
George C. S. Benson (1908-1999): A Remembrance

[George C. S. Benson, the great founding president of Claremont McKenna College (CMC), died at 91 on March 22, 1999. The following is adapted from CMC professor Ward Elliott's remarks at his memorial service in April 1999.-Ed.]

When I started to put down my notes about George Benson, a flood of descriptive words came out: Half were nouns made from verbs: *founder, doer, mover, organizer, administrator, campaigner, mentor, soldier, scholar, reader, writer, talker, hiker, decider, friend, ally, team player, conciliator, visionary*. The other half were adjectives: *modest, faithful, blunt, frugal, canny, wise, consultative, fair-minded, public-spirited, stalwart, Republican, supremely optimistic, Roman*. He was an example, sent from Central Casting, of what pop writers now call the GI generation. His generation waged and won World War II and the Cold War; it has given us seven of our last eight presidents. "No other generation," say the pundits, "has...been so Promethean, so godlike in its collective, world-bending power" through the concentrated application of reason, learning, planning, conviction, and daring.

When he came into my life, in the fall of 1967, he was a recruiter, visiting Harvard looking for a professor of comparative government. I was a graduate student with a nodding interest in comparative government, happened to be around when he came through, and said yes when the department secretary asked if I would like an interview. It seemed like a good chance to develop my interviewing skills and meet someone from the then-booming California job market.

He turned out to be an affable, unpretentious, grandfatherly man, filled with good will, good sense, and a manifestly burning, yet oddly understated sense of destiny for his college, a bit reminiscent of a New England headmaster of the old stripe. "We're only twenty-one years old," he said, "and not a fancy campus, but we do have some interesting people"-and then he dropped three names hefty as anvils: Marty Diamond, ranked among the top ten teachers in the country in a *Time* cover story; Harry Jaffa, who wrote speeches for Barry Goldwater; and the aged Leo Strauss himself, who taught both of them, and many others, everything of importance that they knew. He was full of ideas; he was interested in everything; he got around; he knew everybody. He certainly knew his mind and never lost an opportunity to let you know at length what was on it.

True to type, he did most of the talking at my interview, but he could listen, too, and he could size you up with remarkable accuracy. I wasn't the comparative government person he was looking for, but I went away with the impression that something good might come of it. I was not wrong. The following winter I did two days of intensive interviewing for a different slot, including the famous Benson inspiration walk where the top of him, Benson the visionary, expounded his dreams for CMC, and the bottom of him, Benson the doer, was kicking olives off the patio outside Pitzer Hall, the college's administrative headquarters at the time. Pitzer Hall itself had been built some years before, solidly, simply, and (initially) without air conditioning, by Benson the frugal, who was justly celebrated for scrimping on buildings and grounds and spending what he saved on people. The following fall, thirty years ago, I started my teaching career at CMC.

There I soon met Benson the old soldier. CMC in those days was a favorite target of protests and liberations. It had the ROTC, the Navy and Marine recruiters, and it had the least reconstructed students, faculty, administrators, and visiting lecturers in town. Benson was ready to defend them all, despite a weakness of the Claremont group plan: like the United States under the Articles of Confederation, it had no common executive, legislature, or judiciary. Liberation was popular and seldom punished on the other

campuses, and liberatees had essentially no on-campus recourse against the liberators. Off-campus recourse, the Sheriff's Department, was a cure worse than the disease. But Benson was a shrewd and consultative tactician. When 400 demonstrators from the other colleges showed up to shut down an ROTC drill, he arranged to have head cadet Clay Peters, a sharp, well-spoken black student, welcome them to the day's leadership laboratory and invite them in for a discussion of the role of coercion in campus politics. It was not a good day for liberation because the demonstrators had made a grave blunder attacking students. Administrators were always fair game for demonstrations; faculty and students were not. The cadets, outnumbered ten to one, more than held their ground; and the demonstrators were forced to call everything off after ten minutes of discussion. They never returned while Benson was president.

Old soldier Benson went on to organize the Academic Enrichment Program (AEP) for the ROTC, providing every unit in the West, and eventually every unit in the country, with top-level lecturers on defense policy and area and strategy studies. Where dozens of units had been thrown off campus in the East, not one was expelled in the West after the AEP was initiated. Benson got the Distinguished Civilian Service Medal for his efforts and was later appointed deputy assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs by President Richard M. Nixon.

