

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

Welcome back to another week, folks, of Ideas In Progress from the IHS. Today, we have something very different for you. I'm happy to say we're going to run a series of shows over the next few months highlighting all the many faculty and staff in our little family that make this place so amazing. Everyone seems to have their own, "how I first heard about IHS," or, "what my first encounter was with IHS," stories. Whether it's meeting a series of lifelong friends and colleagues at a summer seminar or like me just chancing across a flyer in your graduate department, I feel like most of us have fun or at least interesting stories to share. And by the end of our little sporadic series here, I hope you'll agree with me that IHS is not so much a proper institution as it is a powerful stream of people, so passionate about advancing liberty, peace, and prosperity that they had to make it a full time job. Here we go then.

And first up it's GMU PhD candidate, Josh Ammons. Tell us if you can, what was your first contact with IHS? Do you remember the very first time you ever heard about it and what you thought at the time?

Josh Ammons ([01:30](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So I was exposed to economics in my undergraduate degree in business administration, and I really enjoyed economics. But I really wasn't exposed to many other disciplines that IHS focuses on. And so I was just searching around trying to figure out where I can learn more to supplement some of the learning that I was doing. And at the time in 2013, we were doing a lot of online programs, which is interesting because we're going back to doing a lot of online programs with COVID-19 issues that we're facing. But my first introduction to, IHS was through the War on Drugs, America's Longest War with Angela Dills. So it was an online program that we did where she was really explaining the economics of the war on drugs and many of the factors that motivate supply chains and consumer behavior and innovations that happened in the marketplace and some of the incentives that are created through the government's response to this issue, being the war on drugs which is America's longest war.

And it was just a really fascinating take because my exposure to economics before that was an intro class for micro and macro. And at least in my class, we never talked about the war on drugs in the way that these policies in particular could be analyzed through the economic way of thinking that I had learned in my courses, my introductory courses at college. And it was just fascinating because it really opened up my eyes to the fact that these concepts that I was learning in school really had a major impact on the world around me, but it also broadened my scope of the ways that I could use economics to study the world. I know many people that aren't as familiar with economics really focus on me being able to predict what the stock market's going to do tomorrow, which spoiler alert, I can't, I have no idea. It seems extremely volatile right now, especially.

But the way that I really look at economics now was shaped in part by this first exposure with Professor Angela Dills on the war on drugs because I was able to see that all types of human behavior is really subject to the incentives and the institutions that we have in the world and being able to connect in this online format was really fantastic in the learning that I achieved, but also in being able to connect with Angela Dills who really kindly was a reference when I applied to work at IHS. And I also met a lot of students through that way. So it was just a great experience. And I was really grateful that I had the door opened to the supportive community through IHS all the way in 2013.

Anthony Comegna ([05:01](#)):

Yeah. I was going to ask what year that was, because your name sticks in my head along with Ryan Zinski and of course Bill Glod and Nigel Ashford and a couple other folks who've been around for quite a while,

as somebody that I remember when I was a student. And I cannot remember for the life of me how I recognize your name from those days, but somehow I do. And I'm wondering what exactly is the story of the transition from you participating in that online event with Angela Dills that sort of sparked this connection between your sort of first principles and the social science that you were learning and your working at IHS for now many years?

Josh Ammons ([05:47](#)):

Oh, thank you. So I can't quite place where I first met you either. So what I'll talk a little bit more about is the journey from that first online program to starting to work at IHS. And I think a key point in that was going to my first summer seminar in 2013 on the morality of capitalism and freedom.

And the link there was I was really interested in economics and I didn't quite know what I was going to do after I graduated. But one of the IHS staff members mentioned to me that IHS is an affiliate with George Mason University. And I was already really familiar with the economics department at George Mason by the time I went to this first summer seminar. And I was really impressed by some of the economists actually that you've interviewed on this podcast, Chris Coyne, Pete Boettke, Brian Kaplan, some of these other names that I was just really influenced by their work and I wanted to learn more, but I also really wanted to work. And I wanted to continue to interact with IHS, so the staff member encouraged me just take classes and then apply for an internship at IHS.

And the other thing that happened at the summer seminar, which I guess is a bit of a digression, but I got to meet Steve Horwitz and Brandon] Turner and Lynne Kiesling and Sarah Squire and [Alexei Marko 00:07:34] and their lectures were really fantastic because you mentioned really shaping my worldview because I had certain classical liberal inclinations, sure. But I wouldn't say that I really had a real framework for understanding the world, especially in the interdisciplinary framework before going to that summer seminar, because you had really my first exposure to an interdisciplinary group of classical liberals. And so Alexei Marko was talking about business ethics, which I was fairly familiar with some of those ideas, although really not the classical liberal spin that he was putting on it.

