

# News of the Profession

## Louise Overacker: A Life in Political Science

Victoria Schuck\*

*[Editor's note: Louise Overacker died a few months before APSA and the Women's Caucus for Political Science were to pay a special tribute to her at the 1982 Annual Meeting. An outstanding, indefatigable scholar, Overacker was a remarkable political scientist. PS thanks Victoria Schuck for preserving Overacker's contribution to our discipline.]*

Louise Overacker, Elizabeth Kimball Kendall Professor Emeritus of Political Science of Wellesley College, died in her ninety-first year at her home in Los Gatos, California, April 26, 1982, from heart complications following a broken hip. An internationally recognized political scientist who contributed to a reshaping of the discipline and built one of the country's outstanding undergraduate departments, her life had something of a story-book quality. Scholar-teacher, able administrator, supportive colleague, political activist, mentor and role model to thousands of students, she became the compleat political scientist—a legend in her time.

### Disappointment

Born early in the last decade of the nineteenth century—November 18, 1891—a third generation Californian, she spent her first ten years in a small East Bay town, Centerville, near San Francisco where her father had a fruit-growing busi-

ness. When he realized a dream to become a cattle and wheat rancher, the family moved to St. Helena in the Napa Valley. After finishing at a little public high school held in rooms of the Town Hall, Overacker assumed that she would immediately enter Stanford University, the young institution which had opened the year she was born and her uncle had attended. But the early interpretation of Mrs. Stanford's will limiting the number of women to 500 at any one time (tuition was free to California students; admission was in order of application) led to disappointment. Her application and arrival exceeded the number, and she had to return to her home in the fall of 1911. Drop-outs did occur in the January term 1912, and on her second journey to the campus, she was allowed to stay. With extra credits from high school and additional courses taken along the way, Overacker caught up with her class and was graduated with a B.A. in economics and a Phi Beta Kappa key in 1915.

Stanford had no political science department although the discipline had been formally organized as the American Political Science Association in New Orleans a decade before Louise Overacker's graduation. The few courses given were in the Economics Department. Yet in retrospect it is fair to say that the University and the young Assistant Professor Victor J. West who had studied at the University of Chicago and had come to teach in her sophomore year sparked her career. West's courses in American politics inspired her to continue for a Master's degree. With a half-time assistantship for two years, more West courses, ample field work in San Francisco, and a thesis on "The Police Department of San Francisco," Overacker received an M.A. in 1917.

World War I brought another dimension

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\*Victoria Schuck is a former professor of political science at Mount Holyoke and past president of Mount Vernon College.

to her education, not as Rosie the Riveter but as a clerk in the Washington bureaucracy classifying jobs in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance for the U.S. Bureau of Efficiency. West, on war leave, had encouraged her to come. After the Armistice, Overacker went with the YMCA to Paris to route entertainers around France. From these two vantage points, she had a chance to observe administration beyond local police, to see the "greats" in action—Wilson, Clemenceau, and Lloyd George—and to celebrate the Versailles Treaty in Europe.

The war over, both West and Overacker returned to Stanford: he to found a separate Department of Political Science in 1919 and she to serve as research assistant. Within the year an offer of an instructorship in political science at Vassar afforded the first opportunity to try teaching. After two years of learning to keep ahead in a wide variety of courses as one of a two-member staff, she decided to secure a Ph.D.

### Only Chicago

For her only one university would do, Chicago, to work under Charles E. Merriam. Then approaching the peak of his career (he would be a principal founder of the Social Science Research Council in 1923-24 and become president of the APSA in 1925), Merriam was fathering the behavior movement and creating the "Chicago School" of political scientists. Overacker entered the doctoral program as a university fellow in October 1922, took more than 60 percent of her graduate courses, seminars and research in parties, politics and methods with Merriam, passed her doctoral examination magna cum laude, wrote a dissertation on "Presidential Primaries," and had her degree in August 1924, one of 19 women to complete the Ph.D. in political science throughout the country in the years 1921-1929 (women comprised 10 percent of the doctorates). At Chicago, she discovered the excitement of competition, absorbed methodological innovations taking over the discipline, including the interrelatedness of the social sciences, and became a member of Merriam's extended "familial [research] community."

### Discrimination

Now ready for an academic appointment, she again encountered discrimination as a woman. Urged by a faculty member to seek a university position and having the strong recommendation of Merriam, she met the head of the Political Science Department of Indiana University who visited the campus to recruit an appointee with her qualifications. He left the interview with assurances that she had the position. Later she had his very apologetic letter: the President was sorry but the institution could not offer the job because she "would have to share an office with a man." Undaunted, Overacker went to a woman's college, Wilson (in Pennsylvania) as professor of government and economics and taught courses in both disciplines for a year.

