IN MEMORIAM

BENJAMIN FLETCHER WRIGHT, JR.

The death of Dr. Benjamin F. Wright, Jr. on November 28, 1976, ended a distinguished career in teaching, research, and academic administration. This career began and ended at The University of Texas at Austin.

Born in Austin on February 8, 1900, he attended its public schools and obtained the B.A. and M.A. degrees at The University of Texas in 1921. He was a student at Harvard University in the sessions of 1921-22 and 1924-25, where he obtained the Ph.D. in 1925 with a major in Government.

Wright's first academic appointments were as Instructor in Government, 1922-24, and Adjunct Professor, 1925-26, at The University of Texas. He resigned in 1926 to accept an instructorship in the Department of Government at Harvard, where he moved through the several ranks to that of Professor. While serving at Harvard from 1926 to 1949, he was chairman of his department from 1942 to 1946, and a member of Harvard's famous Committee on General Education from 1946-1949. He moved from Harvard to Smith College to serve as its President from 1949 to 1959. Then, after a year of study at the Center for Advanced Study of Behavioral Science, he returned to The University of Texas as Professor of Government and Director of Special Programs, including the American Studies Program. After reaching seventy years of age, he continued on modified service as Professor of Government until his retirement six months before his death.
In the more than fifty years of his professional experience, Wright established a distinctive and enduring influence in American political science. He merged, as no other scholar has, two elements in the study of the American polity: political theory and constitutional law. He began with a book on *American Interpretations of Natural Law* (1931) and the edition of a *Source Book of American Political Theory* (1928). These were followed by *The Contract Clause of the Constitution* (1938), *The Growth of American Constitutional Law* (1942), *Consensus and Continuity, 1776-1787* (1958), an edition and long introduction to *The Federalist* (1961), and *Five Public Philosophies of Walter Lippmann* (1973). In draft, awaiting his revisions, was a book on the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson.

These books reflected tremendous historical learning and mastery of American political and constitutional ideas. Wright’s mind was disciplined to thoroughness in research, care in interpretation, and clarity and conciseness in exposition.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was in forcing a balanced view of the American political heritage. One of his early articles corrected the overemphasis on the influence of Montesquieu’s ideas on American institutional development by emphasizing the impact of colonial experience. And yet he argued the incompleteness of the frontier interpretation of American history, because it failed to take account of the stream of ideas from Europe that laid a basis for constitutional government and consent
of the people. He restored balance to a discussion that had blindly followed Beard's interpretation of the Framers and their product as reactionary. He assembled the record of the continuity and consensus in the evolution of constitutionalism and popular government in this country in the eighteenth century. And he also argued that there was no basic antagonism between the tendencies in subsequent American history toward constitutionalism and toward popular government. Because of Ben Wright, every responsible writer in the future will find it difficult to espouse a partial or poorly balanced interpretation of the unfolding drama of American political ideas and constitutional form.

Wright's works give to the reader a sense of what has been meaningful in American experience; they also demonstrate the merits of the American system. He, like Madison, whom he esteemed, was ever conscious of the imperfections of human nature and the limitations against perfect government; but he, as Madison, found bases for hope in the American constitutional system. And, as he reviewed the system's results, he reached different conclusions than those of the later Lippmann. He saw the system of constitutional government and popular consent producing an expansion of civil rights and concern for the poor and other disadvantaged groups. As he viewed the American experience in the perspective of the total span of Western political history, he answered Lippmann's gloomy view of the decline of the West with the confident statement that the West "seems...not only alive, but flourishing."

While writing his books, Wright was creating heirs. Among those who wrote dissertations with him were Louis Hartz and Robert G. McCloskey, who became professors of American
Political Theory and Constitutional Law, respectively, at Harvard; Sheldon S. Wolin and Cecilia Kenyon, professors of Political Theory at Princeton University and Smith College, respectively; and J. Alton Burdine, professor at The University of Texas.

Ben Wright was a demanding teacher. To the laggard, he could appear stern and unsympathetic. But to any in whom he discerned a glimmer of understanding, he was a lucid, patient, and exciting guide. His method of dealing with student papers was simple: he began by praising what there was to praise and then proceeded to expose a stunning array of errors, omissions, and faulty interpretations. Finally, his whole face crinkling into a smile, he would say: "I think you will do very well next time."

Wright's lectures were finely crafted. As one awed Harvard student in the late thirties observed: "They write their own notes." Citations were no more numerous than necessary; it was apparent that a score of additional references were carefully stockpiled in his mind. When he discussed such matters as the debate at Philadelphia or the background to a court decision, it had the immediacy of first-rate reporting plus the analytical perspective of a Holmes' dissent. Each lecture was designed to fit the time available, the scope previously announced, and the absorptive capacity of the better students. (For the others there were also rewards: a UT undergraduate, not a government major, strayed into a Wright class a few years ago; after he had received his C he said in a dazed fashion: "I didn't always know what the
professor was talking about, but I sure enjoyed listening to him.")

In addition to being a distinguished scholar and a gifted teacher, Ben Wright served his time as an able academic administrator. As noted above he was chairman of the Department of Government at Harvard during and immediately following World War II, and faced the difficult task of holding together a department severely depleted of staff but still providing quality education. During this period, he became a member of the Harvard Committee on General Education and shared responsibility for its final report, General Education in a Free Society. His most decisive role came after the Report was issued. The skill, tact, and persuasive reasonableness with which he led debate in the Harvard Faculty contributed immeasurable to the latter's adoption of the Report's major recommendations. As Chairman of the Committee appointed to establish the program in General Education, he presided over the crucial process of attracting exceptional faculty and designing courses to translate into practice the philosophical purposes of the Report.

Wright became president of Smith College in 1949 when dire financial circumstances threatened the continuation of its traditions of excellent education. By firm and sometimes painful budgetary decisions, combined with remarkable success in adding to endowment funds, he was able to achieve substantial increases in faculty salaries, and upon his departure in 1959, to leave a comfortable surplus for the future nurture of the
College. During his tenure as President, his primary aim was intellectual excellence, but no aspect of College life escaped his sharp eye and personal concern.

Wright's administrative skills were imported to Texas when he returned to direct Special Programs in the College of Arts and Sciences and to develop the American Studies Program.

No man's life can be summed up by an account of his professional achievements. Wright had a capacity for deep and enduring friendship and a zest for living that found delight in an inexhaustible variety of experiences: to venture out into the strangely silent beauty of a New England snowfall which had brought traffic to a halt; to show visitors the loveliness of Texas in the spring when bluebonnets came into bloom; to plunge into the cold waters of Barton Springs for an exhilarating swim. Above all else, he knew the profound happiness of love shared with his family. For almost half a century, he gave and received devotion, loyalty, and support in companionship with the remarkable woman who was his wife. He felt pride and delight in his son and daughter, and in later years, the grief of his wife's long illness was lightened for both of them by a joyful relationship with their children and grandchildren.

The death of a man brings immeasurable loss to his colleagues, friends, and family. But grief is softened by the knowledge that until its very end, Ben Wright found life good, and continued to make it so for others.

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Emmette Redford (chairman), Malcolm Macdonald and Elspeth Rostow.
Dr. Lorene L. Rogers, President
The University of Texas at Austin

Bill D. Francis, Secretary
The General Faculty