



**James Wilson Institute**  
*on Natural Rights and the American Founding*

May 23, 2016

From: Hadley Arkes -- A Letter of Deep Thanks for the Gathering in New York  
on April 7<sup>th</sup>—and a Look Ahead

Friends:

If I had any way of anticipating the kind of evening we had in New York, at the Union League Club, on April 7<sup>th</sup>—if I could have imagined how magical it turned out to be—I might have made more of it to my sons, and that would have encouraged them to come across the country to join us. I anticipated a lively reception, catching up with people after many years away, and then giving way to a more intimate dinner. I never expected the turnout we had for the reception and discussion, and that 100 would stay for dinner. But I'll stop with numbers before I start sounding like Don Trump. I couldn't believe that so many of you would carve out the time from your lives, professional and personal, in order to be there that night. And I was touched in another way that so many would be willing to come in from more distant places. **Bobbie Mason** and **John Cui** came in from L.A., **Joe Nesler** and **Carolina Patino** from Chicago, **Darren Malhame** from Columbus, my boyhood friend, **Len Kaplan**, from Houston, my closest friend from Amherst, **Norton Starr**, coming in from Kansas City, and **Chris Palazzolo** from London.

A friend in Aspen, Colorado, saw that picture taken of the whole group—she enlarged the picture on the screen and began looking at every face. And her main reaction was precisely the thing caught by my dear friend **Seth Dubin** '54, in an email to me the next morning:

By this time in life I've experienced any number of tributes and testimonials – but none like [the one last night]. ... Everyone there was eager to be there and everyone there felt an individual, personal bond with you.

I've written to several people to express, at once, my astonishment and gratitude that they made the trip; and I'll write to more of you. It turned out to be a stroke of genius on the part of **Garrett** to ask that we all turn around and take a picture of everyone assembled. But it was another stroke of genius on the part of **Howard Heyman**, the photographer that he could get up high enough that he could capture virtually every face. And every face showed what our friend in Aspen saw in the photo. Everyone who has seen that picture has been taken with it at once, and yet what it shows, to me, are the connections and blessings brought to me by that time we had together at Amherst. It was a gift to be connected anew with students who had meant so much to me—**Geoff O'Connell**, **Chip Norris**, **Andy Neviasser**, **Jamie Zimmerman**, **Noah Gotbaum**, **Jen Kordell**, **Chris Pochon**, and the man who was there on the first day I walked into a classroom at Amherst on September 15, 1966, **Jay Beech**. I could go on naming; but the main point is that we're connected: I've been in touch with some of you since then, and I hope that we can stay in touch. I've not mentioned here others who have remained in

touch with me, down to this day: **Doug Neff, Mike Petrino, Joe Nesler, Jed Doty, Paula Stannard, Rick Swartz, Phil de Picciotto, Noah Silverman, Glen Lewy, Peter Barwick, Bill Kendall, Carolyn Kendall Brick**—and I'm grateful that they too made it in, some from distant places.

As Doug Neff said at the dinner, we hope to keep the group together, and some of you may be able to follow us as we move into this new phase of the project. As Doug and Mike Petrino put it, we're making the move of bringing to a wider audience, in other parts of the country, the teaching you had come to know at Amherst. Friends in other cities have helped recruit people for seminars, as we try out a new format: An opening session on a Friday evening, followed the next day by four sessions, running from the morning until around 4:30 pm. This is what Jed Doty has called "Arkes in a Box"—the attempt to give people the experience, in one day, of what a course had felt and sounded like at Amherst. We have those seminars planned now for Houston and Philadelphia. Bobbie Mason and **Gunnar Gundersen** have expressed an interest in putting something together in L.A. The seminars may have an appeal for lawyers and judges, but they will be the kind of thing accessible to ordinary citizens, even if they haven't had their minds sharpened—or eroded--by the study of law.

