

## Avery Leiserson

Avery Leiserson died February 14, 2004, at the age of 90. He is survived by his wife, Roxy, of Nashville, Tennessee; three sons, Michael of Spokane, Washington, John of Winchester, Massachusetts, and Alan of Nashville; and a daughter, Nancy Welles of New York.

Avery Leiserson was born on June 27, 1913, in Madison, Wisconsin. He was the first of seven children born to William Morris Leiserson and Emily Bodman Leiserson. His father was of Estonian Jewish descent, a member of the faculty at Antioch College, and one of the first three members of the National Labor Relations Board. His mother was an exceptionally brilliant and charming New England Yankee. Avery completed his A.B. degree from the University of Illinois as a Phi Beta Kappa in 1934, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1941.

In the years leading to the completion of his doctoral work, Leiserson was in government service with the National Recovery Administration (1934–1935) and the National Labor Relations Board (1938–1940), and spent the summer of 1941 as a Mediation Officer for the National Defense Mediation Board. Later public service included the U.S. Bureau of the Budget (1942–1945), the Chicago Regional Stabilization Board (1951–1952), and the Secretary of Labor's Advisory Council on Welfare and Pension Plans (1962–1964). These rich governmental experiences were major contributions to his work within the field of public administration, providing materials for his doctoral dissertation and his influential book, *Administrative Regulation* (1942).

Avery Leiserson taught at Princeton University and the University of Chicago before being recruited to Vanderbilt University in 1952 by Chancellor Harvey Branscomb as professor and chair of the department of political science. He served as chair through 1965 with a one-year gap in 1962–1963 when he was visiting research scholar at the Brookings Institution. As chair, he built a nationally recognized graduate program. His continuing commitment to graduate education by the political science department was seen when he was willing to assume in 1967 the duties of director of Graduate Studies to administer the largest group of graduate

students admitted by the department. He also made it a practice to read all of the department's dissertations and attend all of the dissertation defenses. His questions were to the point and often disconcerting.

On November 1, 2003, over 40 of Avery's former graduate students and colleagues gathered in Nashville to honor him for his contributions to each of their lives. At that session it became clear that in different ways Avery taught each person with whom he came into contact how to better live the life of the mind.

Avery also became deeply involved in the development and maintenance of many aspects of campus life beyond the department. He was active in the development of a Black Studies Program (which later grew into the African-American Studies Program) and the still-operating governance structure for the College of Arts and Science. In addition to his early efforts helping to develop the Urban and Regional Development Center, he actively worked on the original definition of the follow-up institution, the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies. In 1966–1967, he was named the Branscomb Distinguished Service Professor. He retired in 1978, honored as Professor of Political Science, Emeritus.

Avery Leiserson provided a dynamic presence nationally throughout scholarly research institutions. He served on the Board of Directors of the Social Science Research Council (1959–1962) after earlier being honored as one of their fellows (1937–1938). He was first appointed to his continuing position as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1963. In 1966, he served as president of the Southern Political Science Association and as vice-president of the American Political Science Association. He is well remembered within the SPSA as the editor of its *Journal of Politics* (1962–1965), in which capacity he edited a special volume of *Journal* essays, *The American South in the 1960s*, which was also published as a book in 1965. For the APSA, Leiserson served as book review editor of the *American Political Science Review* (1959–1961). His intellectual leadership and service to the profession led to his election as president of the APSA in 1974.

In addition to *Administrative Regulation* and *The American South in the 1960s*, Leiserson wrote *Parties and*

*Politics* (1958) and co-authored *Government and Politics* (1966). Several of his published essays underscore Leiserson's vision of political science as broad and integrative. These include "Problems of Methodology in Political Research" (*Political Science Quarterly*, 1953), "Empirical Approaches to Democratic Theory" (*Political Research and Political Theory*, ed., Oliver Garceau, 1968), and "Scientists and the Policy Process" (*American Political Science Review*, 1965), as well as his presidential addresses to the SPSA (*Journal of Politics*, 1967) and APSA (*American Political Science Review*, 1975). In introducing Avery Leiserson's presidential address before the APSA, Samuel Patterson made an insightful observation concerning disputes during the discipline's so-called behavioral era that underscores Leiserson's legacy and also why he did not lead or dominate a school of thought or approach: "If we had been able to listen more closely to Professor Leiserson, the trivialities of the less-than-cosmic confrontation of behavioral versus institutional political science might have been avoided" ("Introduction," *American Political Science Review*, 1975, p. 173).

Overall, it is difficult to summarize the contributions of Avery Leiserson to Vanderbilt and to political science here and nationally. No matter whether considering his efforts in rewriting the Constitution of the College of Arts and Science or any of his myriad efforts building Vanderbilt collegiality and programs, one always knew his energies would push us forward. He was called by more than one dean, and many of his colleagues, the "conscience of the faculty." Departmental activities often appeared controlled by a hierarchy, yet his leadership style was to keep critical discourse engaged until a consensus would emerge. This often led to longer meetings than one wanted, but also to outcomes in which one was proud to share. Within the broad fields of political science, Avery's interests seemed to range everywhere. He saw the need to compare parties across nations and cultures to develop theoretical understanding of American institutions. He saw political science as a pursuit that was defined by politics, not by subfields or narrow methodological concerns. Avery's desire to know and his willingness to pursue knowledge down every relevant path marked him as an

intellectual driven by the search itself rather than someone with personal aspirations that would lead to academic politics. His energies seemed to rub off on anyone in his office or seminar room.

Avery Leiserson was an exceptional individual who continued the traditions of an outstanding family, who provided an extension of the dynamic growth of the discipline of political science, who built a nationally recognized top-20 political science department for Vanderbilt University as he aided in the development of stronger university governance and the development of the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, and who also found time to provide essential energy for the development and growth of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville. Avery Leiserson contributed greatly to the lives of everyone around him and his actions continue to be with us on each of the paths he took.

George J. Graham, Jr.  
*Vanderbilt University*



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**In Memoriam**

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