Benson was often described as a conservative, and in many ways he was—went to church every Sunday, loved the flag, was proud of his military service, was an outspoken cold warrior and critic of government meddling in the economy, defended the ROTC, spear-headed campaigns for GOP heavyweights such as Nixon and David Dreier. His CMC was often described as a "bastion of conservatism." CMC delegations to the Model United Nations, amid knowing giggles, were routinely assigned the role of South Africa in the Apartheid era. But both descriptions were badly overdrawn. Benson himself was a New Dealer in the 1930s and 1940s and much more a moderate, reformist, internationalist Eisenhower Republican than a conservative Taft Republican. He was steeped in the progressive-era mystique of trained public administration and scientific manage-

ment, which seemed to have conquered the Depression and won World War II, not just on the battlefield, but in the think tanks and production lines that sustained the war effort, and in the military government that bound up the wounds of conquered populations when the shooting stopped. He was also research director of the highly reformist (and influential) Kestnbaum Commission on Intergovernmental Relations in the 1950s. He spent his last years writing book after book calling for ethical instruction in the nation's schools and codes of ethics for its corporations.

At CMC he recruited a student body and faculty more conservative than those of other elite campuses, but more liberal than the general public. His goal was to create a balance of representation between liberal and conservative views, fittingly for a campus like CMC specifically addressed to public affairs, and he came much closer to doing so than most of those who criticize CMC as a bastion of conservatism. Gerry Jordan, Winston Fisk Orme Phelps, Jack Dunbar, and Martin Diamond, a social democrat who once had been secretary Norman Thomas, the leading socialist in the United States, are conspicuous early examples of liberals on his faculty. Diamond was not only a social democrat, he was Jewish, hired by Benson at a time when Jews were systematically excluded from university teaching. Benson served notice even before the college opened its doors in 1946 that it would not be closed, hiring a Jewish professor, Everett Carter, in his first faculty.

I have always thought that political debates are much more two-sided at CMC than at most other places, and I am not the only one. I got a touching letter Thursday from a Pomona graduate of the mid-1960s now teaching in a leading business school. Besides praising Benson's 1941 book *The New Centralization* as the best of its kind, he wrote: "you helped me understand something I always thought mysterious and even a bit disloyal-liking CMC classes better than Pomona classes. [Pomona is CMC's elite mother college, Claremont neighbor, archrival, and Benson's own alma mater.] I knew it wasn't the teaching.... My Pomona professors were often... better performers. So what was it? Two things: Engagement-the students and faculty at CMC were seriously engaged with the world

and questions of action... [and] modesty-[our] smugness about having all the answers to all the important questions...was largely absent at CMC." I couldn't have said it better myself. We have George Benson to thank for it.

Some of my happiest memories of him were long Sunday hikes in the San Gabriels. He liked to round up the youngest, spryest members of his faculty, which I suppose I might have been in those days, and march them, huffing and puffing, up one mountain or another. Baldy from the south side, Baldy from the north side, Baldy from the west side, San Gorgonio, San Jacinto, Baden-Powell, Ontario, Cucamonga, and Iron Mountain. On the way, he would identify and expound on every tree and shrub along the way (for he was an avid and accomplished naturalist). He would also admonish other hikers, especially young ones, not to cut corners on the trails. I learned much about Claremont history, personalities, and prospects on these long, informative trips.

I also remember with admiration his voracious reading habits. He read overnight everything his faculty wrote, no matter how technical or obscure, and would have an intelligent question or comment on it for you the next morning. Much has been said about his building CMC from scratch, from a few acres of rocky wash and a few Quonset huts and \$80,000 in gifts and pledges and three-digit SAT medians in the 1950s to number 30 in the country among small liberal-arts colleges by the time of his retirement in 1969, closing in on Chicago and Johns Hopkins. By the college's fiftieth anniversary in 1996, his protege and successor, Jack Stark, had brought it up to fifth among small liberal arts colleges in median SAT, abreast of Chicago and Johns Hopkins. I know of no other college that has moved up so far so fast. Much has been said, too, about his contributions to the Claremont Group Plan. He and founding trustee Donald McKenna really did take up the torch from Pomona's great president James Blaisdell in bringing new colleges into existence. Harvey Mudd College's founding trustee, Henry Mudd, and Pitzer College's founding trustee, Russell Pitzer, were both spin-offs from Benson's CMC board. Greater love hath no college president than to give his best trustees to found another college right

next door. George Benson was a founder's founder, who gave not only CMC and most of us on this stage our starts in life, but also at least two others of The Claremont Colleges.

When he retired from the Defense Department, he returned to CMC to head the college's Salvatori Center. He continued, as he liked to put it, to "move things forward," teaching, planning, and pushing for CMC well into his 80s, long after most ordinary people would have called it a day and retired, and making major gifts to the college from his own funds.

I am pleased that we are commemorating him with a performance of the fourth movement of Brahms's *Requiem*. This is not an ordinary piece of music. Singers turn to it, and to no other, in moments of greatest loss. The night that Kennedy was shot, my choir at the University of Virginia dropped whatever it was we were practicing at the time, opened up the Brahms, turned to the serene, climactic fourth movement, the same one performed this morning by the Claremont Concert Choir, and sang it from beginning to end. It's just what you sing at the end of an era; it is the end of an era; we have just lost one of the greatest educators of our time; and the kids have given him the highest tribute a musical group can give. No one deserves it more than George Benson.

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