



Joel H. Silbey

August 16, 1933 – August 7, 2018

Cornell's Carl Becker long ago observed that a successful professor is "one who thinks otherwise."

Joel Silbey exemplified Becker's insight. Born in Brooklyn, New York on August 16, 1933, he became not only a distinguished historian of American political history, but an ardent fan of baseball's New York Giants. He often recalled how the Giants defeated the favored Dodgers in the memorable 1951 playoffs, and how he had to remain in his house for three days rather than risk being beaten up by neighboring Dodger fans. Thinking otherwise could, contrary to Becker, have unhappy consequences.

But thinking otherwise could also develop a distinguished national and international academic career. Joel graduated from Brooklyn College in 1955, then earned a Master's degree in 1956 and his Ph.D., in 1963 from the University of Iowa. His pioneering dissertation used quantitative techniques, borrowed from the social sciences, to develop what he termed "the Civil War synthesis." That synthesis offered a new explanation for both the development of the post-1828 two-party system and the causes of the American Civil War. After initially teaching at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University), the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Maryland, he began a 36-year career at Cornell in 1966. Joel became an associate professor the next year when his revised dissertation was published as *The Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841-1852*. He was named a full professor in 1968 and then given the President White chair in 1986. He became an emeritus professor on his retirement in 2002.

As a fabled undergraduate teacher, Joel usually alternated his two major year-long classes, a survey of 200 years of American political history and an examination of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In 1986, he received the prestigious Clark Distinguished Teaching Award. In an

introductory lecture in these courses, he often announced that the students' final grade depended on their scores on the midterm and final, short papers, and how the New York football Giants were doing in December. During his office hours he reassured the students who took him seriously.

He chaired the Honors Committee for scores of outstanding upperclass students. One was Evan Stewart, now a prominent New York City lawyer who, understanding that Joel's Olin Library study had become virtually his second home, gave a gift that named the study for Joel. Fittingly, Joel served a term as head of the Cornell Libraries Board. At the graduate level, he chaired the committees for ten doctoral students. One of the undergrads he taught in the mid-1960s and talked to at length in his office was David Maisel, a fellow Brooklynite who wrote for the *Cornell Sun*. In 1995-1996, David established an annual lectureship co-named for Joel that brings noted political leaders, diplomatic officials, and academics to campus.

His teaching was not limited to Ithaca. In the late 1970s, he joined Professor Ted Lowi of Government to establish the Cornell-in-Washington program. As director of the program between 1992 and 1998, Joel helped persuade Cornell's President and Provost to authorize the purchase of the building that now houses year-round classes and student rooms. He was quietly but justifiably proud when his son, David (a published and highly favorably reviewed historian), became the leader of the Washington program.

Over the years, Joel became a star attraction on the Cornell alumni circuit. He convened the first alumni group that met on an island off the coast of Washington state. Along with Dean Glenn Altschuler, Joel taught hundreds of alumni in classes at the Mohonk Mountain House resort, in New Paltz, New York, that analyzed upcoming congressional or presidential elections. Joel also learned to know many alumni when he met them with his wife, Rosemary, who served with Cornell's Office of Alumni Affairs and Development. He often enlivened these gatherings by thinking otherwise – by arguing, for example, that third parties were harmful to democracies. Joel served as well as an unofficial adviser to Harold Tanner, chair of the Cornell Board of Trustees, who sought his advice at a 7:00 a.m. breakfast at the Straight whenever Harold was in town.

Joel published eight books and, remarkably, edited or co-edited 16 other single volumes or multivolume sets. In this work, he employed quantitative along with more traditional methods and sources to specify how the modern U.S. political system had been born and evolved while focusing on the intensifying debates in the pre-Civil War years. His hero for these two developments was not one of the usual suspects, such as Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, or Abraham Lincoln. It was Martin Van Buren, long ignored by historians because of his weak, one-term presidency of 1837-1841. In his biography of Van Buren, Joel transformed this maligned, and ignored, president into one of the first and most astute of the nation's professional politicians who played a crucial role in establishing the two-party system.

Such thinking otherwise on these crucial issues shaped most of his books, including *A Respectable Minority* (1977), on the too often overlooked role of the Democrats during the Civil

War; *The Partisan Imperative* (1985); a magisterial volume, *The American Political Nation, 1828-1893* (1991); and *Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848* (2009), innovative and the first study of that important election in forty years. *Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (2005) was praised in *The Journal of Southern History* review for being authored by a “distinguished scholar [who] has opened a new promising path to be explored in the causation of the American Civil War.” It was a fitting judgment for a lifetime of outstanding scholarship.

Joel also influenced international analyses of the U.S. political system. During the 1990s, he became a leading figure in an initiative in which distinguished scholars from Russia and the United States convened in Moscow to study and debate American political history in ways that might be useful to post-Communist Russia. Joel edited the volume that emerged from these discussions, *RussianAmerican Dialogue on the History of American Political Parties* (2000). In his Preface, he emphasized the fresh “transnational perspective” that produced this important volume: “direct, cogent, and sharp...but also with the gloves off.” In 2005, he was awarded the prestigious Harmsworth Visiting Professorship at Oxford University.

Justifiably proud of his influential teaching, path-breaking publications, and sterling reputation among alumni, Joel always affirmed that his first love took precedence. Rosemary and Joel were married 58 years; they were inseparable. He was devoted to their daughter, Victoria (a lawyer), and son, David (a historian of military and U.S. history and Associate Director of Cornell in Washington). Both graduated from Cornell and enjoy marked success in their professions. Joel was devoted as well to his grandchildren Abigail, Thomas, and Madeline, daughter-in-law Mari Silbey, and son-in-law Thomas Hogan. Joel meanwhile looked forward each day to his teaching, which influenced so many students and alumni, and to thinking otherwise about American political institutions in the Olin Library study that now bears his name. His scholarly legacy includes a more nuanced understanding of the Civil War’s causes and crucial new insights into the role of the nation’s two-party political system as a cornerstone of American democracy.

Written by Walter LaFeber (chair), Glenn Altschuler, and Sandra Greene