

COVEY THOMAS OLIVER

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The problem of writing a "brief comment on Professor Oliver," as I have been asked to do, is that of brevity. His career has been long and distinguished. Moreover, though the occasion for these comments is his retirement, that career is far from concluded. Anyone who knows Covey, and even those who know him only through his works, cannot believe that he will not make further substantive contributions, certainly to scholarship, and, one can hope, to the betterment of the foreign relations of the United States.

It is anomalous that I met Covey, one of the gentlest and most courteous persons I have ever encountered, which we were both engaged in economic warfare. When I entered the State Department in early 1943, he was the chief of the economic controls section in the American embassy in Madrid. He had been one of a small group of young American lawyers who entered the Foreign Service Reserve during World War II, and who combined fluency in a foreign language with extraordinary ability. Four of that group—Covey, Eddie Miller, Henry Holland, and Tom Mann—were to become presidential appointees in the State Department, or the Foreign Service, or both. Others have become leaders of the bar. All had leading roles in many of the most important aspects of a decisive and fruitful period of international relations. It was an extraordinary group. In it, Covey was outstanding.

To his work in the Foreign Service and in the State Department, whether as a member of the United States Delegation to the 1946 Paris Peace Conference, as Ambassador to Colombia, or as Assistant Secretary of State, he brought a unique amalgam of incisive intelligence and innate courtesy. The combination is not usual. Those whose intelligence cuts through verbiage to substance, whose thought is original and penetrating, who are free of the addiction to cliché that all too often passes for thought, are not often so delicately attuned to the sensitivities of others as to be described aptly as courtly. In an age when rudeness seems often to be equated with firmness, when the "I-Thou" relationship of Martin Buber has a tendency to focus only on the "I", Covey Oliver has been as delightfully old-fashioned in manner as he is in advance of his time in thought.

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With all this, Covey has always been a realist, with his realism infused with a sense of the ideal. His ability to probe and to understand were linked always with an appreciation of the requirements of achieving a goal. These qualities made him a very effective public servant, whose many honors are all too few.

As I recall it, the protagonist of one of Robert Browning's poems, Rabbi Ben Ezra says: "Grow old along with me/ The best is yet to be/ The last of life/ For which the first was made." I am not prepared to acknowledge that Covey is growing old. But I do feel that his career until now, extraordinarily successful as it has been, as scholar, diplomat, and teacher, and as husband, father, and friend, is but preparation for the more to come that all who know him await.