

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 17, 2000,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Edward Christie
Banfield was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

EDWARD CHRISTIE BANFIELD

BORN: November 19, 1916

DIED: September 30, 1999

Edward C. Banfield, the George D. Markham Professor of Government *Emeritus*, died peacefully at his Vermont summer home on September 30, 1999. He was born on a farm in Bloomfield, Connecticut on November 19, 1916. He received a B.A. in English from the University of Connecticut in 1938 and went to work for the United States Forest Service. After jobs at other government agencies he went to the University of Chicago, where he received a Ph.D. in political science in 1952 and served on the faculty there until 1959, when he came to Harvard. He left Chicago much regretted by his friend Leo Strauss, who warned him in farewell remarks that he was going to “another university...inferior to ours in everything except endowment and old age.”

Banfield was in every useful way an individual with a strong and distinctive character that impressed itself on all who met him. He disliked vague writing and sloppy thinking, but he applied his powerful critical impulses as much to his own writing as to that of others. He collaborated with his friend Martin Meyerson and with his former student James Q. Wilson, and both discovered that the extraordinary clarity and beauty of Banfield's writing was a lesson for them and for everyone.

To describe his own work, Banfield once said: “My earliest professional interest was in planning. This came about largely by accident.” There you have the duality of planning and accident that was the study of his career. Banfield took up the progressive reforms that in one way or another were the central domestic issue in American politics during the last century, and sought to understand why they failed and yet continued to be attempted. In 1955, Banfield and Meyerson published an account of how Chicago built public housing projects, in which they explained how mischievous these projects were likely to be: tall, institutional buildings filled with tiny apartments erected in areas that guaranteed racial segregation. Within two decades, high-rise public housing was widely viewed as a huge mistake, but Banfield received no credit for his foresight.

In 1958, Banfield wrote, with the assistance of his wife Laura, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, a “work for the ages,” a leading scholar dubbed it. The backward society was a town in southern Italy, and to explain its backwardness Banfield described the “amoral familism” of its inhabitants, who would not cooperate with one another outside the boundaries of their immediate families. By contrast, in a town of the same size located in an equally forbidding part of southern Utah, the residents published a local newspaper and sustained a remarkable variety of associations. In southern Italy, people would not cooperate; in southern Utah they scarcely did anything else. Foreign aid programs ignored this finding and went about persuading other nations to accept large grants for new projects. Few of these projects generated economic growth, and where spectacular growth did occur in Asia, it was without the benefit of foreign aid. The planners did not take proper account of culture.

“This book will probably strike many readers as the work of an ill-tempered and mean-spirited fellow.” Thus runs the most famous sentence right at the beginning of Banfield’s most famous book, *The Unheavenly City* (1970). Banfield was neither ill-tempered nor mean-spirited, but he was impish and provocative (a chapter in that book was titled “Rioting Mainly for Fun and Profit”). The type he wished to provoke was the “reformer-moralizer,” as he termed it, and the outstanding problem he saw in contemporary politics was how to distinguish morality from its angry little cousin, moralism.

To moralism Banfield opposed not so much self-interest as culture, a notion by which he anticipated those today who speak of “social capital.” Some people, he wrote, were “future-oriented,” but many others who form what we now call the underclass are present-oriented and thus unable to take advantage of the opportunities before them.

The resistance of culture to reason means that social scientists can never find laws which could then be applied by social engineers. He once said: “By its very nature social science, although it should aim as does all science to explain much by little, could not address itself to important matters except by sacrificing a great deal of rigor and also of generality.” It must always be supplemented by “the mysterious faculty that the Greek philosophers called prudence,” which the social scientist is unlikely to possess. Banfield’s strictures--for his wisdom came in strictures--were hotly contested when he made them and are now in great part routinely accepted. In making clear that culture preceded both economics and politics, Banfield was a prophet ahead of his time.

Banfield’s impishness, together with the power of his thought, made him a conspicuous target for the student radicals of the late Sixties, who insulted and persecuted him. A certain levity also made him an early practitioner of grade inflation. When a teaching fellow approached him with an undergraduate bluebook, he would scan it and at the first hint of intelligence or comprehension say, “Give him an A.” And he wrote a book on *The Democratic Muse* in which he suggested that Harvard make exact copies of all its paintings

and sell the originals to those foolish enough to believe they could tell the difference, or that it mattered if they could.

Banfield's extraordinary mind was embedded in a character that combined tough criticism of loose thought with exceptional generosity and the delights of humor, long meals, and friendly company. He and his wife, Laura, spent their summers on their farm in Vermont where they grew corn, entertained acquaintances, and fascinated students and colleagues. Though afflicted during his life with many illnesses, he was blessed with an old age free of senility. Besides Laura, he leaves behind his children, Laura and Elliott, and countless friends and former students who will never forget a remarkable man.

Respectfully submitted,

Samuel P. Huntington

Arthur Maass

James Q. Wilson

Harvey C. Mansfield, Chair