

In memoriam: Albert Somit, PhD

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ABSTRACT. Dr. Albert Somit recently died at 100 years of age. He was a major figure in the development of biopolitics. This essay reflects on his career and his role in helping others in advancing the study of politics and the life sciences.

Key words: Albert Somit, Biopolitics, Politics and life Sciences

Albert Somit was born on October 25, 1919, in Chicago and died on August 2, 2020, at 100 years of age, in the San Diego area. He earned his bachelor's degree in history and political science at the University of Chicago and, later, continued his education in the PhD program there. During graduate school, he became fascinated with biology and its influence on human growth and behavior. He completed his doctorate in 1947, while already teaching in the Department of Government at New York University (NYU).

After a military deployment, he returned to NYU, where he taught until 1966. In that year, he moved to the State University of New York at Buffalo as chair of political science. He moved up through the ranks to executive vice president (1970–1980) and acting president for a year (1976–1977).

In 1980, he was named president of Southern Illinois University (SIU), a position he held until 1987, when he retired from administration and was named Distinguished Service Professor. He remained active in this role—teaching, conducting research, and writing—until he fully retired from SIU in 1992.

Anyone who knew Al Somit would not be surprised to learn that he was working to the end, focusing his efforts on an American Political Science Association paper looking back over 50 years of biopolitics (the study of the linkage between biology and politics), a field in which he was a founder and continued to work until his death.

His achievement most relevant for the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS) was serving as one of the founders of an interdisciplinary movement to link biology with politics. He worked with Dr. Carl Gans, from the Department of Biology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, to deepen his knowledge of the

relevant biological literature. He then authored one of the first publications in this area in 1968, which appeared in the *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (now the *American Journal of Political Science*). In 1972, he wrote a review of the first 10 years of biopolitics that appeared in the *British Journal of Political Science*. Al edited one of the first volumes outlining the variety of approaches to biopolitics, *Biology and Politics: Recent Explorations* (1976), which was an outgrowth of a conference in Paris that Al organized. He was there at the beginning of the enterprise and actively involved for five decades thereafter.

He authored numerous articles and book chapters, and he coedited a book series with JAI Press and, later, Emerald Publishing, “Research in Biology and Politics,” that featured current research by practitioners. Many junior faculty had their work included, thus nurturing a new generation of scholars in the field. His book-length works included *Biology of Primate Sociopolitical Behavior* (coedited with Glendon Schubert, 1982); *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy* (1997); *Failure of Democratic Nation Building* (2005); and *Handbook of Biology and Politics* (2017).

A major contribution by Al Somit and other senior political scientists interested in biopolitics (including John Wahlke, Glen Schubert, Fred Kort, Roger Masters, and Jim Davies, as well as international scholars such as Rudolf Wildenmann, Jerzy Wiatr, Heiner Flohr, among others) was their willingness to mentor junior faculty and graduate students.

Somit was involved in developing an organizational infrastructure for biopolitics. Through the International Political Science Association (IPSA), he developed Research Committee #12 (Biology and Politics), one of the earliest of IPSA's research committees, approved in 1972. This work provided for development of panels for the triennial (now biennial) international congresses and an international imprimatur. He continued to serve in

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one leadership role or another in this research committee until his death. When the APLS began, Al was one of those tapped to be on the Council, and he served on the editorial board of the organization's journal, *Politics and the Life Sciences*. He continued to be involved in leadership positions in the APLS for the next two decades.

He believed his most important contribution as a professional political scientist was to remind people who and what we are, recognition of which has come slowly. More generally, he saw value in his effort to clarify how evolutionary tendencies, reflected in human

nature, strongly influence what and how our species learns, including bureaucratic behavior. He contended that socialization does not account for the manifestation of political behavior separate from evolutionary influences. He believed that human behavior has been fundamentally influenced by our evolutionary tendencies and will continue to be so.

One century of life, working on academic issues until the very end. A real dedication to the study of politics and to the questions raised by the nature of human nature. And a legacy worthy of his efforts.