In an address at Moscow State University, President Ronald Reagan described how information technology was rapidly transforming industrial societies. As if from “a chrysalis,” the world was emerging from a reality constrained by “physical resources into, as one economist titled his book, ‘the economy in mind,’ in which there are no bounds on human imagination and the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource.” That remark may have disappointed Warren Brookes ’50 slightly: he had noted in its preface that The Economy in Mind (1982) was “the work not of an economist but of a journalist.” But in a larger sense, the presidential reference was a fitting tribute to a life spent extolling the virtues of free markets and the potential of innovation.

Unflinching faith in the capacity of human ingenuity to overcome scarcity was the key theme animating Brookes’s works. His optimism was undergirded by a specific conception of wealth as “less physical and arithmetical than metaphysical and conceptual,” grounded in “energy of mind” rather than “entropy of matter.” He relished confronting “doomsdayers” and “gloom-mongers” who decried unsustainable growth. The real “gross domestic product,” he wrote, is less dependent on market value than on “the value systems of our people.” The creativity that sees silicon in sand and fiber optics in glass is a function of the “spiritual laws” that “give mankind the power to triumph over material lack and limitation.”

Brookes came to journalism indirectly, having worked primarily in marketing until his mid forties. As a Cryovac executive, he helped pioneer the mass application of “saran-type plastic packaging,” both reducing cost (meat could be pre-cut, boxed, and preserved at the packing plant) and increasing shelf life.

He ventured into publishing in the early 1960s, as the Christian Science Monitor’s promotions director. Despite success in boosting the paper’s circulation, his belief that the Monitor should regain its core audience by emphasizing church principles led to a protracted, ultimately losing, struggle with the publication’s leadership.

What happened next is not fully clear, largely because Brookes declined to discuss it publicly. He seems to have suffered an acute period of demoralization, and credited his wife with saving his life. The episode proved transformative, launching his second career as a columnist who applied lessons from two decades in business to questions of political economy. In 1975, a friend at the Boston Herald-American asked Brookes to prepare a memo for the paper’s economics reporters. The resulting “magnificent article” ran by itself and the Herald eventually gave Brookes a regular column, emphasizing the “taxpayer’s” perspective. When California’s Proposition 13 rolled back taxes in 1978, Brookes advocated a similar measure in Massachusetts. The paper received roughly 16,000 letters and Brookes became known as the architect of Proposition 2½, the 1980 referendum that capped Bay State municipalities’ property tax revenue at 2.5 percent of value and limited increases to 2.5 percent a year. Brookes forecast an “exhilarative” economic effect, along with soaring property values that would blunt the revenue impact. His accuracy can be debated, but the fiscal Armageddon augured by some commentators never materialized, and even many original opponents now deem the measure a “qualified success.”

In 1985, the Detroit News hired Brookes as its Washington columnist. He settled an hour outside the capital in a conscious effort to avoid coziness with officialdom. His commute, he joked, was “a perfect excuse for begging off the Washington social whirl” when his business there was done.

His rural location also suited the way he worked: “stay in [the] office and absorb the statistical data, then call up the experts about it.” Rigorously, he compiled and analyzed data from recondite sources; tables and graphs were hallmarks of his columns. What set him apart was never his style—the tactfulness of a “pneumatic hammer,” said one critic—but his persistence in unearthing inconvenient facts and in challenging conventional wisdom.

Brookes’s reverence for entrepreneurialism coincided with the rise of Reaganomics and positioned him as an outspoken fount of supply-side policies. Not all were enamored: “He starts with funny
figures...and comes out with funnier figures still,” said Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis. Fiercely and admittedly ideological, Brookes could also train his sights on kindred targets, famously dismissing President George H.W. Bush as “all rudder and no keel.”

Later in life, the man once described as “one of Boston’s most read, and least seen, columnists” seemed to be inching closer to the limelight. He became an early star of the fledgling Washington Times editorial page and caught the attention of major news outlets. His sudden death from pneumonia at 62, just as his influence was peaking, devastated readers and friends.

Brookes was “ever the skeptic, but never the cynic,” said one editor. His personal philosophy sprang from an abiding faith in humanity as the ultimate natural resource. In a 1977 exposé of Boston public housing, Brookes championed ownership rights for tenants as the antidote to high costs and squalid conditions. When Jack Kemp, confirmed as U.S. secretary of housing and urban development a dozen years later, asked him, “What should I do?” Brookes replied with his trademark guffaw, “Privatize it—but before you do, empower the poor.” Eulogizing Brookes, Representative John Dingell mused that he was probably still churning out columns: “If Saint Peter tangles with him, he’s going to be sorry.”

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