Remembering a professor of aristocratic-Burkean values who understood the inevitability of change

Jeffrey Hart, Ivy League Modernist

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The Noontime lecture series at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a prime meeting place where young Capitol Hill conservatives, mostly working in either the House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate, came together in the pre-internet era to meet one another, exchange ideas in a social setting, and enjoy a speaker. The structure of the series was specifically designed to connect the rising generation of young traditionalists (and many future leaders of the conservative movement) to important, already established right-wing politicians, intellectuals, writers, media figures, and authors.

In that era, the Heritage series was a peerless Who's Who of the most important figures in American conservatism, and it was common for conservatives in their early twenties, just out of college and working in their first jobs, to interact with the likes of Friedrich Hayek, William F. Buckley Jr., Jack Kemp, Newt Gingrich, Kate O'Beirne, Russell Kirk, Midge

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Decter, Bill Bennett, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Stan Evans, George Will, James Jackson Kilpatrick, Robert Novak, and Phyllis Schlafly.

The lectures always drew a sizable crowd, and many lifelong friendships were seeded in the foyer of Heritage in those years.

It was during one such Noontime forum that I met Jeff Hart. From that meeting, a lifetime friendship blossomed across nearly thirty years. At the time, he was already a well-known professor of English at Dartmouth College, one of the founders of the Dartmouth Review, a longtime senior editor at National Review, and a kind of exemplar of an entirely unique strand of cultural conservatism that was an Americanized version of—but not really related to—what Russell Kirk creatively called Bohemian Toryism.

Its primary emphasis was on history and literature in the vein of Hilaire Belloc, and it often paid attention to political or policy considerations only secondarily to cultural matters. In almost all discussions with Jeff, culture, not politics, led. His conservatism contained an element of disinterestedness in the here and now.

His was a brand of conservatism that seemed always to be seeking a defense of the best of Western civilization and the American experience, and in its late-twentieth-century form, it was fervently anticommunist, favorable to free enterprise, and driven by a view that great literature, clarity of expression, a moral duty to be intelligent, and American exceptionalism (after two world wars and a Cold War) were indisputable.

The elements of this admixture were sometimes difficult to pinpoint with precision, but they became touchstones of Jeff’s lyrical writing, consistent defense, and celebration through the years: the aesthetics of the Ivy League, Brooks Brothers, and J. Press as indelibly linked to social graces and good manners; the literature of Modernism, i.e., Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, as emblematic of granitic expression; tennis, golf, and collegiate hockey in the spirit of Princeton’s Hobey Baker, which embraced the ethic of the amateur; an unwavering loyalty to the concept of the gentleman; the conviction that Athens and Jerusalem were the civilizational pillars truths always relevant to our own era; and the ideal of elite education and learning to be found in the best of the Columbia University Great Books curriculum.

Jeff often spoke of that rarefied, Columbia milieu that shaped him as a young man—classes with Lionel Trilling, Mark Van Doren, and Jacques Barzun—as if it were only yesterday. That concentrated world up on the Morningside Heights of the ’40s, ’50s, and ’60s etched his soul and guided him for the rest of his life. Great ideas and amateur sports, for Jeff, went together as of a piece. There is a photo that hangs on my office wall of Jeff in his tennis whites as an undergraduate standing outside an ivy-covered classroom building at Columbia in the 1950s. He is holding a wooden tennis racket.

In sum, Jeff’s thinking, writing, and self were never far from campuses and the playing fields of colleges and universities. One of the annual events he looked forward to with relish was the Harvard-Yale football game, where I joined him in the mid-1990s in Cambridge. I have never seen anyone enjoy a game with such passion and good humor. He joked that he had decided to leave his full-length beaver coat at home.

A New Yorker by birth; educated at the prestigious Stuyvesant High School, Dartmouth, and Columbia; and having served in naval intelligence, Jeff made a dramatic turn toward the Augustan Age of eighteenth-century British literature, focusing on the English writer and polymath Dr. Samuel Johnson when he undertook his doctorate. He decided to dedicate his life to the primacy of the classroom in Hanover; to build the renown of National Review with William F. Buckley Jr. in New York City; and to cultivate a legion of young mentees.
Jeffrey Hart will be remembered as a signal, if not always orthodox, player in the revitalization of conservative thought in the late twentieth century.

at Dartmouth and around the country with a single-minded dedication to great writing and an infectious love for the liberal arts and humanities. In all these, he succeeded.

Jeff believed that the world of ideas, which should be celebrated and discussed, must also be applicable to everyday life. This was the fundamental way in which he internalized and understood politics—as a pragmatist at one very important remove. It was the basis for his great reverence for both Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, the latter of whom was a close colleague at National Review and the former of whom had the office that Jeff later occupied at the magazine’s rabbit-warren original offices on 35th Street in Manhattan.

Jeff’s roaring laughter was legendary, yet he possessed a rare gift for pivoting from high jinks and a great joke to offering a sublime mini-peroration or observation on the most solemn and tender occurrences, without missing a beat. It was part of his charm to be able to discern the extraordinary in the ordinary.

We often met at the Yale Club of the City of New York, where he would stay and work during his fortnightly visits when working for National Review. I remember having breakfast there with Jeff one gloomy winter morning. During our conversation, he paused to marvel at the beauty of a nearby Christmas tree that was shimmering in the corner. His delight and expression were almost childlike. He then seamlessly shifted to a story about how John Henry Newman would teach Dante: with such refinement, understated flair, and pathos that Newman would pause, weep, and then recite the poetry again.

Jeff had the gift of a raconteur, and his unique conservatism sprang from a catholic worldview that prized methodical reasoning. He was urbane and witty, relished the historical sweep of the East Coast as foundational to the American experience, and while favoring tradition and custom, at least as a general rule, his was a disposition that was adaptive, cosmopolitan, and protean. He didn’t resist change per se, and in his later years he fundamentally shifted on major issues, often finding himself in agreement with those on the left.
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He said and wrote that conservatism was about reform and not stasis. He believed that one of the great constants in life was change, and his internalization of Edmund Burke’s philosophy was more expansive and adaptable than many conservatives would abide.

Jeff had always been more a man of the center-right than a dogmatic conservative—he admired Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, believed the Great Society’s changes were here to stay, and wrote favorably of the social and moral alterations of the ’60s and ’70s on occasion. When he demonstrably moved away from many of the positions that had defined contemporary conservative domestic and foreign policy in the ’80s, ’90s, and early 2000s, it was a decisive pivot toward an older form of Eastern liberal Republicanism, which had been Jeff’s New York roots. He defended the abortion-rights position on human life. He opposed the war in Iraq as a former Cold War hawk (a view then, if not now, heterodox on the right). He voted for John Kerry and Barack Obama for the presidency. And he had tough, serrated words for the growing importance of evangelicals in the GOP.

Yet despite where he ended up, his thoughts and trenchant observations across four decades live on in the many books, columns, reviews, and back issues of National Review that shaped a new era—and a turn toward conservatism—firmly aligned with the Buckley-led movement of midcentury. Where that turn was more cultural than political, Jeff played a historic role.

In our many letters of friendship, Jeff always used stationery that contained a quote in blue ink at the bottom of the page, a quip from the agrarian writer John Crowe Ransom: “In manners, aristocratic; in religion, ritualistic; in art, traditional.”