

ROBERT G. DIXON, JR.—TEACHER, COLLEAGUE, AND FRIEND

EDWARD T. FOOTE*

No one who knew Robert G. Dixon, Jr., would be surprised that he died scrapping cheerfully against the odds. He died May 5, 1980, of a heart attack during an exploratory operation in the Johns Hopkins Medical Center. He was visiting at the University of Virginia Law School last spring semester when one of his several ailments had worsened inexplicably. The illness was found later to be cancer.

F. Hodge O'Neal, my worthy successor as dean of this School of Law, has written elsewhere in these pages about Bob's accomplishments as a scholar. My bittersweet assignment is to reflect a little on Bob's qualities as a teacher, colleague, and friend. It is bitter that he is gone, so suddenly with so much to do. No one, however, can think about Bob's exceptionally productive life, brimming with so much energy, without enjoying again the warmth and zest of the man. They are happy thoughts.

Until just before entering the operating room, Bob was writing his final examination in constitutional law. During the last two years of his life he had been in and out of hospitals frequently and had become accustomed to using a "gravity free" pen so he could write on his back. People with him just before he died said that despite the pain, he was taking his usual pleasure in drafting for his students one of those mind-busting questions he favored so much, the kind with which he had spent his life wrestling.

Since 1946, in political science and in law, Bob taught thousands of students. One runs into his former students everywhere. Everyone seemed to know Bob. His style as a teacher was not that of the scintillating showman. Certainly he spoon-fed no one. He permitted little deviation from his own high standards of excellence. His blunt reaction to shoddy work wherever he found it stung occasionally, yet he asked of his students nothing he did not ask of himself, and he asked of himself more than almost anyone. Since Bob's death, I have talked

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with many of his former students from several different schools. Their recollections, full of respect and affection, are the ultimate tribute to a teacher. He made them think.

I met Bob first in 1974 when he was Assistant Attorney General of the United States, Office of Legal Counsel. I was an inexperienced dean with an endowed chair to offer. My faculty and I had decided that Bob would fit that chair just right. As it later developed, to our delight, we were right. On that day, however, I got my first glimpse of the dynamo whose prolific pen said so much to so many. He was behind a lot of papers on a huge desk. As it turned out, he was almost always behind a lot of papers. He looked up as I was ushered in, smiled that warm smile of his, and then, before he had to change his train of thought, looked back down at the line he was editing for that one last change. In years since, I have seen him do that a thousand times. He never stopped editing until he had to.

No one worked harder than Bob Dixon. How Claire and his daughters put up with it all those years seemed a mystery, until one got to know Claire, his daughters, and Bob better. Yes, he would work until late at night, night after night, and much of the weekend. But his time with his family was precious time. He made sure that was so, no matter what his professional commitments. The family was unusually close, and remains so without Bob. Claire, Bob's wife of thirty-one years, was totally part of his life, and vice versa.

They had met in 1947 while he was a young instructor at the University of Maryland and she was a student. Having graduated from Syracuse University with the A.B. degree (*summa cum laude*) in 1943 and the Ph.D. degree in 1947, he was embarked already on his lifelong study of our political process. He remained at the University of Maryland from 1946 until 1956, when he earned the J.D. degree from The George Washington University Law Center. He had attended law school at night while teaching full time at the University of Maryland. Incredibly, if that were not enough to do, he also taught a little in the evening division for extra pocket money in those early years of parenthood. It was typical, but impressive. Also, typically, Bob graduated from law school with highest honors, Order of the Coif. Not surprisingly, Bob was asked to join The George Washington University law faculty one week after he graduated.

Bob already had made notable contributions in political science. There continued the steady stream of high quality articles and books

that brought him national distinction in his profession. His 1968 book, *Democratic Representation: Reapportionment in Law and Politics*, won the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Book Award for the best of its kind that year and became the standard reference work in that prickly corner of constitutional law.

After joining our faculty in 1975, Bob's writings in public law focused increasingly on broad concepts of equality. He had completed five chapters of a book on the subject. Reflecting his reputation among law professors, not to mention his courage, Bob was asked to join two other brave souls on a panel at the plenary session of the Association of American Law Schools Convention in 1979 to discuss the meaning of the *Bakke* case.

These explorations of this elusive, perplexing concept led Bob to propose, then create almost alone, what became a fascinating intellectual journey for everyone at this university and countless people elsewhere, *The Quest for Equality*. The *Quest* was a series of nine day-long symposia held here, each exploring a separate facet of equality:

- I. Philosophy of Equality
- II. Equality in American History
- III. Racial Preferences and Scarce Resources: Implications of the *Bakke* Case
- IV. Equal Employment Opportunity
- V. Public School Desegregation
- VI. Sexual Equality Under the Fourteenth and Equal Rights Amendments
- VII. Equality in Basic Needs and Services: Constitutional Right to Subsidy and Sharing?
- VIII. Reaching the Private Sphere: Schools, Clubs, Monopolies
- IX. Judicial Administration of Equality and Liberty: From Declaration of Rights to Restructuring Institutions.

Guest participants included many of the outstanding legal thinkers of our time. In talking with several of them since Bob's death, we have been reminded again how much he will be missed elsewhere, too. The *Quest*, the School of Law's contribution to Washington University's 125th anniversary celebration, has been published in these pages. Bob was editing the series for publication as a book at the time of his death.

Planned from the beginning with an uncompromising promise of high quality, the *Quest* was typical of Bob's professional accomplishments. He worked as hard on the details as he did on the broad concepts. For his many old friends especially among our distinguished

guests, he worried that the menu be worthy of the conversation. And for all of us, he worried that the debate be worthy of the system of government he understood so well and explained so clearly. He did it all in pain, we understood better later, with a rare grace that inspires us all.