

# A Teacher among Bureaucrats—

## The Legacy of Alvin H. Bernstein

By ELIOT A. COHEN

**O**n March 23 a glittering but somber crowd of active and retired officers from all services, present and former government officials, distinguished academics, and civilians from all walks of life gathered at the National Defense University (NDU) to memorialize Alvin H. Bernstein. A well-known figure in defense circles, he served as the chairman of the Strategy Department at the Naval War College, director of the policy planning staff at the Pentagon, director of the Institute of National Strategic Studies at NDU (where he was the first editor-in-chief of *Joint Force Quarterly*), and founding director of the George C. Marshall Center in Germany (an institute that teaches civil-military relations to officers from former Warsaw Pact

countries). His was a seemingly conventional in-and-out, academic-turned-government career, marked by its ups and downs and a dash of controversy. It also illuminated the gap between life in the academy and the bureaucracy as few careers have.

Al Bernstein began as an ancient historian, teaching classics at Cornell, then strategy at the Naval War College and later at The Johns Hopkins University. He could keep several hundred officers alternately mesmerized and roaring with laughter while he lectured, without a note, on the strategy of the Peloponnesian War, or used analogies from the screenplay of *The Godfather* to illuminate how the Romans maintained intricate policies of alliances, patronage, and nicely timed brutality to build an empire. By introducing his students to Alcibiades and Scipio Africanus, Al taught them how to think about strategy. Understanding the relationship between Sparta's oligarchy and its military tactics, for example, offered a way of thinking about how the United States might defeat the Soviet Union. Still, at life's end, Al had concluded that those things that had

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## Alvin H. Bernstein

(1939–2001)

**N**amed a research professor at the National Defense University (NDU) in 1997, Dr. Bernstein previously served as founding director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies from 1993 to 1996 and director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at NDU from 1990 to 1993. During his tenure at the institute he was the first editor-in-chief of *Joint Force Quarterly*, a professional military journal published by NDU for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Before coming to the university he was Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning from 1989 to 1990.

Dr. Bernstein was a professor at the Naval War College from 1982 to 1989 and also chairman of its Department of Strategy from 1984 to 1989. He was a professor of classical history at Cornell University from 1969 to 1982 and chairman of its Department of Near Eastern Studies from 1979 to 1982.

Appointed a scholar-in-residence in the Center for Advanced Studies at National University in Singapore in 1985, he also served on the National Council of the Humanities from 1988 to 1992. In addition, he was an adjunct professor in the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University as well as the Cornell-in-Washington Program of Cornell University in recent years.

He was the author of several books and numerous articles on classical history, strategy, and international security affairs. Dr. Bernstein received a doctorate from Cornell University in ancient history with minors in medieval history, classics, and ancient philosophy, was awarded a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Oxford where he read *Literae Humaniores*, and earned a B.A. in classics from Cornell.

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made him a superb teacher had also rendered him radically discontented with government life.

His disenchantment may seem odd because one of the clichés about a Washington career is supposedly the easy shift from the world of government to that of the classroom and back. There is, to be sure, a whiff of disdain in the bureaucratic view of the academic world. Nary a cocktail party attended by a professor goes by without the labored production of Henry Kissinger's little witicism about the disputes in academe being so great because the stakes are so small. Of course, after watching a Washington fray about whether soldiers will wear baseball caps versus black berets, one may wonder about a supposed academic monopoly on intensity about trivial matters. One surely knows some senior political appointees who devote just as much loving care to bullet placement on briefing slides as professors do to obscure historical data. Nor do all professors find it difficult to manage anything bigger than their in-baskets. Academic leaders like Al have to hire and fire (and inspire) subordinates, juggle budgets, and in general do everything that non-academic managers do. In this respect, the two worlds differ less than many think.

Moreover, many a bureaucrat would like to teach. For some, it offers continuity with earlier intellectual interests reluctantly set aside for government service, or simply the exhilaration of time spent guiding thoughtful and inquisitive minds. For others, a prestigious academic institution is admittedly a comfortable place to await a change of administrations, and respectful young people serve as a fine audience before whom one may reflect upon one's own achievements. The academy, for reasons of its own, may abide these less worthy motives, not caring much about what ensues in the classroom. Students may know better, but out of awe or indifference hold their tongues, no matter what the size of their tuition bills.

