

University of California: In Memoriam, 1993

Grant McConnell, Politics: Santa Cruz



1915-1993

Professor Emeritus

One of the pre-eminent political scientists of mid-century, Grant McConnell died at his home in Bonny Doon, California, on September 27, 1993, at age 78. Best known as a strong and influential critic of the dominant role of private interest groups in American politics, Grant is revered today as a visionary in the field of environmental politics and a seminal figure in the study of American political development.

Grant grew up in Portland, Oregon, where he was born on June 27, 1915. In his youth he skied competitively, spent his summers in the forests, and acquired a lifelong passion for the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. Grant's father, a banker, suffered setbacks in the Depression and Grant had to give up his plans to leave home for college. He is still remembered as an outstanding all-around scholar at Reed College in Portland, where he majored in political science and wrote his senior thesis under Charles McKinley on the Social Security Act. While an undergraduate at Reed, Grant met his future wife, Jane Foster, a Yale-educated public health nurse who was briefly in charge of the campus health service.

Grant graduated from Reed in 1937 and went east to begin graduate work in the Harvard Government Department. Although his supervisor was Carl Friedrich, a political theorist, Grant was heavily influenced in this period by Alvin Hanson, the economist who applied Keynesian theory to the New Deal. He also became friendly with the young Paul

Samuelson and other graduate students who were impressed with the lessons of Keynes.

During his first year at Harvard, Grant was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and left for Oxford in the fall of 1938. There he worked primarily with G.D.H. Cole, the great labor historian and theorist of guild socialism. He spent his vacations mountaineering in Europe, and was climbing in Switzerland when war broke out in 1939. The American

Rhodes Scholars were immediately called back to Oxford and sent home on a hastily-booked American freighter.

From 1939 to 1941, Grant was enrolled in the Government Department at Harvard while teaching economics at Mt. Holyoke College. He and Jane, who was working as a nurse at Smith College, were married in 1939.

As U.S. entry into the war grew imminent, Grant moved to Washington seeking government service. His first job was as a writer with the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency that Grant believed was effective in supporting the interests of small and poor farmers, especially in the South. Observing the growing conflict between the FSA and the American Farm Bureau (a government agency serving the more successful farmers) sparked Grant's continuing interest in the role of private constituencies in defining the interests that public agencies can serve, and the historical tendency of American policy makers to enhance the power of local economic elites. In 1941-42, Grant went to work as an economist for the Office of Price Administration, focusing on issues of war production and rationing.

Grant entered the Navy as an officer in 1943. As a specialist in sonar and radar, he was first assigned to patrol duty off the Pacific Coast, and then to radar picket duty in the East China Sea. On a mission to provide early warning of kamikaze raids, Grant's destroyer was sunk off Okinawa. He suffered lifelong hearing loss as a result of an underwater explosion that occurred while he was attempting to rescue injured shipmates.

In 1946, Grant was discharged from the Navy with the rank of lieutenant, and he and Jane went to live in a partially built cabin in the Cascades wilderness of Stehekin, Washington. There they lived for three years and during most summers and sabbaticals thereafter, until the health of both finally failed. Grant and Jane's experiences surviving in the wilderness, and fighting to preserve it, are richly described in his autobiographical last book, *Stehekin, A Valley in Time* (1989), which he dedicated to Jane on their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

In 1949, Grant resumed his graduate work in political science, this time at the University of California, Berkeley. Clark Kerr appointed him in 1950 as a research assistant at the Institute of Industrial Relations, where he collaborated with the labor economist Lloyd Fisher. Working under Peter Odegaard during 1951, Grant wrote his dissertation and first book, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, in only nine months--expanding on the work he had done at the Farm Security Agency a decade before. In 1952 he received his Ph.D. and began teaching in the Department of Political Science at Berkeley.

