



RESOLUTION MEMORIALIZING THE LATE WILLIAM B. POFF

WHEREAS, having skipped two grades, this 15-year-old had already graduated from Christiansburg High School when he boarded Norfolk and Western's Powhatan Arrow in June 1948, with his speaking coach in tow, and headed west to the Future Farmers of America convention in Kansas City, Missouri. He had won the local, district and regional prepared public speaking contests, and was there to compete in the national finals, his topic: "the future health of our farms, the health of America."

William B. Poff was born in 1932. If you consider the depths of the Great Depression as valleys, 1932 was Its Mariana Trench. But his parents were resourceful, optimistic people who had not brought a son into the world to become a hapless character in a Steinbeck novel. His father ran a country store Bill has called an "empire of clutter." There his father sold everything you can imagine in a country store: cattle feed, penny candy, dynamite, canning goods, guns, and ammunition. Bill's mother was a school teacher. Together Bill's mother and father had negotiated the eddies and shoals of the Great Depression, come out on the other side, and raised a confident, intelligent son as capable of selling cattle feed and dynamite as he was public speaking. And here he was, on his way to the national finals of a public speaking contest, a pure Americana event, set against the backdrop of young farmers from all over America converging at the Kansas City Convention Center.

One thing is certain; there was nothing fortuitous about his appearance there. At an early age he added the New York Times to his reading list and had a local hotel save its weekly subscription. In retrospect, this was part of a lifelong pattern. Yes, he was playing baseball and, like the other young lads his age, had a dream of becoming a professional baseball player, but he also was reading Shakespeare and the New York Times.

If you had scoured his home for books and magazines, you would have found surprisingly few legal periodicals and law-books. What you would have found is a large, eclectic library with everything from the works of Euripides, Cervantes, Spinoza, Milton, Darwin, Aristotle, Tocqueville, St. Augustin and the like, to obscure authors writing about (and as Dave Barry would say, I'm not making this up) "Do Cats Think." You would also note that he was reading Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Atlantic Quarterly, Fortune, The American Scholar, The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, The New York Times, and a host of weekly magazines. Interrupt him of an evening and you would have been as likely to interrupt his reading of the latest, controversial novel as you were to interrupt his trial preparation.

So, when he stood to speak at the Kansas City convention, there was little left to chance as he won the national final. Those of us who knew Bill, with some amusement might reflect upon the reputed words of General George S. Patton Jr.: "Rommel, you magnificent bastard! I read your book!"

But there was no time to receive accolades. The 1948 Republican convention would start in Philadelphia on June 21. Bill's father and mother would be in attendance. So Bill boarded the train in Kansas City and headed directly to Philadelphia to join them. Ted Dalton was at the '44 and '52 Republican Conventions and perhaps at the '48 convention when Bill arrived.

The Republican Party's 1948 domestic platform had moral heft. It opposed racial segregation in the armed services, sought prompt enactment of federal legislation to end lynchings, and favored abolition of the poll tax. And Bill was there as the convention selected Governors Thomas E. Dewey and Earl Warren for President and Vice President. All in all, I would say it was high theater and a pretty good civics lesson for a 15-year-old, who only days before had delivered an award winning speech on domestic agricultural policy in America.

At age 16, in the fall of 1948, Bill entered Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and while on the path to academic excellence there, taught himself to play chess, and of course, bought chess books and subscribed to chess players magazines, and started playing chess by mail. I personally have a hard time fathoming Bill waiting by the mailbox for some Alaskan's next move, and I suspect that prompted what happened next. He read in one of his chess magazines about a chess tournament that was to be held in Mississippi, in which a fairly well known chess player was expected to compete. Bill packed his suitcase, filled up his Belvedere (well before an interstate highway system) and headed to the deep south. Though he denies having developed any real talent for the game, it is nevertheless a fact that the sought after match came to reality and ended in a draw.

It has been observed that a liberal education is an essential ingredient of leadership. As President John F. Kennedy forcefully noted in 1962: "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." But a formal education, professional or otherwise, is no substitute. A diploma is nothing more than an entree, in the vernacular, a "ticket to ride," or a piece of paper. A person who has such a paper may or may not have a liberal education, or for that matter even a lick of sense, and the same is true for someone who does not have it. To quote Calvin Coolidge with *slight* poetic license: "the world is full of formally educated derelicts." In contrast, one of the

finest, liberally educated trial lawyers and statesman in American history, Abraham Lincoln, had virtually *no* formal education.

I know we can say with confidence that had Bill *never* attended college or law school, Bill *still* would have been liberally educated as well as grounded in the practical experiences of life. But as we know he did attend college and then law school at Washington & Lee where he was Phi Beta Kappa, Editor-In-Chief of the Law Review, Order of the Coif, and graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955. We are assured by history that his diplomas were not merely pieces of paper.

