

The Passing of an Era: Sam Noumoff Dies at 79. Outstanding Scholar and Political Analyst of US Imperialism

By [Global Research News](#)

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[Sam Noumoff Tribute](#)

For many generations of students who studied politics at McGill University, Sam Noumoff was an iconic figure. He taught courses in political theory and comparative politics that you would be hard pressed to find on the curricula of universities in the developed or, indeed the developing, world today. Aside from offering a radical perspective on the comparative politics of East Asia, over the years Sam introduced thousands of students to Marxist political theory and even offered a course, on which I was briefly his teaching assistant, called Comparative Revolution.

Sam, with his radical ideas, was often a thorn in the side of the University administrators who more than once tried to get rid of him. He was part of the failed effort, back in the 1970s, to unionise the faculty at McGill. However, over the years I think there developed a begrudging respect for Sam among the high mighty at McGill, as he actively engaged in University governance and tirelessly pursued fights, not only for academic freedom, but also against unjust treatment, whether of faculty, students, administrative staff or the many workers who kept the university's physical plant running.

Sam came to McGill from the United States in 1967 as a young firebrand deeply involved in the movement against the Vietnam War. He fought a life-time battle against what he was not afraid to label as US imperialism, or what he said was the "U.S. determination to control the world's destiny on its own terms through military power". Over the years he gained the respect of leaders of revolutionary movements and national liberation struggles as he tirelessly, and often quietly, intervened where he could to advance their cause. In one reminiscence he told of the time when on an academic visit to North Korea in the 1970s the foreign minister had asked him to carry a note to Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter, which was a back door effort to get peace negotiations going with the US. Of course, Richard Holbrooke, the Undersecretary who eventually agreed to meet him, made it clear the US was not interested in such overtures. Many found Sam's sympathy for North Korea difficult to understand, but it was simple for him: he saw North Korea as a victim and a product of decades of US efforts to isolate contain and destroy the regime by any means possible. Sam had many stories about the harassment he and his wife suffered by US and South Korea intelligence, at the height of what was not a very "cold" war, for what was always his effort to oppose the imposition of US power in Asia.

For many of us who studied at McGill in the 1970s Sam, along with his life-time colleague and friend Paul Lin, introduced us to the history of the Chinese revolution. Sam had a profound understanding of modern Chinese politics and the social and economic

transformation unleashed by the Chinese Communist Party that has proven to be one of the most extraordinary experiences of late development the world has ever seen. He was deeply philosophical but by no means naive about the Party's efforts to lead the country forward into the 21st Century. Sam saw the incremental moves towards developing a more democratic China on its own terms over the past couple of decades as part of a long historical process, which would be driven by the Chinese people's own efforts to build their future. He observed the way people were carving out their own spaces for local elections and the impact of internet and electronic technology on giving them access to new forms of expression and communication. He commented on the emerging practice of law and people's own claims being pursued through the legal system in fights against abuses of power or in defence of local communities.

While Sam became an authority on politics in China, Japan and the Koreas, he maintained relationships with organisations and movements all over the South and often with individuals caught in the grip of asymmetric power. Over the years he assisted countless people in their small and big struggles in life, never asking for anything in exchange, always concerned about their well-being. Countless individuals from across Latin America, the Philippines, India, Palestine and so many other places will have very personal memories of correspondence, advice and unselfish assistance that Sam provided.

But I will always remember Sam foremost as a teacher. In those early days when I was a young rebel opposing the Vietnam War and smitten by the counter-culture of the early 1970s, I can remember Sam drawing spirals on the blackboard in an attempt to get us to understand dialectics and how processes of incremental change can lead to qualitative leaps. He introduced me to the works of scientific socialism and he was aghast when, inspired by the Chinese revolution, I told him I was leaving university without finishing my degree to go out and live what we were studying. He pleaded with me to stay and finish my studies first, but I was a hot-headed idealist. In the ensuing almost decade of working in factories, engaging in street politics and international solidarity activities, I kept some contact with Sam who never condemned our naïve politics but often shook his head at the mistakes we made. When I humbly went back and knocked on Sam's door almost a decade later, he generously welcomed me back and was a constant source of encouragement as I got serious about critically studying the history of socialism, the economics and politics of development and launched myself on a long process of finishing my BA, getting a scholarship to do a Masters and then one to go on to undertake doctoral research at the University of Oxford.

During my doctoral research in the Philippines, I helped Sam arrange to visit and to travel to the zones where the New People's Army had their strongholds. He wanted to meet party leaders and activists first hand and to talk with them about their struggle in the post-Marcos era. It was a hard journey for him, as I remember, but he came back fascinated and for long thereafter followed what was happening and offered modest comment and the occasional critical reflection over what they were doing. That was the way Sam lived – a man of staunch principle, sympathetic to those who were fighting injustices of all kinds, but hesitant to pass judgment and ready to offer quiet advice.

I was able to reconnect with Sam a few years ago when he was living in Spain with his most beloved wife Francesca who also sadly died just weeks before Sam. It was to be a rushed time at the tail end of a short vacation on the Costa Blanco, but as I was stranded by the Icelandic volcano, we were able to enjoy much more time together than originally planned.

One day, we drove Sam and Francesca up into the mountains to a tiny village that had been a stronghold of resistance against Franco's fascists during the Spanish Civil War. There we met the old one-armed proprietor who, against all the odds, had kept the village in Republican hands during the entire war and who was still running the village restaurant serving big plates of paella with the single arm left to him by the fascists. Sam was fascinated looking at the memorabilia in that place and it launched us into discussions about the civil war, the anti-fascist war and what emerged in its aftermath. He was as fascinated a few days later when we met up to go and see and hear the flamenco dancers. Sam was a man of many passions.

I probably became much more circumspect about socialism than Sam in the years after I returned to my studies and perhaps learned more about political science and development economics from other professors. But Sam and I always connected over a deep critique of the polity in which we were born and a life-long commitment to opposing the imposition of its power on people around the world. I learned that Sam had once met Pete Seeger, who had so influenced me long before I went to Canada. I learned that Sam was involved in the defence of Daniel Elsberg and Anthony Russo when they were charged for releasing the Pentagon Papers, the exposé of US aggression in Indochina that had such an impact on me in my formative years. I saw in Sam a man of principle, who even when I disagreed with his position on this or that point, I always admired. When I last spoke to Sam a couple of weeks ago in hospital I told him how important he was in my formation. He said, well that is the way of this world, that he had learned from Chomsky, I learned from him and my students would carry it on. Sam was one of the people who taught me to be a teacher. He valued deeply his students and saw his responsibility to help them develop a critical mind and that, perhaps more than anything else, has influenced my own vocation as a teacher. Sam will be, and already is, deeply missed by all those fortunate enough to have crossed his path in our lives.

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