The truth is that the teaching vocation calls for skills different from many of those needed in government life. At its best, in fact, teaching requires a different type of personality than that found in the higher reaches of officialdom. In government one must take people as one finds them, leading, managing, or simply driving them for the public good, not for their individual betterment. Great teachers, on the other hand, scrutinize each student's soul, looking for the opening that will allow them to jar each individual out of complacency, awaken their interest, alert them to disturbing contradictions or unpleasant possibilities, and perhaps even inculcate some humility. The Al Bernsteins of this world cunningly lure students down the path of conventional belief into intellectual ambushes from

which they can escape only at the price of learning and growth, which can entail pain as well as delight. They teach in odd places, too; not just in the classroom but around the coffeepot, at departmental meetings, and in the gym.

Some of the teacher's skills serve well in government life, such as the ability to read body language or dissemble in order to elicit an audience's real opinions. The techniques for masterful running of a seminar (a pejorative term in government circles) somewhat resemble those needed to chair a committee's deliberations. At their best, both teaching and government service are altruistic callings, and for most academics and officials neither way of life leads to wealth. But in two large respects academic and bureaucratic cultures clash.

The university teaching career is at best remarkably static. Some honors may come one's way—a prize or *festschrift* from one's students—but there is no promotion beyond tenure, with its grant of perpetual academic freedom. As a writer, the professor may hunger for fame and even wealth; as a teacher, though, he can aspire to nothing beyond doing better what he already does. He cannot rise through the civil service to the Senior Executive Service, nor leap from the post of deputy assistant secretary to under secretary. The teacher exercises real influence—the serried ranks of distinguished mourners at Al Bernstein's memorial proved that—but indirectly, in the long term, and in immeasurable ways. The official operates in an elaborate, confining hierarchy, but has more tangible achievements: a negotiation concluded, *demarché* delivered, ship launched, or force deployed. The context, incentives, and measures of effectiveness of the two callings vary greatly.

Furthermore, the values of a good teacher are in at least some sense irreconcilable with those necessary for effectiveness in government. Academic life is about the pursuit of truth, while the art of government lies in getting things done. Academics are irresponsible in the best as well as the worst sense. They revel in the freedom that allows them to toy with ideas, to intrigue students with outrageous possibilities, and to propound the subversive notion that the official consensus rests on slipshod reasoning, questionable data, and unexamined assumptions. They know intellectual loyalty to neither party nor boss, but if they are any good, only to the truth. They delight in exploring inconsistency and exposing error. Government would be impossible if bureaucrats thought or acted that way. The official must defend the institutional position of the moment, at least to the outside world and to his subordinates. Loyalty to one's superiors is, when not confused with servility, a real virtue and not merely a fulcrum for ambition. To write a speech defending a

policy with which one only partly agrees inflicts no particular pain upon a bureaucrat, nor should it. For someone steeped in academic values it is—or ought to be—agony.

There are, of course, remarkable and rare individuals who move between these worlds while keeping their integrity, effectiveness, and equanimity intact. Both ways of life have their appeal. Both can demand the highest qualities of selflessness and ability; both can also degenerate into mean-spirited self-absorption. The corruption of government life lies in the effects of power and publicity—as Henry Adams put it, an “aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim's sympathies; a diseased appetite, like a passion for drink or perverted tastes.” The corruption of academic life is pettifoggery, captiousness, and preening vanity which differs from but is just as harmful as its governmental counterpart. Nevertheless, the aspiring in-and-outer should realize that to say “I think I will spend my life making policy and teaching” makes almost as little sense as saying “I think I will spend my life teaching and commanding nuclear submarines.” Sooner rather than later one must choose. As Winston Churchill once observed, “A man must nail his life to a cross either of thought or of action.”

If Al Bernstein could have spoken at his own memorial service, he would have told us that despite achievements as a manager and a leader, a chasm divides the worlds he seemed to straddle so well over the years. I believe that he would have admitted that he had hoped otherwise and would have liked to disprove Churchill's view. But in the end he recognized the clash of values and temperaments for what it was and remained true to himself and his calling.

In Robert Bolt's famous play, *A Man for All Seasons*, an aspiring courtier, Richard Rich, asks Sir Thomas More for preferment at court, which More, doomed to martyrdom, gently denies. “Why not be a teacher?” More advises him. “You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one.” “And if I was,” Rich asked, “who would know it?” “You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that. . .,” Sir Thomas replied.

Al Bernstein, great leader that he was, had come to understand that choice. Unlike Master Rich, however, throughout his career Al followed his vocation and taught, and his many friends and students, by their grief at his loss, gratitude for what he gave them, and joy in his memory, testify to what a great teacher can achieve. **JFQ**