

A Tribute to Paul O'Neill
By Kristine Marcy

Paul O'Neill was a leader in government and a captain of industry. He was a dedicated public servant even when out of government; an idealist (not an ideologue) who held himself, and his staff, to extremely high standards.

O'Neill began his career at the Veterans Administration where he served as a computer systems analyst. In 1967, he joined the Office of Management and Budget (then called the Bureau of the Budget) where he rapidly rose to the top becoming Deputy Director and then Acting Director at the end of the Ford Administration. Until his position as Deputy Director, O'Neill held career positions. He noted that despite working on some of the greatest policy challenges at the time, "nobody ever asked about party." He was a remarkable leader. I had the privilege of working at OMB when he was there. Many Fellows worked with O'Neill during his government service and many Fellows' careers were shaped by service in the OMB that O'Neill helped to create.

In 2015, Fellows Paul Posner and Steve Redburn interviewed O'Neill about his days at OMB and the transition from BOB to OMB and the Executive Office of the President.* That interview was larded with lessons and guidance for the future of public administration. He stated, "The Presidency should not be about sophisticated cynicism. On the contrary it should be about ideals....To those who do not know it, the greatest opportunity you will ever have is the opportunity to make a difference in something that matters....Guard the flame in your time and pass it undiminished to those who follow."

O'Neill approached every policy decision with the framing question, "what's the right thing for the American people." His former boss at OMB, George Schultz described Paul as a "pro's pro in public service - smart, objective and always professional." O'Neill described himself

as an *Includer*, saying, “I like the idea of including the smartest people on every issue...no matter what their polarity.” That’s one of the reasons why it was a personal joy to work under him at OMB.

In 1977, O’Neill left OMB for International Paper as Vice President, ultimately rising to become President. In 1977, he became Alcoa’s Chairman and CEO where he served until 1999. Ever successful, this was a golden age for Alcoa as evidenced by the rise in its stock value, and the remarkable improvement in safety in the aluminum industry, a cause that O’Neill championed.

O’Neill returned to federal service as the 72nd Secretary of the Treasury. He served there for two years before being terminated, in large measure for speaking his mind, and framing issues as “what’s the right thing to do for the American people.”

During his interview with Fellows Posner and Redburn, he returned to the theme of making a difference in important matters of policy. He quoted Oliver Wendell Homes Jr. who said “...as life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the action and passion of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived.” O’Neill did just that.

*To listen to the Posner/Redburn interview with O’Neill go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARYYbBtS7zU>