When Wellesley in 1925 invited her to take the post of assistant professor in the History Department, she accepted with alacrity. Thus began a remarkable career for Overacker lasting 32 years—and beyond. She shifted courses from government to political science—from



**Louise Overacker**

the historical to analytic and behavioral—created an independent department in 1940. Under the exigencies of war when the college closed for an extended winter recess, together with a young faculty member, she coupled “practical experience” to political science. In-term field work and summer Washington internships became a distinguishing feature of Wellesley’s program.

As Margaret Ball, her first full-time appointee (1936) and long-term colleague (until 1963) has recently remarked, Louise Overacker was “a mainstay of the department, whether as chairman or as senior member under someone else’s chairmanship. She was a pillar of the college.” Her primary concern, the maintenance of high standards, coincided with the values of the college. For her teaching and research were inseparable. Encouraging young faculty in each, she was much admired within and outside the department.

Her leadership in no small measure derived from authoritative scholarship. Her dissertation, which was reworked for Merriam’s “parties and politics series” of Macmillan, appeared in 1926. Aided by a Social Science Research Center (SSRC) grant, she took leave to coauthor the revision of Merriam’s 1908 book, *Primary Elections*, published in 1928. West’s untimely death in 1927 led her to accept his widow’s invitation to develop a book from notes on campaign funds. *Money in Elections* resulted in 1932, another in Merriam’s politics series. The three monographs plus ten articles in two series—one on primaries appearing in even-numbered years from 1928 through 1940; the other on campaign costs, alternating in off-years after each presidential election from 1933 through 1945—published in the *American Political Science Review* guaranteed her reputation. Meeting the canons of “scientific” objectivity and quantitative measurement “whenever possible,” she became the foremost researcher in the two fields.

### Recognition

Her peers in APSA gave early recognition to her abilities. She was a frequent mem-

ber of roundtables on methods and American politics in the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s. The year Merriam was president, she was elected to the Executive Council for a two-year term (1926-1928). In 1933 she was selected to chair the program committee for the national meeting, and in 1939 elected second vice president—the highest office open to a woman. More importantly SSRC grants kept coming in 1933 and 1936 for research on campaign expenditures. And at the close of her primary-campaign-fund series in 1945, she was named to the Board of Editors of the *Review*, a first for a woman, and she served two terms.

During World War II, Overacker made the decision to remain on campus, allowing leaves for the young faculty. In 1945 she accepted a rare invitation to a woman by Boston University to present the Gaspar G. Bacon lectures, later assembled in a little volume on *Presidential Campaign Funds* (1946). There was time to respond to other invitations—for book reviews, an essay in the collection to honor Merriam, *The Future of Government in the United States* (1942) and an article for the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* on “Primaries, Political.” While preparing the last she discovered the pre-selection process in the Australian Labor party as the only institution outside the U.S. resembling the direct primary. Her interest was also piqued by the realization that no substantial accounts of Australian politics had emerged since Bryce’s 100 pages in *Modern Democracies* more than a quarter of a century ago.

As soon as the war ended, she turned her research to comparative politics and especially Australia, New Zealand, and England. A sabbatical and another SSRC grant took her to Australia in 1946-1947; the prized Guggenheim award, to Australia and New Zealand in 1951-1952; and a leave, to England in 1954. Her ensuing book on *The Australian Party System*, published in 1952, was a sell-out. The *APSR* not only had a pre-publication chapter on the Australian Labor party in 1949 but added a bibliography on Australian politics in 1953 and an article on the New Zealand Labor party in 1955. The *Political Science Quarterly* carried her article comparing

the New Zealand and British Labor parties in 1957.

In her last years before retirement there were further honors. The APSA selected her for its committees concerned with American party reforms and national party conventions. She also was given another two-year term on the Executive Council, 1956-1957. And in the year of her retirement, 1957, as the climax to her career, she received the coveted election as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

### Active Retirement

The decade following amounted essentially to changing positions. She was a John Hay Whitney Visiting Professor at Bethany College (West Virginia) in 1957-1958, Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa in 1958-60, substitute professor at UCLA for the newly appointed Chancellor of University of California at Santa Cruz who suddenly had to leave to plan the new campus in 1960-61. Her last teaching was at the Inter-American University in Puerto Rico in 1963.

But her writing went on. The popularity of the out-of-print book on Australian parties had raised the issue of a new edition. Yet the enormous social and political changes of the 50s and 60s made her consider an entirely new book. An invitation from the Australian National University to spend 1965 there as a visiting fellow provided the impetus for a new monograph. *Australian Parties in a Changing Society: 1945-1967*, published in Australia in 1968, became her sixth and final book.