And then Steve Horwitz was really talking about capitalism and the family arguing that both markets and even our family relationships are guided by the spontaneous order that ends up changing the way that we interact with each other, both in markets and in a family sphere and really in civil society broadly in a way that leads to socially beneficial outcomes, especially from a classical liberal perspective. We're really encouraged by the way that families are being much more open and society seems to be accepting on people that deviate from a 1950s family norm style. And then also capitalism is really improving the lives of a lot of especially the least well off. And so he really connected those two ideas in a way that I thought it was fantastic. And then Brandon Turner starts talking about Marx in a really critical, but actually a very charitable way to where I can really understand those ideas and appreciate the nuances that Marx was bringing to the table as well as we had a great lecture on [inaudible 00:09:45].

Then Lynne Kiesling was the one that first introduced me to Elinor Ostrom and those ideas have been extremely influential in my research as a graduate student and just shaping the way that I think about other ways civil society and club goods work, and being able to understand the sort of bottom-up governance.

And so all of these various professors that we were working with really brought a lot to the table and really enriched my view to where I could understand this as a coherent framework going all the way back perhaps even before the Scottish Enlightenment but really taking off around David Hume and Adam Smith. And so having that framework really helped me to understand how important these ideas

were for society and for social science in particular. And it made me really passionate about advancing classical liberal ideas and working in IHS and also just meeting the staff members.

They were really encouraging and really helped me to want to apply to IHS and see a future that was really unrealized. I mean, when I was in undergrad, I had no idea really what I wanted to do. So I picked business administration because I figured it would give me as many options as possible once I figured that out. And I'm grateful that I left a lot of options open because it helped me to be able to find IHS and eventually figure out that the discipline that I really wanted to focus the most on was economics. And it gave me that introduction. So I guess that's a roundabout way explaining how I got to IHS. And I could go with more stories like that if you're interested or feel free to take the conversation in a different way.

Anthony Comegna ([12:00](#)):

Well, I'm curious because you mentioned that you're a graduate student and you're here at George Mason, which is a partner with IHS. And I'm curious to know how you have connected sort of your, the kinds of things that you're researching and learning as a graduate student, both through your master's and now into the PhD program at Mason, with the kind of work that you do day-to-day at IHS over the years here. How does one inform the other in Josh Amman's day-to-day life?

Josh Ammons ([12:39](#)):

Oh yeah, that's a great question. So from my view, one of the most important core concepts within the classical liberal ideas that we really focus on at IHS is peace and peaceful solutions. [inaudible 00:12:57] also insists that liberalism is really a project aiming toward peaceful relations with individuals at a societal level and in between nations. And so one of the things that really facilitates that is trade, and I think trade is extremely important. Perhaps even today, it's more important because we need all these medical supplies to be able to keep people safe. But also that trade, I really believe in the due commerce thesis and being able to interact with other people and trade in markets helps us to humanize other people and understand a bit more about them. And so the markets piece is a big piece of why I like liberalism and particularly how that influences peace.

But one of the things that was really pernicious in my understanding was after reading *After War*, Chris Coyne's book, and I know Chris Coyne was on the podcast. And so I encourage anyone to check that out if they really want to learn more about his work. But it's really troubling because a lot of efforts to bring peace around the world that governments generally use are military foreign invasion and various foreign interventions. And by reading his work, I understood all the public choice reasons why many of these fail and it just empirically looking at the data, we have a pretty bad track record on these kind of things. And so I was really interested in figuring out other solutions to bring about that peaceful world, particularly in places where the people are really suffering and they want some sort of a peaceful solution, but for whatever reason, trade isn't on the table, or they're just lacking basic human rights.

And so if we understand that we might have an ethical obligation to help people, but if we don't have a means of doing so and liberating people from the struggle without causing more harm, then we're in a really bad spun. So one of the things that I really took out, even really going back to that first summer seminar, was the focus on the Ostroms. And then also marrying that bottom-up governance idea and Ostromian framework. And so, I guess also it's helpful to note that Gene Hoffman's] got a really good podcast on Ostrom that explains a bit more of this than I'm going to be able to explain now.

But basically the idea is that if citizens are allowed to interact with each other, then they're going to figure out rules and mechanisms for solving societal problems. And if we take that really

seriously, then we can understand a lot of the ways that nonviolent action can help people in a society reform the overall rules of the game. Many of which that I alluded to are extremely pernicious, especially in developing economies. And so there are various actions, a lot of the research that I did to understand the methods and the mechanisms by which citizens are accomplishing this was working on Gene Sharp's research and really going through that as long as well as Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's work in why civil resistance works, where they actually go through empirically and look at instances of regime change and compare a violent interaction between nonviolent methods and show that there are many peaceful ways that society can move from a dictatorship type of institution to something that looks a lot more like liberalism and really creates the societal wellbeing that I'm really passionate about.