After graduation from law school, Bill joined the United States Army and taught at the Judge Advocate General school in Charlottesville and there met and married the first love of his life, Magdalen Barbara Andrews, a scholar in her own right, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and an award winning journalist, who at the time was a reporter for The Daily Progress in Charlottesville.

Though it is often repeated that lightning strikes but once, several years after Mag's death, Bill married the next love of his life, Spring Cho, an intelligent, endearing, successful businesswoman. Words would fail me, and I will not endeavor to capture the depth of his relationship with the two loves of his life. Indeed, Bill would have blushed at the mention of his personal life, but he also was at his core a modest man, who never missed an opportunity to give credit to others, and these two women were equal partners in Bill's legendary successes.

From an early age he was fully engaged in the civic life of our state and nation. Since the moment in 1958 he first called Roanoke home and joined the law firm of Woods, Rogers, Muse, Walker, & Thornton he became a person to whom you would turn to assure the success of your civic venture. And all the while he practiced law on a grand scale as the consummate trial

lawyer and appellate advocate, always unfalteringly prepared; versed in the law; unflaggingly civil to his adversaries, witnesses and court personnel; and possessing an extraordinary gift to speak to jurors, at any level--a thoughtful, careful, yet bold, advocate whose quest for excellence never took him so far that he could not see his father's country store or feel the strong pull of his mother's love of knowledge.

I trust you will forgive me (if not thank me) for selecting only a representative sample of his remarkable professional and civic accomplishments: Bill was President of both the Virginia State Bar and the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, was a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates, the American College of Trial Lawyers, and the International Academy of Trial Lawyers, was appointed to the State Board of Education twice, once by Gov. John Dalton and once by Gov. Mills E. Godwin, served for 10 years as Chairman of the Six District Republican Committee, and from the 1960s was a tireless advocate for the sister city program.

In 1974, in advocating Bill's ultimately unsuccessful election to the Chairmanship of The Virginia Republican Party, The Roanoke Times editorial staff noted that Bill had had a hand in electing two Republican Governors, one Republican Lieutenant Governor, two Republican Congressmen, and from one to three Republican members of the Virginia General Assembly. If the Republican Party were to select Bill, it would be selecting a man who, in the words of the editorial staff, "while giving no aid and comfort to Democrats, is not an ideologue muttering a monologue at either extreme." As an aside, it very well may be that this endorsement doomed his selection.

But perhaps the following vignette from 1973 captures the value of his assistance and the trust others placed in him for any task, whether civic, legal, or political. John Dalton had decided to begin the quest that had eluded his father, but he would start with a run for Lieutenant

Governor. John tasked Bill with managing his campaign. He placed \$1,000,000 in a checking account, signed the checks in blank, and handed them to Bill. History will record that Bill ran a stunningly efficient, yet frugal, campaign, assisted John in swamping his adversaries, and returned a good portion of the money to John.

Margaret Mead once observed: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the *only* thing that ever has." Bill's life stands as a testament to Mead's observation.

William B. Poff was a thoughtful, classically, liberally educated man, a committed citizen, and the consummate trial lawyer. Today we pause to note that he was a credit to the Roanoke Bar, the women he loved, his community, the legal profession, and his country. But remarkably, he never wavered from his characteristic modesty, a quality aptly captured in a letter he sent several years ago following a George Will editorial recounting a scene from Bull Durham, the movie about minor league baseball which Bill thought to be a fitting metaphor for his career.

A young minor league pitcher, Nuke LaLoosh, after a good inning, is deflated by his veteran catcher, Crash Davis:

Nuke: "I was good, eh?"

Crash: "Your fastball was up and your curve ball was hanging. In the Show, they would have ripped you up."

Nuke: "Can't you let me enjoy the moment?"

Crash: "The moment's over."

Correctly, George Will concludes that moments are awfully momentary. "And so they are," Bill lamented. "I, too," he said "have had some good innings, at times against some minor league hitting. But in the Big Leagues, they probably would have knocked me out of the box. I had my moments to enjoy. The moments are, however, I fear over."

No, Bill that's not the way we see it. You chose the league you played in. Your fastball was fast, even for the guys in the Show, and your curve ball could be miraculous. This league would not have been the same without you.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the members of the Roanoke Bar Association reflect upon William B. Poff's life with admiration and his passing on September 5, 2012 with sorrow;

AND BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that copies of this resolution be furnished to the Circuit Courts of the City and County of Roanoke, the City of Salem and the County of Montgomery, as well as the United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia, Roanoke Division, with motions that this resolution be spread upon the permanent common law order books of those courts; and that copies of this resolution be furnished to William B. Poff's wife to communicate the esteem in which the Roanoke Bar Association holds him and his memory and the Association's sorrow in his passing.

GIVEN under the hands of the President and Secretary of the Roanoke Bar Association and the seal of the Association this 8th day of April 2014.

Stephen W. Lemon
President, Roanoke Bar Association

TESTE:

Joseph W. H. Mott
Secretary, Roanoke Bar Association