

A Tribute to John McClaughry

Ethan Allen Lifetime Achievement Award
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In 1966 I was looking around for a summer job in Chicago after my sophomore year at Harvard and thought a political campaign might be fun. Someone had told me that political campaigns were a great place to meet girls.

Like many young people, I knew little about politics and government but thought that being a liberal Democrat was the way to be a nice person. So I wrote a letter to Illinois Senator Paul H. Douglas, a liberal icon with a storied past, and asked if I could work on his reelection campaign. I received a curt brush-off from a patronage factotum of Mayor Daley's Cook County machine: "Who sent you? We don't want nobody 'dat nobody sent."

But wait! Douglas's challenger was a neighborhood dad and father of grade-school friends—Charles H. Percy. Although he was a Republican, I knew that he and his kids were nevertheless nice persons. I walked over to his house and asked if I could work on his campaign. He was delighted, and grabbed a piece of paper and wrote out "John McClaughry, Research Director" with an office address. "Show up Monday morning and Mr. McClaughry will put you to work."

I showed up, and received an intense introduction to political ideas. Mr. McClaughry was friendly and gregarious but did not exactly go out of his way to put me at ease. He told me a bit about campaign issues and gave me a stack of things to read and several assignments. But mainly he plunged into talk about current politics and policy—the recently passed Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, and those that had launched LBJ's Great Society and War on Poverty. Like me he was strongly pro-civil rights, but he thought the anti-poverty and Great Society programs were monstrosities, bound to make serious problems worse. He was toying with the idea of homeownership for the poor, financed by "sweat equity," as a means of building self-reliance and upward mobility in the face of the dependency-promoting federal programs.

Riding the train home that evening, I reflected that I had entered a new world. I was surprised that Mr. McClaughry had engaged so seriously with a mere college student—I would come to realize that, for John, earnest engagement in every immediate moment was as natural as breathing. I was amazed that his positions on the issues were so precise and disaggregated—I would come to realize that those positions were products of a self-taught philosophy that could not be reduced to a slogan.

That summer and fall changed my life fundamentally. In 1967 I worked for John in the office of Senator Charles Percy on Capitol Hill, pursuing that homeownership idea. In 1968 we worked together on Richard Nixon's presidential transition. In the 1970s I worked on several of his

Vermont political campaigns and helped him build his first log cabin on Kirby Mountain. In the 1980s we were colleagues in Ronald Reagan's White House. Here are four things I learned about and from John in the summer of 1966 that grew deeper over the decades:

First, he was and is immensely well-read, knowledgeable, and intellectually creative. His philosophy was an inspired synthesis of libertarian and communitarian, and of liberal niceness and conservative toughness—with an overarching insistence on decentralization and localism. He was always giving me books to read. I would have come across Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek on my own, but John introduced me to civil-society apostle Richard Cornuelle, black-power advocate Nathan Wright, and lefty localist Gar Alperovitz. His command of American history was staggering. I advise you never to get into a betting contest with John in the chronological naming of America's vice presidents. But his interest was less in names than in political ideas and events. If you let slip a slightly-off account of the Mugwumps or Locofocos, or say anything at all critical of Thomas Jefferson or Robert La Follette, you will be set straight immediately in authoritative detail.

The originality of John's thought sometimes made him a contrarian in the results-oriented, career-obsessed world of politics on campaign staffs and in Congress and at the White House. And an occasional puzzlement to his fellow Vermont legislators in Montpelier. But he has been consistently ahead of the pack. He wrote brilliant, visionary speeches for Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, and for George Romney and Chuck Percy. Did you know that the now-familiar political term "empowerment" was a McClaughry coinage?

Second, John was and is not only a brainiac but also a social person, an activist, always networking and conspiring, building friendships and forming alliances. The Percy campaign Research Director befriended a group of young African-Americans on Chicago's South Side—Dave Reed and the New Breed—who were intent on leaving the Daley plantation with an independent congressional campaign. They did so as Republicans allied with Chuck Percy.

And John directed me to the Ripon Society back at Harvard, a humming cell of Republican student activists who were beginning to make their mark on the national stage. They—we—were known as liberal Republicans, but were actually pro-civil rights libertarians. We advocated both school desegregation and school choice. John joined us in 1967 as a fellow of the Kennedy Institute of Politics.