Rick Swartz raised the question of whether I might do the course in "Political Obligations" over a couple of months, on evenings, in Washington for alumni who had graduated before I had invented that course. Bobbie Mason has raised the question of whether we might do a replay of some key parts of the course in one of those one-day seminars. And that strikes me as something we should really think about doing. But of course, we'll also have available fairly soon those CD's of 16 sessions taken from the course. **Susannah Black '99** has suggested that my former students could form discussion groups around those recordings—or other readings—in different places.

But quite apart from the teaching, what I find so appealing—and charming—here is the prospect of being together again with my former students, older and younger, in pursuing this project. I've had quite an interesting experience in being on the road, invited to give a talk on "natural law" and the Founding to businessmen, lawyers, judges and pastors. As we explain our mission, we tell them that we are trying to restore, to a new generation of citizens and lawyers, the furnishings of mind of those remarkable men who founded and shaped this regime. James Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall had a striking knack for tracing their judgments back to those "axioms" that underlie what we can reliably "know." And when they did, they brought home to us certain truths and rights that would be there *even if there were no Constitution*. What I can tell you is that people who hear this teaching for the first time are often quite lit up by it. They are stirred by something new—and something so in accord with their own common sense of the problems that arise in our law and politics.

One of the gratifying things here is that when potential donors hear the substance of what we're about—or hear me make the case--they usually want to help. And so there has been nothing at all demeaning in raising money for the project, especially since I'm raising it for the program and the staff, and not for myself.

I was touched by several of my former students at the dinner, one a surgeon, who said, “We really have to get going with this—and how can we help?” That’s quite dear, and we haven’t figured out yet just how we would have you help if you wished to help. Mike Petrino used to say, “Yes, we would like contributions, but even more, we would like people to join us in coming to meetings of the group, getting involved in the project where they can—and getting the word out to others.” We might ask you to give us names of friends or classmates whom you think would be interested in these seminars. You might even consider joining with a classmate and assembling a group of 12-15 people for a seminar in the city where you live. Or we might ask you to spread the word when do need to solicit donations in order to sustain the project and pay the rent.

But in the meantime, the first thing to be done, as Doug Neff reminds us, is to keep the group together—to make sure we organize at least one meeting a year, in New York or Washington, that brings many of us together again. Doug and Garrett have some qualms about me flying twice a week this fall to give the course on ‘Obligations’ just one more time at Amherst. There’s a certain appeal, to me, in giving that course on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my first course at Amherst. That is what we were celebrating in New York, and that range in years was marked by the presence of Jay Beech ’67 and **Alex Berluti** ’17.

In closing, though, I must record again my deepest appreciation to the Host committee for that lovely evening in New York. My dearest thanks again to Jed Doty, who led the effort from beginning to end, joined by **Kevin Conway, Peter Ezersky, Josh Epstein, Mike Petrino, Phil de Picciotto, Phil Jackson, Glen Lewy and Barry Volpert**. They managed to shape, with you, an evening I’ll never forget.

In that letter to me the next morning, Seth Dubin also remarked on Phil Jackson’s kindness in remembering my beloved Judy as he did the grace for us: “I appreciated Phil Jackson’s words about Judy,” he wrote. “For many of us, they were essential to the evening. Of course she would have kvelled. She also would likely have discouraged you from believing that each and every complimentary thing that was said about you was true.”

I told Seth that she wouldn’t have had to do that—that I was already discounting the praise that was well out of scale. Judy and I would have traded knowing glances. At critical times, when I would come up with a truly good idea, she would say, “Why didn’t you think of that before?!” And I would use an old line from people who put in hours at a typewriter, staring at the wall, waiting for the next line: “Where were you when the page was blank?” But Seth was right. Judy would have savored he night, even as she thought the praise would not be good for my character. In that, as in everything else, she would have been right. (I think of LBJ’s line of praise overdone: “My Daddy would have loved it; my Momma would have believed it.”) Still, Judy would never have said to Jed and Doug about that evening in New York, “Why didn’t you think of that before?!” The timing and the people and the words were just right. And I’m deeply grateful to you all for that gift.

*Hadley*