And the other key point of this is that the coauthor that I've been working with on this is Chris Coyne, who I've mentioned several times, but the first way that I connected with him was actually at our board meeting. I saw him walking through the halls and I had been reading his book, *After War*, and just thought it was one of the greatest books on this topic that I was really passionate about. And I got so excited and I sort of got taken aback and said, "Oh, you're Chris Coyne, please sign this book." And then once I got into the program at GMU, I took all the classes with him that I could possibly take and then started working on this research with him. And actually just a few weeks ago, we published a chapter in the book, *Bottom-Up Responses To Crisis*. And so this is my first book chapter. And as a budding academic, I'm really proud of the research and hope to be able to explore more of this research with my dissertation.

But it was really making those connections with faculty and also building on ideas that I've learned through working at IHS and my classes at Mason obviously, but a lot of the ideas that I'm learning in my work really coincide with that research really well. And so it's a great atmosphere to be able to really get a deep understanding of the interdisciplinary links in classical liberalism through IHS that you can then bring to your respective discipline and really enrich your research in a way that I think a lot of people who are just focused on economics or philosophy or political science without really peering over those artificial walls of the ivory tower to see what other disciplines are doing might actually miss. And I think that this interdisciplinary framework that IHS provides at all their programs will just really help people to have a more nuanced view on whatever they're researching.

Anthony Comegna ([20:16](#)):

I have a lightning round prepared for you. Okay. A round have a quick questions, four questions and just respond as quickly as you can, as honestly as you feel free to. Okay? Who is the most funny person in the IHS network?

Josh Ammons ([20:36](#)):

James Stacey Taylor, certainly. So James Stacey Taylor is by far my favorite in terms of humor. He's got this really dry sense of humor. And my first exposure to him was actually working my first summer seminar and understanding a bit more about the Scottish Enlightenment through his lectures was fantastic. He's really well-versed in those ideas, but the way that he communicates them, it's just extremely hilarious. And I won't give away any of his punchlines because I'm sure that he wants to present that. But if you pay attention during the lectures, he'll throw in some dry jokes and some that are just really obviously funny for everyone. And yeah, he is by far one of my favorites in the humor category.

Anthony Comegna ([21:40](#)):

Who is the most radical?

Josh Ammons ([21:44](#)):

The most radical? Well, I think Anthony Comegna is probably most radical.

Anthony Comegna ([21:50](#)):

That's what I always tell students at discussion colloquia. I say, "Look, this is not a contest to be the most radical, classical liberal in the room. I already won that many years ago." So don't bother. But surely John Hasnas has me beat, right?

Josh Ammons ([22:06](#)):

Oh, perhaps. I really like John Hasnas' work, *The Obviousness of Anarchy*, which I think is really a great article talking about how really when you think about all the interactions that we have and the way that a society is moving often it's not the laws that are really influencing us to do the right thing. It's the institutions that are privately created or just rules of civility. And that anarchy is really all around us if you just open your eyes to it. And I think it's a pretty simple and intuitive thing once you think about it, but so in that way, it's perhaps much more mundane and not very radical. But I think that many people just don't look at the world that way. But from my perspective, once you see it, it's really hard to unsee that insight that he brings. So I really like his work and he's a great faculty partner.

Anthony Comegna ([23:17](#)):

Who is the snappiest dresser?

Josh Ammons ([23:20](#)):

Chris Coyne, for sure.

Anthony Comegna ([23:22](#)):

That's what I say, too.

Josh Ammons ([23:24](#)):

Absolutely. Basically he's got the pants that are just out of this world, always fabulous. And you might see him in a couple of lectures. He does the same thing in class. He's always got the fantastic pants and just the tops as well. He's just a really, really snappy dresser. I love it.

Anthony Comegna ([23:48](#)):

Who has the best name?

Josh Ammons ([23:51](#)):

The best name? I don't know. Can I pass? Nothing is really coming to mind on that.

Anthony Comegna ([23:59](#)):

You must not have heard of Judge Glock or Johnny [crosstalk 00:00:24:03], right? Come on.

Josh Ammons ([24:04](#)):

No. So I've never actually met either of them in person. But I have heard of them. That's definitely fantastic names. Adam Smith is also another fantastic name.

Anthony Comegna ([24:16](#)):

What?

Josh Ammons ([24:18](#)):

Yeah. So there's a contemporary, Adam Smith. And I think he's definitely got a great name, particularly because he's an economics professor.

Anthony Comegna ([24:30](#)):

Oh, oh, okay. So yeah, yeah, yeah. Somebody alive now named Adam Smith. That makes sense.

Josh Ammons ([24:36](#)):

Yes, exactly. It really is confusing because you see on citations and it'll say, "Adam Smith, 2018," and you're thinking, "You're about 200 years off here," but no, it actually is an economist that's still researching now.

Anthony Comegna ([24:54](#)):

Yeah. I don't know if that's a career killer or a career maker, but...

Josh Ammons ([24:57](#)):

Right. Right. Because the great Adam Smith is always getting the credit for your research.

Anthony Comegna ([25:09](#)):

There you have it folks, IHS's own Josh Ammons. Well on the way to being one of our heavy hitter economists. It was a delight hearing his story. I hope you all enjoyed it and come back next week for more Ideas In Progress.