

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 8, 2003, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Alan Heimert was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

ALAN HEIMERT

BORN: November 10, 1928

DIED: November 1, 1999

Alan Heimert, the Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature, who for four decades was a member of this Faculty, died on November 1, 1999, at the close of his 71st year.

Born in Oak Park, Illinois, he attended school in nearby Elmhurst, where he obtained both his secondary education and a state tennis championship. He then came to Harvard and was graduated with an AB in Government in 1949, following which he earned an MA in History at Columbia. History itself interrupted his graduate studies, however, and from 1952 to 1955 he served as a non-commissioned officer in Japan and Korea. Upon being discharged, he returned to Harvard to prepare a PhD in American Civilization, thereby confirming the scholarly and institutional allegiances that were to dominate the rest of his life.

For 38 years he taught in the English Department, where he served as Chairman and where he carefully nurtured promising seedlings in that legendary nursery of Americanist scholars, English 70. For 40 years he was associated with the Committee on Higher Degrees in the History of American Civilization, from whom he received his doctorate; he directed more theses than any other member of that committee and served at various times as Chairman for a total of 14 years. For 45 years he was associated with the Committee on the Degree in History and Literature, where he also served as Chairman and tutored more undergraduates than anyone before or since. And for almost 50 years, he was a devoted denizen of the world of Eliot House, where he was to reign as Master for nearly a quarter-century.

During the cataclysmic days of the late sixties and early seventies, he strove, Neptune-like, to calm the turbulent seas, serving with distinction on the Committee of Fifteen, the University Committee on Governance, and the Faculty Committee on African and Afro-American Studies. In 1970-71, he took a major role in revising the rules of this Faculty, where he later served as Parliamentarian for more than a decade. Ardently opposed to apartheid, in 1981 he founded the South African Fellowship Program, which he directed for almost 20 years, bringing well over 100 black South Africans to Harvard. For that

achievement he was made an honorary life member of the South African Institute for Race Relations.

Alan Heimert was the co-author, with Reinhold Niebuhr, of *A Nation So Conceived* (1967). He also co-edited, with his mentor Perry Miller, *The Great Awakening* (1967) and, with Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritans in America* (1985). Several of his essays have become landmarks in American studies, most notably his seminal study of the political implications in *Moby Dick*. His greatest work, however, which has been called “the most significant and provocative book on American religious history,” is his *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (1966).

In 1960-61, he was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton; in 1967 he was a visiting professor at Berkeley; and in 1986 he was Lee Kuan Yew Distinguished Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. In 1986, he was also made a Fellow of John Harvard's college in Cambridge, England, and he was elected to the American Antiquarian Society. In 1995, the Early American Literary Division of the MLA awarded him its lifetime achievement award for scholarship and teaching. And two years before his death, Harvard honored him with the Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Teaching Award.

This partial list of achievements gives small indication of the magnitude of the man himself, who always seemed considerably larger than life – an attribute better conveyed, perhaps, by the kinetic metaphor of Alan driving the Zamboni during intermissions at “An Evening with Champions,” making the rough places smooth with vigor and determination, skill and *chutzpah*. Undergraduates easily saw through the curmudgeonly disguise with which he attempted to conceal the compassionate, benevolent father-figure underneath. Alan's unfaltering optimism and faith in the young derived from his profound belief in the capacity of every individual for moments of transformation or revelation; as many have attested, he himself had a gift for providing such moments, for being the great awakener who left his students forever changed.

To his incoming graduate students, Alan would explain that there were two things they had to do in graduate school, get a PhD and get an education, and that one had almost nothing to do with the other. It was their *paideia* he cared about, and he trained his students to learn well, teach well, and write well, but above all to think well. Never wishing to have disciples, he encouraged resistance and dissent in their quest for truth. Hence, there is no Heimert school in American studies. There is, however, a very important Heimert *community* of distinguished former students, bound together by undiminished fealty to his memory and by, in Jonathan Edwards's phrase, “the mutual love of the brethren.”

Community was of supreme importance to Alan, whether it was the congregation at Northampton or the crew of the *Pequod*, the alumni of English 70 or the members of Eliot House, or America itself – and he famously instilled in his Eliot House students a sense of

communal obligation to do good and give back what one had received. But it is the community that constitutes Harvard about which he cared most. He was a passionate, articulate defender of Harvard's noblest traditions and of this university as a place where free people intelligently thought their way through problems. His standards were lofty and exigent, and, in the words of a close friend, "he fought for what he believed even when the winds were blowing in the other direction." Despite the dark disappointments and physical indignities of his final years, when those contrary winds threatened at times to reach gale force, Alan Heimert's lambent dream of Harvard continued to glow undimmed.

He leaves his beloved wife, Arline, his adoring children, Andrew and Lara, and a host of bereft students and friends, all of whose lives he immeasurably enriched.

Respectfully submitted,

Daniel Aaron
Sacvan Bercovitch
Andrew Delbanco (Columbia)
Laura Fisher
Daniel Steiner
Walter Kaiser, Chair