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Tribute to George Dent

Peter W. Wood†

George Dent is a longstanding member of the National Association of Scholars (“NAS”), head of NAS’s Ohio chapter—the Ohio Association of Scholars, a member of the NAS’s board of directors, and a member of the steering committee on that board.

The NAS membership by itself testifies to his contrarian side. The National Association of Scholars—founded as the Campus Coalition for Democracy in 1982 and reorganized as NAS in 1987—quickly gained a reputation as the voice of neo-conservatives in higher education. Though NAS resisted that label and worked hard to encompass a broader swath of the political spectrum, the organization was unmistakably a center of opposition to the identitarian left on campus. George joined the NAS not long after it was founded and soon emerged as one of its regional and national leaders.

I know George wholly in this context, but it is a rich context—one that offers glimpses of his courage, energy, imagination, and perseverance.

The issues that first drew him to NAS, and that he made his own, were the fight for academic freedom and the fight against identity-group preferences. These overlap when colleges and universities obstruct the freedom of faculty members to criticize group preferences. George was clearly thinking about these matters well before he joined NAS. In 1988, for example, he published a law review article, “Religious Children, Secular Schools,” which examined possible ways that the state could accommodate the education of religiously observant people. That topic was well outside of George’s main professional specialization in business law, but it proved to be part of an enduring interest. He would write again in “Of God and Caesar: The Free Exercise Rights of Public School Students” in the Case Western Reserve Law Review; and on other aspects of religious

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freedom in law review articles such as “Civil Rights for Whom?: Gay Rights Versus Religious Freedom.”

George’s concern about religious freedom, however, is of a piece of his larger defense of freedom of expression—and his critique of campus ideologies that impede such freedom. Among his notable contributions to NAS’s journal, Academic Questions, was “Political Discrimination in the Curriculum: A Case Study.” The case in question was that of sociology professor Richard Zeller at Bowling Green State University. Zeller had heard complaints from his students who said that “their grades would suffer if they criticized abortion or feminism.” After conducting a survey which found that “overwhelming majorities of students” believed that such topics and others such as multiculturalism ought to be open for criticism but were seldom actually criticized, Zeller proposed a course titled “Political Correctness,” which he would teach for no additional pay. The college rejected the course at least partially on the grounds that another faculty member said the phrase “political correctness” had “no basis.”

This was something of a “we don’t need no stinking badges” moment, but George didn’t come to rest on the irony of a college suppressing intellectual independence on the grounds that such suppression doesn’t exist. Rather, he patiently walked through the details of the case to show the strength of Zeller’s position, both within Bowling Green State University’s official rules and as a matter of law.

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6. See Mike Wendling, Professor Fights for PC Course, BG News, Oct. 7, 1998, at 5 (noting that Zeller’s survey indicated that 82 percent of students believed that BGSU should offer courses with a “lively criticism of feminism, affirmative action, campus speech codes, the value of becoming a victim, sexual harassment and multiculturalism. . .”).
An echo of George’s concern over the suppression of dissenting views can be heard in “Doubts in the Priesthood,” another Academic Questions article. He wrote:

Until recently academics who harbored doubts about the wisdom or propriety of racial preferences and multiculturalism were well advised to keep their thoughts to themselves; to question them publicly would at least provoke criticism from one’s colleagues, and could incur loss of professional privileges and even severe punishment.10

Taking note of several left-of-center academics who had framed criticisms of racial preferences as harmful to blacks or an obstacle to economic equality, George saw signs of a fracture within the left’s solid support for admitting, hiring, and advancing people on the basis of skin color. He may have been too optimistic about that, but clearly George himself was never among those who kept his thoughts to himself.

Early on, he was a fierce opponent of racial preferences as morally wrong, educationally destructive, and legally doubtful. He carried his opposition forward by filing freedom of information requests to pry out of public universities in Ohio information about their racial preferences and by fearlessly publishing his own views. He was a strong and vivid supporter of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, itself an outgrowth of the successful 1996 ballot initiative for Proposition 209 in California, formulated by NAS leaders in that state. George has also sustained a critique of the Association of American Law Schools for its heavy-handed promotion of identity-group “diversity.” In his 2011 Academic Questions article, “The Official Ideology of American Law Schools,” George admits it is “unrealistic” to expect law school faculties to move away from their deep-sunk commitments to progressive political pieties, but “it is important to put the problem of political discrimination in the public eye.”11

The tone of that sentence isn’t weariness, exhaustion, or defeat. It is the voice of the man who knows there will be no quick victory but who remains unyielding in his judgment of the merits of his position.

George has always seemed to me in person a man of steady principle backed by quiet determination without a trace of histrionics.

10. Id. at 339.
12. Id. at 193.
And yet he has taken on four of the most fiercely aggressive ideologies of our time: secularism, racial preferences, academic feminism, and gay marriage.

What kind of person rushes into those burning buildings? The best answer I can give is a reader. One of the first times I met George, he noticed my bookmarked copy of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and we were at once off on a conversation about literature. My NAS colleagues report similar experiences. I couldn’t say what works of political or social theory George has been reading in recent years, but Houellebecq’s *Submission*, works by Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, Sinclair Lewis’s novels, *Anna Karenina*, and George Meredith’s novel, *The Egoist*, are on his recently-read shelf.

For more than twenty years as a member of the board of directors of NAS, George has kept a close eye on our finances, by-laws that he revised, mission, and initiatives. He ceaselessly offers ideas for how NAS can attract new members and donors, build alliances with like-minded organizations, and shape new research projects. He is that rarity among the trustees and directors of an organization who takes the trouble to understand every piece, large and small, of the organization’s pursuits.

It is hard to make that sound as vibrant as it is. NAS is a membership, research, and advocacy organization that has frequently involved itself in cases of individual faculty members who have come under reputational assault, such as Richard Zeller at Bowling Green. Figuring out how to assist in these cases is never easy, and the results are often disappointing. How does a body such as NAS sustain its confidence in these stormy seas? In no small part by having someone like George keeping watch and reminding us at crucial moments that the race is not always to the swift or the battle to the strong.