

## JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

### In Memoriam—1941–2013

Some people are shaped by the places they come from in indelible ways. Their ethos becomes their ethics and defines their character. We see this, for example, in Willa Cather's stories of how the immigrants who came to the Great Plains were shaped by the land and their struggles to survive and build a life for themselves, their families, and the members of their community. Jean Bethke Elsthtain, who died on August 11, 2013, at the age of seventy-two, could easily have been one of those characters. Born in a small community near Fort Collins, Colorado, and struck with polio at age ten, her doctors were convinced she would never walk again, yet she not only proved them wrong, but from that point on never stopped striding forward in a life of extraordinary accomplishment. Her experience growing up on the plains gave her the courage and resilience to become a pioneer in many different academic fields.

Wherever she went her land and upbringing went with her. She remained a plainswoman at heart even in the most sophisticated company, courageous, stubborn, and indomitable. The values of her grandmother shaped her feminism, the experience of her small community pushed her toward a communitarianism that focused on the care of the poor and disabled, her Christianity gave form to her notion of social action, and her conviction that American democracy was basically good shaped her fears of excessive sovereignty and her views on war and international relations.

She got her BA at Colorado State University in 1963 and MAs from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of Colorado before completing her PhD at Brandeis in political science in 1973. She taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst from 1973 to 1988. She then moved to Vanderbilt, where she remained until 1995, at which point she accepted a position at the University of Chicago, teaching there until her death. Over the years, she held visiting positions at Harvard, Yale, Oberlin, Smith, and Georgetown. She was the author of more than twenty books, including such seminal works as *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*; *Just War Theory*; *Women and War*; *Democracy on Trial*; *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*; *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*; *Just War against Terror*; and *Sovereignty: God, State, Self*. It would be hard to find a college or university where she had not given one or more lectures. She was also a public intellectual whose reflections appeared in leading journals of public opinion, including *The New Republic*, *First Things*, *The Weekly Standard*, *Commonweal*, and *Books and Culture*. She was often interviewed on radio and TV. She served on numerous national

commissions and boards, was friends with many of the political leaders in the emerging democracies of central Europe, and was consulted by Pope John Paul II and President George W. Bush, among others. Among her many forms of service to the public and the profession was as a member of the advisory board of the *Review of Politics*.

She was forthright and unswerving in her beliefs and unwilling to compromise in the face of the changing fashions in academic life. She was tough, and had a strain of the heroic and the tragic. She mentioned in *Women and War* that as a child she cut her hair in emulation of Joan of Arc: "One day I would be a leader of men, too. Maybe a warrior. Maybe a martyr—though there didn't seem to be much call for martyrs anymore." In a certain sense she realized these dreams, always a warrior, always a teacher, at times a leader of men and women, and at times also a martyr for the causes she believed in so deeply. As a result of her combative stance, she was involved in controversies over the appropriate role of the family in feminism, the roles of women in war, and the justness of the war against terror. All of these disputes cost her many friends but she was unwilling to sacrifice what she saw as the public good in order to retain the good opinion of those with whom she disagreed. To give just one example, I first met Jean when she came to Duke to talk about women and war. She was invited almost as an afterthought by Women's Studies to discuss her views of the family. She asked me to go with her to that talk. The room was packed. She was given ten minutes to state her position and then was subjected to forty-five minutes of vicious critique supported by the continual applause and cheers of the hostile audience. I was perhaps the only friendly face in attendance. She bore it all without flinching and when her critic was finally done said, "I have seventeen points I want to make," and proceeded to demolish point by point everything that had been brought against her. While her answers often elicited groans or boos, she continued unabated. It was simply the most courageous academic performance I had ever seen. She had picked a model as a young girl and she lived the life she imagined for herself, a life of courage and resilience, well led and without regrets.

It would be hard to classify Jean politically. After 9/11 many thought of her as a neocon, but that label was misplaced. Michael Walzer was more on the mark when he described *Democracy on Trial* as "the work of a truly independent, deeply serious, politically engaged, and wonderfully provocative political theorist." Her friends included many of the leading thinkers of our times, some of whom also became her critics. Her hostility to postmodernism and her political realism rubbed some of them the wrong way, but even they often continued to agree with her on many other issues.

She was strong and forthright until the very end. I last saw her at a National Humanities Center conference on human rights in March of 2013, where she was the respondent to Michael Ignatieff. By that point she was largely confined to a wheelchair and was sleeping more of the day than she was awake. But despite this her presentation was sharp and clear, and yet also

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friendly and supportive. It was Jean at her best. Death eventually came for her as it did for Willa Cather's archbishop, too soon perhaps, but only as an exclamation point to a life of extraordinary achievement. She came from the earth of the plains and presented the values of her community as a model and a challenge to the wider world. She has returned to that same earth, but because of her those values still abide and will continue to challenge our thinking about the enduring questions she addressed.

–Michael Allen Gillespie  
*Duke University, August 2013*