

## TRIBUTE TO ROBERT WILSON ON HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY

Howard Raiffa

Most of you here today to honor Robert are either his students or faculty colleagues. I guess I'm the only one who knew Robert as a graduate student. I think of him as a double mutant. Mutating from an undergraduate student of theoretical mathematics at Harvard to the least mathematical of all graduate schools of management – the school that worshipped the case method of instruction and extolled the administrative point of view. And after a dose of this, Robert mutated back into the realm of mathematical discourse. How did this happen???

Bob did his undergraduate work in the very theoretically oriented math department at Harvard, and he did very well. In his application to the math department Bob said he chose math “. . . in appreciation of its power, elegance, fundamental importance, and in recognition of my own abilities.” My son Mark was also a student in that department, some years later, and in his junior year he confided in me, “Dad,” he said, “I think I'm one of the best of the normals, but there are all those abnormals and I'm not in that league.” So Mark left math for computer sciences and Bob left math for the practical world of business administration.

It was a surprise to me that the Harvard Business School admitted Bob. They were seeking older applicants who had some real-world business experience. But Bob came with 800 GRE scores on quantitative and verbal skills and had a non-nerdy personality. That was in 1959 when Bob was 22.

Bob took the first-year core curriculum at the B-School, no substitutes, no mathematics, and did very well. He completed his MBA in the top 5% of his class and was a Baker Scholar. But already in his second year of the MBA program Bob was mutating back into the academic world of applied mathematics. In his second year in the MBA program, I was his advisor and I would like to think I influenced him to enter into our doctoral program. We offered a Doctor of Business Administration (the DBA degree in lieu of the more prestigious Ph.D.) and after getting the MBA very few further courses were required for the DBA. He took reading courses mostly under my supervision.

It was an exciting time at HBS. Jack Grayson just finished his doctoral dissertation in risk sharing among oil wildcatters and Charles Christenson was working on the formation of syndicates for risk sharing of new corporate issues.

Robert Schlaifer and I were going through a transformation: from Bayesian statistical decision theory to managerial economics. We ran a weekly seminar, the Decision under Uncertainty seminar, that ran for five very productive years and Bob Wilson became a contributor to that seminar. The seminar reported mostly on research in progress and Schlaifer and I with later contributions by John Pratt and Richard Meyer, distributed ongoing elaborations by memos distributed to all the participants. Wilson worked on algorithmic methods for solving complex linear-programming problems under uncertainty and under the supervision of John Bishop, Robert Dorfman and myself carved out a slice of that work which became his doctoral dissertation.

I like to think in retrospect that Bob Wilson made a wise decision to remain at Harvard. I think we prepared him with an agenda for future research topics and a feeling of excitement for a burgeoning new field. As a doctoral student he accumulated a portfolio of partially formulated problems that focussed some of his post-doctoral research.

I've had a lot of doctoral students in my long academic career and Bob Wilson remains the brightest of the bright and the nicest of the nice. It's been thrilling for me to see him develop such a fine career in research.