The New Criterion

Notes & Comments November 2012

John Silber, 1926–2012

Remembering John Silber, President and Chancellor of Boston University who turned a second-rate commuter school into a world-class research institution.

When John Silber died, age eighty-six, at the end of September, he was at work on an essay for *The New Criterion*. I was very much looking forward to the piece. It was to be a review of Martin Duberman's new biography of the left-wing historian Howard Zinn (1922–2010), the author of the anti-American bestseller *A People's History of the United States*. John had often crossed swords with Zinn at Boston University, where Zinn was a professor and where John reigned as President from 1971 to 1996 and then as Chancellor until 2003. Duberman's biography is certain to be an exercise in hagiography, probably of the fawning variety, and John's anatomy of the book and its subject promised to be a piquant addition to his library of salubrious polemic.

I deeply regret that John did not complete the review, but I was not surprised. I had spoken to him just a couple of weeks before his death. He was as cogent and cheerful as ever but was clearly fighting a formidable battery of ailments. I was abroad when the news came that he had died. I returned a few days later to find a brief letter from him informing me that his illness was terminal and thanking me for our friendship. It was written two days before his death.

If we lay aside our customary editorial voice in these notes, it is because John was such a close personal friend. I had first met John some time in the late 1980s, but it was not until after I published my book *Tenured Radicals* in 1990 that we became friends and ideological allies. A look at my files shows that I have well over one hundred letters from John—only occasionally in the last couple of years did he resort to email—and there are nearly as many from me to him. I mention this because it highlights one of John's signal characteristics: his intellectual and personal responsiveness. Some of his letters are brief notes bringing an article or author or event to my attention. Many are responses, often quite detailed, to something I'd written. There was, I am grateful to report, a certain quantum of praise. There was also, I am even more grateful to report, plenty of criticism. John was one of the contributors to our series on "The Betrayal of Liberalism" in the late 1990s. His essay was about what he regarded as the "core of liberalism"—more about the term "liberalism" in a moment—and he began by making the point that true liberalism cherishes candid criticism because such corrections are aids to enlightenment. "Socrates," John

wrote, “taught us to prize those persons of knowledge, candor, and good will who challenge our views, and to be especially grateful when we are shown to be mistaken. For then we exchange a false opinion for a truer one.”

This is a point that will be familiar not only to readers of Plato but also to readers of John Stuart Mill. John understood Mill’s limitations. We were at one in our admiration for James Fitzjames Stephen’s *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, a devastating attack on what we might call Mill’s libertarianism. (“Complete moral tolerance,” Stephen wrote in that book, “is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say, when society is at an end.”) When I published my book *Experiments Against Reality* in 2000, John wrote me not one but two long letters. One dilated on things he liked about the book. The other was full of pointed criticisms of my treatment of Mill. He wrote two letters, he explained, because he did not want his criticisms to obscure his praise. (He didn’t have to add that he also wanted to be sure that his commendation did not obscure his criticisms.)

It must have taken hours for John to compose those two letters. Yet that was the proverbial tip of the iceberg. I was hardly the only recipient of such generous intellectual attention. Some years ago, I had occasion to see some of the assessments he wrote for BU faculty who were up for promotion or tenure. They were extraordinary for their penetration, detail, and breadth. John did not weigh in on faculty in the sciences, but in history, philosophy, literature, and kindred subjects in the humanities, he ranged in a masterly fashion.

These assessments, I should emphasize, were written by John in his capacity as president of the university. How many other presidents would have taken the time, or would have commanded the intellectual equipment, to provide such assessments? Many of the tributes John received during his lifetime, and all of the obituaries that followed his death, rightly emphasized his economic triumphs at BU. When he took office in 1971, the university was running a deficit of $8.8 million on an annual budget of $71 million. John reduced the deficit during his first year and thereafter not only balanced the budget every year but also generated several hundreds of millions in surplus, which he invested in faculty and infrastructure and other resources. He increased grant revenue from $11 million in 1971 to more than $300 million. On his watch, the endowment increased from $18.8 million to $700 million. When he left BU in 2003, its annual budget was $2.5 billion and the university was in the black. Those numbers are worth bearing in mind when encountering the news—it is always presented with disapproval—that John was for many years “the highest paid” university president. As he liked to point out, he would have been ashamed had it been otherwise. He had taken a second-rate commuter school and transformed it into a world-class research institution whose faculty boasted a clutch of Nobel laureates and whose admissions were almost as selective as the Ivies. He had earned the money.

