

# Clarence B. Carson, R.I.P.

by Paul A. Cleveland

On April 9 we lost one of our strongest defenders of the cause of liberty when Clarence Carson passed away at age 77. In many ways Carson's story is a familiar one for the time in which he grew up in America. He was born in 1925 into a family of limited means. His father was a tenant farmer in rural Alabama. It was a seemingly unlikely place from which a scholar would emerge, but in the sweet air of the relative freedom of the age any aspiration was possible. Like so many others before him, Carson believed that he could follow his own dream about what life could be. There was no thought of class struggle or being bound by one's circumstances. There was no wallowing in self-pity. While circumstances might be tough, they were only obstacles that could be overcome by thoughtful planning and hard work.

He learned the lessons of hard work and frugality in his childhood and they served him well all his life. From his upbringing he learned the important truth that a rich man might be prodigal with his resources, but a poor man could not afford that luxury. Perhaps it was on this insight that he began to plumb the depths of the discipline of economics even though it was not his primary area of study. Nonetheless, Clarence had a considerable understanding of the subject,

which is clearly demonstrated in his book *Basic Economics* and in many other writings.

After serving a term of duty during World War II, Carson returned home. Between 1946 and 1957 he engaged in numerous educational pursuits. At the end of this time he held bachelor's and master's degrees in history from Auburn University and a Ph.D. in history from Vanderbilt University. During these academic efforts he honed his understanding of the importance of the person and of individual responsibility. In fact, the title of his dissertation was *Embattled Individualists: The Defense of the Idea of Individualism, 1890–1930*.

It was also during his college years that Carson met and married Myrtice Sears. In his 1998 book, *Swimming Against the Tide: Memoirs and Selected Writings*, he recalled their meeting and affirmed his lifelong love for his wife when he wrote, "I met a pretty young redheaded lady [in 1949] at a dance held in the gymnasium at Handley High at Roanoke on Saturday evening. . . . I was smitten with her almost from our first dance. I still am." Together, Clarence and Myrtice built a life for themselves and their two daughters, Evelyn and Melissa. It might be easy to gloss over a man's private life in reflecting on his academic achievements. However, to do so in this case would be a disservice to the man and promote an error that would prevent us from understanding his work. Carson's commitment to and love for his family profoundly shaped his think-

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ing. They were as fundamental to his work as were theism and the notion of natural law. In an age when many people were dismissing the importance of personal character and integrity, Clarence always affirmed it as foundational for all other endeavors. Thus, it is not surprising that his was a successful marriage. Nor is it surprising that his family will miss him dearly.

With his degrees in hand, Carson pursued a college teaching career. He began at Elon College in North Carolina in the fall of 1957. From then until 1973 he held academic positions at numerous institutions, including Grove City College and Hillsdale College. During this time Carson also began his writing career and published numerous articles in *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty*. Over the years his contact with the Foundation for Economic Education grew.

### Prolific Writer

In 1973 he turned to a career in writing. He published 12 books and hundreds of articles. Among his works is the six-volume *A Basic History of the United States*. This series captures the essence of the American drama and provides the reader with an excellent understanding of our past. His *Basic American Government* explores the nature of the constitutional government devised by the founders and explains how this form of government has been eroded. *Basic Economics* succinctly captures the essential principles of the discipline in an easy-to-read style. Throughout the country these books have been widely used by people searching for sound educational materials for their children. In a world where public schooling continues to go from bad to worse, there would certainly be a much greater shortage of such materials if Carson had never embarked on these efforts.

His defense of liberty stemmed from his even stronger commitment: He always



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wanted to know the truth and to help others understand it. The thought of living with error was simply not acceptable. Yet his pursuit of truth was never overbearing or tyrannical. Carson possessed a graciousness that allowed him to teach others about those things that are honorable, right, and good without lording it over them. I count myself as one who was fortunate enough to study under his tutelage. Even with all my faults, I believe I am a better man today than I would have been if I had not known him.

Death is an event that comes to each of us, but we cannot all face it with the satisfaction that we lived lives full of significance. Carson was able to pass from this world with the full assurance that his life counted for eternity. He leaves a rich legacy that will benefit the lives of people everywhere for many years to come. His books and articles endure, as full of wisdom and honesty as the day they were penned. □