

## *Reflections on the Economic Club of Chicago* *by Arnold R. Weber*

In the last thirty years my association with the Economic Club of Chicago has been as diverse as it's been rewarding. During this period I've been an active member, a dinner speaker and have served a two year stint as President\* of the Club.

I've personally benefited most from the glittering and varied array of speakers the club has brought to Chicago. This included the heads of national governments (Richard Nixon, Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac, among others), a long list of CEO's of major corporations who were at the pinnacle of their success and celebrity and a collection of savants in economics, microbiology and technology. The formal speeches were almost always stimulating, but along with the rest of the audience, I always awaited the moment of truth when the President of the club asked a series of probing, disarming questions. I marveled at the acumen and intellectual reach of the President until I held that position and learned that these questions were the collective product of a Questions Committee which no doubt used "Meet the Press" as its model.

My participation as a speaker provided a perspective on the Club from the other side of the lectern. As I recall, this was the first time I delivered a speech in a tuxedo other than to offer a toast at my sons' weddings. This adornment added to the gravity of the occasion, however, it did not inhibit my academic habits and the talk ran over the allotted time. John Bryan, who was the President at the time, had the good sense to limit the question period rather than letting the session run late and cause the members to miss the last Metra trains to the suburbs. Because my topic was the state of higher education, this indiscipline conveyed a deeper message about the problems of the institution.

It was during my stint as President that I learned that the smooth operation of the club did not happen by chance. Rather, it was the consequence of the devoted, highly efficient support of the Club staff and various committees which took the leadership in shaping the program, selecting and inducting new members, monitoring the Club's finances and arranging the receptions, lunches and dinners. Setting the table for as many as 2,300 guests is no task for part time amateurs. These dinner logistics met their most demanding test when Newt Gingrich, who was then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, sidled into the banquet hall eight minutes before he was scheduled to speak and the catering staff managed to serve him a full course dinner, which he proceeded to ingest in time to step up to the lectern on schedule.

Over seventy-five years, the Economic Club has maintained a position as the preeminent business and public affairs forum in Chicago. Its speakers have addressed the major issues of concern to business and civic leaders. Its membership has reflected the changing economic scene and diversity of leadership in the wider community. As such, it is a powerful representation of the deep commitment of Chicago business and professional leaders which has served the metropolitan community so well for so many years.

\* The title of President was changed to Chairman in 1998.