Third, John was and is hilariously funny. When a top campaign staffer complained to Mr. Percy that John could be abrasive, John posted on the office bulletin board a brochure from an actual trade group, the National Institute for Abrasive Methods, announcing that he was forming a local chapter. When he lost a statewide political campaign that I was managing, he banged out a concession statement on his Selectric and handed it to me for release. It began, "The voters of Vermont have just made one hell of a mistake." That is the only occasion I can recall where I successfully overruled him.

Many in this hall will be familiar with John's books such as *The Vermont Papers*, *Expanded Ownership*, and *From Welfare to Work*. My personal favorite is *Fair Play for Frogs: The Waldie-Frobish Papers*. It presents 14 years of letters between Jerome Waldie and Nestle J. Frobish, along with media commentary and an introduction by Mo Udall. Waldie, a progressive California assemblyman and later U.S. congressman, had introduced a bill to permit "the taking of frogs by slingshot." Frobish, John's creation, is chairperson of the Worldwide Fair Play for Frogs Committee, an outraged progressive with a talent for guilt-mongering and vituperative rhetoric.

Waldie at first replies earnestly to Frobish, assuring him that he, too, is strong for animal rights. But Frobish is persistent, and soon Waldie catches on and joins in a decade of increasingly ornate arguments and actions. These include the introduction in the United States Congress of the Omnibus Frog Protection Act, with categorical grants, a national advisory council, and reforms to grade-school curricula to teach the true, heretofore neglected role of frogs in American history. It is a masterpiece of political satire.

Fourth, John was and is a close student of human nature and human circumstance. That summer, he kept telling me about someone named Tom Curtis, a Missouri congressman who had been a leader in drafting and enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They had gotten to know each other working on tax legislation when John was a Senate staffer, and what had impressed John was Curtis's quiet integrity and disinterested devotion to the public good. When John discussed great historical figures, or colleagues down the hall, he would return again and again to questions of personal character and of making right decisions amidst the confusions of politics. John's evaluations are, of course, often acerbic and blunt. That's because he thinks character is king and routinely holds everyone to high standards.

John's concern for character and circumstance is, I believe, the key to his appreciation for decentralization. It is in the local community that human action finds its fullest expression for good or ill, and is most instructive and productive. John's boyhood as a near orphan in downstate Illinois, and his years among the hobos riding the rails across America as Feather River John, were as important to his developing worldview as anything he read in books. His 56 years and counting as Kirby Town Moderator is the most satisfying of his lifetime achievements. Driving around Kirby and Concord and Lyndonville, John knows everything about the lives of his neighbors and their trials and triumphs, and has a friendly word for everyone and many favors to do and to receive.

When John was deciding where to put down roots in the 1960s, he carefully considered Vermont and Tennessee. He did not know that hordes of other flatlanders were about to invade Vermont bearing a political outlook very different from his own. Tennessee might have turned out to be more comfortable, but, in retrospect, Vermont was John's calling. John's beloved wife Anne might even get away with saying it was Providential, and me too.

For he has been able to live in this lovely, rugged state while fighting at the barricades against some of the most dangerous developments in American politics—crony capitalism, bureaucratic suppression of initiative and society, progressive fantasies that government can abolish human nature and circumstance with subsidies and regulations. John’s many hundreds of articles on politics and policy—state and local, national and international—are a treasure house of reasoned analysis and instruction. When he tells you that no one’s been listening to him, don’t listen to him just this once. His commentaries, week after week, down the years and decades, have become a Vermont institution, an important part of the state’s understanding of itself, and have many times moderated or improved (or just stopped) the course of practical events.

John the activist has been building the Ethan Allen Institute for thirty years. It has sometimes been a one-man act against heavy odds, but if you want to see the results just look around this room tonight. The Institute is a strong network of accomplished men and women dedicated to individual liberty, conservative values, and effective, limited government. It is part of a burgeoning group of state policy institutes that is the most promising development in American conservatism today.

The Institute’s continued growth and success will be a great legacy of a great man.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in honoring John McClaughry with the Ethan Allen Lifetime Achievement Award.

— Chris DeMuth

