

REMEMBERING DEAN ELSPETH ROSTOW (1917–2007)

JAMES K. GALBRAITH

The editorial staff of the LBJ Journal of Public Affairs dedicates this edition of the Journal to the memory of Dean Elspeth Rostow, who died on December 9, 2007. The following are remarks made by Professor James K. Galbraith at the memorial service for Dean Rostow.

CONTRARY TO SOMETHING my father wrote many years ago, matriarchy is not an oppressive form of government. We know that here.

Elspeth Davies Rostow was my direct link to worlds that I had tasted but that she had lived. She first met my mother, then 14 years old, at Camp Marbury on the shores of Lake Champlain near Vergennes, Vermont, in 1927. She knew the Cambridge of Kaldor and Lady Keynes, the MIT of Kindleberger and Samuelson, the Washington of Kennedy and Johnson, and her family roots went back to a New York I never knew and even to the mist-bound age of New England ship captains. We met when I was two years old. When I was 35 I had the pleasure of vetting her for a presidential appointment, and I stated on my personal authority that she had not abused drugs in 33 years.

She escorted Leadbelly to parties at Columbia and she dined with Andre Malraux at the White House; if you wanted to cast a film star in her role you would have chosen Eva Marie Saint—oh wait . . . Eva Marie Saint did play her, thinly disguised as Elspeth Whittaker, in *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians are Coming*, in 1966. And yet for all that, she was also Texan. More precisely, she became Texan, implausibly and to her own surprise. Or again: she came to Texas, and the state made room.

She loved The University of Texas at Austin as an extension of her own soul. Her star turn came as Dean of the LBJ School, but there was much more, done

quietly, in later years. She knew our campus like an air traffic controller knows the sky. And in all essential matters she saw exactly where the interest of the University lay. How many of you—I should say, how many of us—are here today, because she made the right call at the right time?

And the teaching! Through and with and around Walt she observed the presidency and foreign policy at close range, spent 65 years in the classroom teaching it and never lost her taste or touch or verve. And the paperwork! How many hours did she spend on her couch, student papers or Texas Excellence fellowship applications piled high around? And the meetings! For how many years did she patiently interview the best students we have, screening and coaching them for the Rhodes and Marshall competitions? How many debates, in how many departments, did she decide, or defuse, with an aphorism or an epigram?

In conversation she was wry, pithy, arch, irreverent. What Bill Buckley said of my father applies to her: she was “syntactically pure.” The pleasure of her company was that of sharp judgments, never malicious but never saccharine, always delivered with not a single extra word. Once after slipping out of a symposium I asked her later if there had been any controversy after I left. No, she said. “Everyone was brilliant. Everyone said that everyone was brilliant. Everyone was wrong.”

She and her beloved Walt opened their house to my family, and alongside her circle of gracious and fascinating friends we celebrated birthdays and Thanksgivings and a wedding and shared two memorials before this one. But how many others, who saw her less, felt the touch of her friendship just as much? The former Indian Foreign Secretary Jagat Mehta writes that at my father’s memorial in Cambridge last year she took his daughter Vijay aside “and told her in a whisper ‘You know I have always been in love with your father.’ That was her method,” Jagat wrote, “of expressing her sustained affections for me over the years that I was in Austin.”

My wife wishes it known that to her, Elspeth was the perfect blend of professional, mother, and spouse; together they understood exactly what place the cosmos reserves for husbands. A card in her hand, dated April 1993, captures her comic timing. It reads: “Dear Ying, now that we know that the date has been set, we feel it is safe to give you this haunting query from another century—with great affection, Walt and Elspeth.” The enclosure, sheet music dated 1871, carries these lyrics: “Jamie has long been a-courting me, Never was lover more true. But if he asks me to marry him, What in the world shall I do?”

As a woman she was elegant, impeccable, exquisite, but the words do not do exact justice. She had perfected the high art of the mask—of the feminine poker face. But the mask was there to be lowered, she would let you slip in behind it, to see the twinkle in her eye, the impish smile, to share the confidence or the touch of wit. As the photographs have captured she was intensely beautiful when young, and again intensely and I think increasingly beautiful in great age. I was in love with her from the day I arrived in Austin until the day she died.

Of her last week, this is what we know so far. On Wednesday night, she attended the LBJ School holiday party; I came in as she was leaving and she noted

that I was wearing Walt's tie. On Thursday she attended the Ph.D. colloquium; the topic, near to her heart, was the preparation for college of high school students in Central Texas. Friday she finished her grades and went to another party. On Saturday evening she dined at home—on a martini.

How we wish we could have kept her longer. But as my daughter Eve, now eleven, wrote to Ann last Sunday, she was the perfect person. She lived in grace and style to the last day. How lucky we were, to have known her so well and to have kept her so long.

James K. Galbraith
Austin, Texas
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