Grant moved to the University of Chicago in 1957, where he rapidly rose to a position of eminence in the profession. In his early years in Chicago, he published extensively on the role of major economic groups in the formation of national policy, the labor movement, the conservation movement, and government regulation of business. The year he spent as a visiting professor at Makerere University in Uganda crystallized his interest in the relation between the study of American political institutions and the emerging field of comparative political development studies. Grant played a major role in departmental affairs at the University of Chicago, helping it to achieve national eminence in American and comparative politics and serving as a mentor to a series of graduate students who went on to distinguished careers in the field of American politics. During his eleven years at the University of Chicago, Grant rose rapidly to become Ford Foundation Research Professor and chair of the department (1968-69). His significant writings of this period include *The Steel Seizure of 1952* (1960), *Steel and the Presidency* (1963), and *The Modern Presidency* (1967).

In 1966, Grant published his most important scholarly work, *Private Power and American Democracy*. This classic volume elegantly synthesized the conclusions of his research on agriculture, labor, steel, and conservation, while placing it in a broad theoretical and historical perspective. In opposition to thinkers like Tocqueville, who had argued for the legitimating role of decentralized private associations in American democracy, Grant demonstrated the tendency of our system of interest group representation to turn public power to the service of private ends. This argument challenged the central claim of the dominant school of postwar political science--interest group pluralism--that a government more highly responsive to private interests was for that reason also more "democratic." After nearly thirty years, *Private Power* stands as one of the landmarks in the debate about the democratic character of the post-New Deal American state, alongside the work of Robert Dahl, Theodore Lowi, and David Truman. It is also among the handful of books in American political science that can be considered a permanent contribution to our civic culture.

In 1969 Grant left the University of Chicago and accepted an appointment in the Politics Board at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He intended to focus his scholarly

interest on the emerging field of environmental politics, and he was instrumental in founding the Environmental Studies program at UCSC. His administrative abilities were quickly recognized, however, and he became the first executive vice chancellor of the campus during 1970-71, and then acting chancellor during a difficult period of conflict over the Vietnam War.

While continuing to write and publish at UC Santa Cruz, Grant devoted an increasing amount of his time to activism and advocacy on environmental issues. He remained convinced that regulatory agencies addressing the environment had been effectively captured by private interests, but he also

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became concerned that countervailing assertions of a national interest were not sufficiently powerful and broad to capture the fundamental values at stake in preserving wilderness from economic development. Returning to the theme of earlier writing attacking the idea of “multiple use” of wilderness areas, Grant devoted himself increasingly to the stringent protection of pristine forests from exploitation of various kinds. While based in Chicago, Grant had played a major role in creating the Cascades National Park that includes his beloved Stehekin. At Santa Cruz he lent his services as a political scientist and conservationist to organizations devoted to environmental preservation in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. Grant's name figures prominently in histories of environmental movements and policies of the past fifty years, and his personal papers, now collected at the University of Washington, will be a valuable resource to scholars studying the formation of environmental policy relating to the North Cascades and Alaska.

Grant retired from the University in 1980, and largely withdrew from involvement in the academy to devote himself more fully to his environmental concerns. In 1992 he wrote, “Since retirement I have continued a fight I began while I was in Berkeley, to preserve the magnificent wildlands of the North Cascades, to which I had retreated after my release from the Navy in 1945. I made my own decision early that someone (and it turned out to be me) had to fight to protect that area, the finest in my opinion in the U.S. Well, after thirteen years, we won two big new wilderness areas, a National Park, and two related areas.”

Those who know Grant remember him as a deeply thoughtful and principled man. He was the kind of teacher whose pointed stories would bring students to see things for themselves, and many of his former students still recall apparently casual conversations

with Grant that had a permanent impact on their lives. With colleagues Grant was a lively raconteur, hampered in large groups by his loss of hearing, but always ready in personal conversation to engage new ideas with an open mind and the utmost seriousness. Grant was a rare combination of a committed professional, a true intellectual, and a gracious gentleman; his guidance and example helped many younger political scientists with dissenting ideas find a voice and a career.

Grant McConnell is survived by his wife, Jane, of Bonny Doon, California; his daughter, Ann, of Ben Lomond, California; his son, Jim, of Los Angeles; and a granddaughter.

Robert Meister