



Theodore J. Lowi

July 9, 1931 – February 7, 2017

Theodore J. Lowi, one of the social sciences' most towering intellects of the 20th century and a renowned teacher for generations of Cornell students, died on February 7 at the age of 85. Lowi taught at Cornell for a total of 49 years, first joining the faculty as an instructor in 1959, leaving in 1965 for a position at the University of Chicago, and returning in 1972 to become the John L. Senior Professor of American Institutions. He became the Emeritus John L. Senior Professor Emeritus in 2015.

Lowi's approach to political science lay at the nexus between American political institutions, political history, and public policy, yielding insights that remain prescient in light of recent developments. In his classic book, *The End of Liberalism* (1969), he argued that in the United States the rule of law and the power of representative government were being displaced by the ascendant interest group liberalism. It enabled organized private interests, particularly business groups, to benefit from the expanding administrative state, to the detriment of the unorganized. As the public interest suffered as a result, he explained, "cynicism unavoidably curdles into distrust."

Lowi considered Congress to be "the first branch," the most democratic and representative, and he viewed the aggrandizement of the executive branch—at Congress's expense—with great concern. In his book, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (1985), he argued that several factors in combination—citizens' growing expectations of government services, the weakening of the role of grassroots parties in the campaigns, and the increased capacity of modern presidents to use technology to communicate directly with the public—were giving rise to a "plebiscitary" character to the office, as presidents generated ever-greater expectations among the electorate. Yet such hopes were inevitably dashed, as the limits of the

office in the realm of domestic policy meant that presidents predictably failed to deliver on the scale of their promises. They would turn instead to their greater powers as “commander-in-chief,” engaging in high-risk overseas adventurism. Their approval ratings would in time plummet, and the public’s disillusionment with government generally would deepen.

In two of his most famous and oft-cited essays (“American Business, Public Policy, Case-Studies, and Political Theory,” *World Politics*, 1964, and “Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice,” *Public Administration Review*, 1972), he put public policy front-and-center as the topic that could enable us to understand politics generally. It launched his hallmark “arenas of power” framework, based on the idea that “a political relationship is determined by the type of policy at stake, so that for every type of policy there is likely to be a distinctive type of political relationship.” These “types” were not categorized in the typical fashion of emphasizing the substantive topic policies addressed but rather they were sorted analytically according to the relationship they establish between society and government, leading to the distinction between distributive, regulatory, and redistributive policies. As Lowi explained, “Each arena tends to develop its own characteristic political structure, political process, elites, and group relations.”

Lowi called for scholarship that makes politics its primary focus. In his formulation, this meant studying power—not simply as it is possessed by individuals or groups, but rather as it emanates from “the state,” through formal rules and procedures, resources offered, and the authority through which decisions are made. He considered public policy to epitomize “government-in-action,” showcasing political relationships that reveal how power is distributed and navigated. Troubled by the growing divide in political science between empirical studies and theoretical work, he advocated simultaneous attention to both as the most promising way to further understanding of politics. The challenge for the scholar, as he saw it, is to be able to step back from a case or set of cases, studied in an in-depth manner, and to analyze the broader patterns and relationships at work, those which illuminate how power operates more generally.

Lowi’s scholarship bears an enduring influence on the study of political science. He helped spur the development of historical institutionalism, in particular the approach to studying the United States known as “American political development.” His ideas also gave rise to the theory of “policy feedback,” which is utilized by numerous contemporary scholars of both American and comparative politics to examine how policies created at an earlier point in time shape subsequent politics by influencing the activity and goals of ordinary citizens, lawmakers and interest groups.

Lowi became well known on campus for his riveting lectures in the introductory undergraduate course in American government and politics, which he taught almost continually throughout his years on the faculty. He delivered them with his characteristic southern drawl, and the zeal, and intensity of an evangelical preacher. The course attracted a packed house, in some years enrolling up to 500 students. His charismatic presence combined with the clarity, complexity, and originality of his ideas more than filled the cavernous Bailey Hall.

His belief that undergraduates could gain from exposure to the policymaking process, witnessed firsthand in the nation’s capital, prompted him to develop the idea of the Cornell-in-Washington program, which commenced in 1980 and continues to this day. He also played a leadership role in founding the Cornell Institute of Public Affairs (CIPA) in the 1980s, and served as one of the

program's core faculty.

Lowi mentored generations of graduate students. He encouraged them with his southern colloquialisms and tips such as, "Remember it's not a book; it's a dissertation;" and "Don't get it 'right', get it 'written.'" He served as an early and dedicated mentor to women and to people of color, and was honored in 1996 with the award for an "Outstanding Mentor of Women in Political Science," given by the Women's Caucus for Political Science.

Lowi was born and grew up in Gadsden, Alabama. His father, Alvin Rosenbaum Lowi, founded a chemical company and his mother, Janice Haas, taught piano. The family, which included four additional children, attended the local Jewish temple. He began his studies as an undergraduate at Tulane University, but had to drop out when he became ill; he subsequently attended Michigan State on a music scholarship, specializing in the oboe and graduating in 1954. He earned the Ph.D. at Yale University in 1961.

Lowi's star rose quickly. The American Political Science Association named him the top political scientist in 1978. He became the organization's president in 1991, and served as president of the International Political Science Association from 1997-2000. He received numerous honors throughout his career, ranging from a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967-68; to the Richard Neustadt Award for the best book on the presidency in 1985, for his book *The Personal President*; to the Harold Lasswell Award of the Policy Studies Organization in 1986 for substantive contribution to the study of public policy. Besides his numerous scholarly books and articles, he became the author of a Norton textbook on American government beginning in 1976, with several co-authors joining in over the years on subsequent iterations; the current version remains widely adopted annually.

Lowi was married to the former Angele Marie Daniel. The couple had two children, Anna and Jason. They lived not far from campus. Lowi would sometimes run from home to the Arts Quad, stopping repeatedly along the way to engage in spirited conversation with colleagues and students.

When Lowi completed his year as president of the American Political Science Association, he delivered an address in which he shared "the pains of discovery" gleaned from his "pilgrimage" of listening in on the discipline in that role. "At the end of my pilgrimage, I have come to the conclusion that among the sins of omission of modern political science, the greatest of all has been the omission of passion. There are no qualifications for membership in the APSA, but if I had the power to establish such standards, they would be that a member should love politics, love a good constitution, take joy in exploring the relation between the two, and be prepared to lose some domestic and even some foreign policy battles to keep alive a positive relation between the two. ...I speak for the pleasure of finding a pattern, the inspiration of a well-rounded argument, the satisfaction in having made a good guess about what makes democracy work and a good stab at improving the prospect of rationality in human behavior."

Theodore Lowi's ideas and the force of his character inspired students of politics at Cornell, throughout the discipline of political science, and well beyond. His scholarship, teaching and mentorship were consistently characterized by an ability to analyze politics from an original

point of view, one with a sharply critical edge that deeply questioned assumptions and was ever mindful of the public interest. That intellectual sharpness was embodied within a personality of tremendous warmth, vibrancy, and verve. A stalwart critic, an ever-creative thinker, a force of nature emanating energy and joy—this was Ted Lowi as scholar, teacher, mentor, and colleague.

Lowi's wife, Angele, predeceased him by two years. He is survived by his children, as well as his siblings Alvin Jr., Bertram, Jan Horn, and Betty Baer.

Submitted by Suzanne Mettler (Chair), Richard Bense, Isaac Kramnick and Elizabeth Sanders