REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Michael Novak

Over a long life Michael Novak traveled from writing speeches for George McGovern to serving as Ronald Reagan's ambassador to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, reflecting an intellectual journey from socialism to capitalism. He died Friday at age 83, but in many ways he remained the boy forged in Johnstown, Pennsylvania: a working-class town of steel mills, coal mines and immigrant Slovak families trying to find their way in this new land called America.

A thinker who argued for the morality of free markets.

Raised as a Roman Catholic, Novak believed as a young man that socialism was the ideal economic arrangement. But he began to notice a flaw: While socialism sounded good in theory, in practice it didn't work—and non-elites fared the worst.

Capitalism had little high-minded theory, but in practice it literally provided the goods. If ordinary folks did so much better under capitalism, maybe the caricatures—e.g., that it is all based on greed—were wrong. Maybe free markets had their own virtues and were defensible, and even superior to other economic systems on moral grounds.

From this recognition sprang his most important work, "The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism," which changed America's public debate when it was published in 1982. "Democratic capitalism," he wrote, is "neither the Kingdom of God nor without sin. Yet all other known systems of political economy are worse. Such hope as we have for alleviating poverty and for removing oppressive tyranny—perhaps our last, best hope—lies in this much despised system."

Too many religious leaders, Novak argued, have no understanding of how economies work, and thus they focus on redistributing wealth without regard for how wealth is created. As for business leaders, he encouraged them to think of their careers as a calling, and the rest of us to recognize that capitalists are "the main hope" for billions around the world still locked in poverty.

Michael Novak also wrote for these pages, and we reprint one of his pieces nearby. As we mourn his loss, we also celebrate a life dedicated to the same proposition put forth in the Declaration of Independence: that the Creator fitted everyone to flourish in freedom—and America was founded to prove it.