

A Tribute to Martha Derthick



WITH MARTHA DERTHICK'S PASSING on January 12, 2015, America lost one of its preeminent scholars of American politics. Her friends, colleagues, and students lost an irreplaceable source of wisdom and encouragement. And at *Education Next*, where Martha had been a co-author of the Legal Beat column, we lost an outstanding contributor to our understanding of the legal underpinnings of education policy.

A native of Ohio, Martha graduated from Hiram College in 1954 and then attended graduate school at Radcliffe. After receiving her PhD under V.O. Key in 1962, she taught at several institutions including Stanford and Harvard but spent most of her career at the Brookings Institution, serving as director of its Governance Studies Program from 1978 to 1983, and at the University of Virginia, where she was the Julia Allen Cooper Professor of Government and Foreign Affairs until her retirement in 1999.

Martha was a scholar of great breadth and originality. A truncated list of the topics she studied includes tobacco politics, the National Guard, the Social Security Administration, policy implementation, and deregulation. Throughout her career federalism remained a central concern. "Americans chose," she once wrote, "to be both one great nation and many relatively quite small, local communities." No one understood better than Martha the tensions, challenges, and opportunities that choice created for the American Republic, and she devoted much of her scholarship to exploring how the contradictory impulses of centralization and decentralization could complement each other. She was an acute student and often passionate defender of local institutions, including America's schools. It is at the local level, she believed, that character is molded, enabling individuals to become worthy citizens.

Wide praise and recognition followed Martha's work. *Policymaking for Social Security*, which won the Gladys Kammerer of the American Political Science Association (APSA), is her best-known and is generally considered her most important book. She argued, against the prevailing consensus, that the political success of Social Security was not inevitable but was shaped by administrative behavior, institutional autonomy, and voters' preferences. Two of her many books, *The Influence of Federal Grants* and *The Politics of Deregulation*, received the National Academy of Public Administration's Brownlow Award. Both volumes are credited with opening significant new approaches to the study of American politics.

Her research led the APSA to honor her in 1992 with the John Gaus Award for a lifetime of exemplary scholarship.

Those fortunate enough to be Martha's students found in her an exceptionally generous and nurturing mentor. She took great interest in our success and happiness long after we left her classroom. In the classroom, her devotion to her students could make her an intimidating presence, particularly when she returned papers. From her father, a reporter and editor for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, she inherited a distaste for prose that was not crisp and precise. Shoddy execution and vague expression always received her censure. But no criticisms were more valued than hers. She was constitutionally incapable of false praise and only offered honest evaluation. Her students took great satisfaction when they met her expectations and now fondly and gratefully recall her delightful directness.

In my case, her directness proved life-changing. My first year in graduate school, I proposed an arid theoretical treatment of federalism as a presentation topic for her seminar on intergovernmental relations. She smiled and said, "Josh, that will put me to sleep." She recommended another topic she thought would be more fruitful and interesting. As always, she was correct. That topic turned into a dissertation and later a book.

No recollection of Martha would be complete without mentioning her love of gardening (space does not permit discussing her devotion to basketball). In Charlottesville, she located a piece of undeveloped land that years earlier had been a distinguished garden. There she saw, where others could only see a terrifying mass of poison ivy, a garden that for decades had been overtaken by weeds. She restored the garden, improved it, and then designed and built a house to showcase it. Subsequently, her garden won awards, and her house received architectural praise. Fittingly, her last article, "Azaleas in the Life and Work of Beatrix Farrand," was just published in *The Azalean*.

For the past nine years, it has been my great honor to be her collaborator in the pages of *Education Next*.

—Joshua Dunn