Once settling into her California home, she did what she had often told her students to do: take an active part in politics. Indeed she had been an occasional activist in the Democratic party in Massachusetts and had also been a participating observer in party campaigns whenever she was present at elections from Australia to England. In California Overacker worked in Democratic party clubs, the Democratic Council, attended state conventions, and even signed up as a deputy registrar in order to conduct door-to-door registration of voters.

Louise Overacker thought of herself as "a political scientist who happened to be a woman." Hers was an era in which the role definition of women depended solely upon individuals. Her students graduated in an age of volunteerism and became community leaders, also judges, writers and other professionals. Representatives of three generations of Wellesley women reveal the depth of their appreciation.

Betty K. F. Johnson, Wellesley class of 1944 and now chairman of the Board of Trustees, who was a member of the 1942-1943 winter internship group, comments on her courses and the "pure joy" of her General Examination question. "She was stern, but kind, demanding and receiving the best we could produce. There was never any question under her tutelage but that political science was the first science of man . . . not because Aristotle said so, because Louise Overacker taught it." After Betty Johnson's marriage and her own continuing involvement in Democratic politics, they engaged in a life-long correspondence. "It was as if she were my north star. I fixed my political compass by her." With "unflinching loyalty and devotion," she and other former students created a fund for an internship scholarship honoring her on her eightieth birthday.

Elizabeth Drew, class of 1957, *New Yorker* political writer and television commentator, views her influence this way. "Louise Overacker's role in stimulating my interest in understanding how the political process works was a critical one. I am not sure that I would be doing what I am today if it had not been for her. What greater tribute can there be than that she inspired and left a lasting impact on her students? She showed us what was important."

Nannerl Keohane, class of 1961, the new president of Wellesley, mentions her leadership in the department and "skills as a sensitive and effective teacher," a person remembered "with a mixture of awe and affection" who "brought depth and excitement to everything she did on campus." She notes, "When I took the presidency of the College, I traveled up into the foothills of the Coastal Range

from Stanford to Los Gatos to receive her blessing as one of the sturdiest links with Wellesley's past. I did feel that I had her blessing, and this was one of the most important things I brought back East with me."

For some years Louise had teasingly chided me about not paying a visit. In the summer 1981, I went to her hilltop home. What pleasure! We discussed myriad subjects from politics and international affairs to the reprinting of three of her books as classics in the late 1970s, the brilliance of Nan's appointment. Charming and witty as ever, she posed cheerfully for my new camera.

This warm wonderful woman—we shall miss her.

Her legacy remains. □

## Defending the Humanities

**Moira Egan\***

National Humanities Alliance

One frequently observed phenomenon in Washington is that when a program or agency comes under attack, its supporters who may previously have been in torpid disarray suddenly are galvanized. The sweeping changes proposed by the Reagan administration have provided ample opportunity for this kind of reaction from a variety of groups—environmentalists, students, and the handicapped, to name only a few. The administration's decision to reduce by half the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has brought about a high degree of concern among scholars and other supporters of the agency. The result has been the formation of a coalition dedicated to preserving federal support for the humanities and a subsequent string of successes in both the legislative and the executive branch.

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\*Moira Egan is executive director of the National Humanities Alliance.

The NEH was founded in 1965 and for the next 15 years attracted extraordinary bi-partisan support. Both the NEH and its sister agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, enjoyed their greatest growth when Richard Nixon was President, but found support from every administration. In the Congress, senior members of both parties in the House and the Senate were committed to the agency. Although the NEH was at times the subject of controversy over the selection of a chairman, its policies, or its individual grants, the precept upon which it was founded, that "it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent," was never seriously questioned.

### Punitive Cuts

The earliest inkling that after January 1981 this would not long continue to be the case came when the Heritage Foundation issued its report recommending a wide range of changes in government agencies to President-elect Reagan. The section on the NEH, while affirming the basic mission of the agency, was highly critical of current policies and programs. But even this report did not prepare supporters of the agency for what followed—the announcement by President Reagan that he would seek a cut of 50 percent in the NEH budget. The justification for this action, that the humanities should be a low priority, that the NEH had become the "patron of first resort" for the humanities, and that the NEH had discouraged private donors, seemed flimsy at best, outright wrong at worst. The cuts were not simply part of government-wide reductions but were so large and so carefully targeted as to strike many observers as punitive.

Distress at the disproportionate size of the cuts and the harsh language of the justification was widespread and, as might have been expected, bipartisan. Among those most concerned were directors of scholarly organizations in the humanities, who had believed that the rationale underlying federal support for