Most of the obituaries of John acknowledge these triumphs, but they do so in a grudging context. *The New York Times*, for example, aside from misstating the facts of his severance package (the $6.1 million John received was deferred compensation he had saved over the years, not a gift from the

university) presents him primarily as a contentious figure who, however gifted, was primarily a "divisive" leader. "He survived," the *Times* noted, "sit-ins, street protests, strikes, mass resignations, death threats, a suspicious fire that destroyed his home, a Civil Liberties Union lawsuit, federal and state investigations touching on his financial dealings, and critics who called him a tyrant and worse."

All of this is true. But to be properly appreciated, it needs to be put alongside another salient fact: John's extraordinary intellectual leadership. His success at BU was not just a matter of raising money, or hiring distinguished faculty (and sacking the slackers), or attracting students with higher SAT scores. Nor was it primarily a matter of facing down antinomian elements represented by leftists like Howard Zinn, though there is no doubt that John excelled at, indeed relished, confronting his opponents. (Item: When Larry Summers, then-president of a neighboring university near Boston, came a cropper after confronting a lazy but once-famous black professor, and the professor decamped to Princeton, John quipped that, had it happened at BU, he would have provided one-way limo service for the professor, "thus simultaneously improving two institutions.")

No, in the end what set John Silber apart in the sorry world of American academia was a combination of two things: courage, on the one hand, and a passionate commitment to the life of the mind, on the other. Searching for a single word that might compass these qualities, I thought of "fierce." John was a fierce intellectual combatant, who thought nothing of striding into a crowded auditorium of angry students or faculty to face them down with reasoned arguments. But he was also a fierce partisan of intellectual achievement, beginning with his own work as a scholar of Kant (among many other passions) and filtering down to his embrace of excellence wherever and in whomever he found it. Titles did not impress him. Accomplishment did. Unlike nearly all college and university presidents today—really, can you think of more than a handful of exceptions?—John was an intellectual leader as well as a competent manager. He didn't just go to the academic bourse to bid on big names: he pursued his own vision of what the university, as a home for the life of the mind, should be. That vision was rooted in a tradition going back to the Bible and the Greeks and was based on a profound understanding of human nature as both flawed and aspiring. Realizing that vision was John's real achievement at Boston University. It is sad to see how that institution has rapidly slipped back into the ranks of mediocrity and political correctness. John forged a great university out of a commuter college; I've been told that his successor said he hopes that by the time he leaves the presidency everyone will know him and his wife by their first names. It's a sort of distinction.

In many of John's obituaries, much was made of the connection between his having been born with a withered arm and his combativeness. The *Times*, for example, reported that he used the stump as a "weapon against bullies." Maybe so. John certainly didn't repine or indulge in self-pity. He taught himself to draw and sculpt (I've seen an impressive bas- relief he created of his friend Elie Wiesel) and he could play the trumpet with one hand. But he had learned there were limits. When

he was a child in Texas, John decided he wanted to be a large-animal veterinarian when he grew up. His father had to explain that, while John could do many things, handling large animals with one arm was not going to be one of them. John chuckled at himself when he recalled that story.

Behind John's fierceness was a large appetite for life. He and his wife, Kathryn, had eight children and innumerable (the *Times* says twenty-six) grandchildren. One Christmas, the Silbers's holiday card was a panoramic shot of the entire clan: it looked like a picture of a small village. John was marvelous with children. When he discovered that my young son entertained a passion for Lord Nelson, John helped him conduct a battle with warships they made from hollowed out walnut shells with toothpicks for rigging and bits of paper for the sails.

All of this was not only part of John's fierceness. It was also part of his liberalism. John didn't like it that I used the term as a synonym for "left-wing." I saw what he meant. "Liberal" in the old sense, what is sometimes referred to as "classical liberalism," shares nothing but a name with what goes under that rubric today. Indeed, it is an irony of language that a word that suggests freedom and liberty should have come to describe phenomena that are so inveterately illiberal. Speech codes. Quotas. The whole machinery of political correctness. These are the engines of what goes under the name liberalism today. How different it is from the robust liberalism of an earlier time. Color-blind justice. Advancement according to merit. The ideal of disinterested inquiry: These were cardinal virtues of classical liberalism, long since abandoned.

John would not have disagreed. But he clung to the true meaning of liberalism, a meaning he gleaned from parental tutelage, Sunday school, and his early theological studies. He had, he explained, in that essay on "the core of liberalism" that I mentioned earlier, been a liberal ever since he was ten years old and stood up for an elderly black woman on the bus. He was shouted at by angry passengers who herded the woman to the back of the bus. "Looking back on this event," he wrote, "I think it was the first indication that I was a liberal." I am not sure whether, given all it has suffered, the word "liberal" can be salvaged for the noble purposes it was created to name. But I have no doubt that those purposes persist. I have seen them resplendently embodied in John Silber. *Requiescat in pace.*

—Roger Kimball

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 31 Number 3 , on page 1

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2012/11/john-silber-1926a2012