works and interacting with him at national meetings.

Gene was the editor-in-chief of *Interfaces* from 1976 to 1982. He continued to contribute to *Interfaces* through his Fifth Column. A quick search on author Woolsey in *Interfaces* through INFORMS PubsOnLine lists 81 articles, the

last in 2012. There are a lot of good lessons in those articles. In fact, you can learn a lot from Gene by just trying to understand the titles he used:

The Fifth Column: On the Proper Scheduling of the Vampires, or Phlebotomy Follies (Woolsey 1983).

The Fifth Column: Three Short Studies in Industrial Psychology: Time, Don Juan & Motivation (Woolsey 1975).

The Fifth Column: On Ratio Ratiocination or The Fight at the Gas House Gym (Woolsey 1988).

The Fifth Column: Scheduling Without Reservations or Ad Astra per Simplicimus (Woolsey 1987).

And there is my personal favorite: *A Candle to Saint Jude, or Four Real World Applications of Integer Programming* (Woolsey 1972).

By the way, why is his column called the Fifth Column? Hint: It is not because there are four other columns.

The OR world is a lot less colorful with the loss of Gene Woolsey. He had a huge impact on me personally in terms of how I think about problem solving and how I teach it to my students. As OR became more of an academic discipline, Gene's goal was always to get us to refocus on what he felt it was all about—solving problems. *Interfaces* will miss Gene. I already do.

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