

# 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. □

# A Carson Sampler

*Editor's Note: Long-time contributing editor Clarence Carson died in April. In memory of this friend of FEE, we reproduce below excerpts from three of his many articles for The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty.*

## **"The Property Basis of Rights," September 1980**

**T**here has been an attempt to separate property rights from other rights in this century. It has usually been done by labeling some rights as "human rights" and referring to others as "rights" of property. This distinction has been accompanied by the claim that "human rights" are superior to "property rights."

. . . The distinction has not gone unchallenged. In the 1960s there was even a sort of slogan coined which called it into question. It went something like this: "Property rights are human rights." The idea had some appeal. After all, rights are not something ordinarily thought of as belonging to plants or the lower animals. If there is a right to property, it must be first and foremost a human right. That was not, of course, quite the distinction the critics of property rights were attempting to make. They referred to property rights as if they were rights belonging to property. Those who challenged this concept maintained, to the contrary, that property rights were really rights of human beings to property. Thus, "Property rights are human rights."

At the time, I agreed with this line of reasoning—I still do—and thought it stated the case adequately. However, further study and reflection have led me to a somewhat different conclusion. Property rights are not just another human right; such a statement understates the case. They are much more fundamental than that. Property rights are basic to all rights.

This relationship first occurred to me while studying the loss of rights in totalitarian countries. My general conclusion was that the loss of property rights either preceded or accompanied the loss of other rights. This was so in Hitler's Germany. It was so in Lenin's and Stalin's Russia. It has also been the case in other totalitarian countries. It is possible that some property rights could be retained while other rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion, freedom of association and so on, would be severely curtailed or taken away. But it is now inconceivable to me that other rights could be maintained when property rights were gone.

This suggests to me that there is a causal connection between property and other rights. The historical connection can be seen not only in countries where rights have been lost but also in countries where they were being established. For example, in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, real property was being made private and personal. At the same time, there was a movement for substantial free-