

Remembering Ash Carter

Former United States Secretary of Defense Ash Carter (Connecticut & St John's 1976) passed away on October 24th at 68 years of age, after an unexpected heart attack. He leaves behind his wife Stephanie, his children Ava and Will, and many family, friends, colleagues, students, teammates, and admirers. His passing leaves a huge gap in his combined fields of science and policy, in the critical arenas of foreign affairs and U.S. national security, and in the lives of so many he led, taught, mentored, and inspired.

From an early age, Ash Carter was a unique exemplar of the combination of intellect, energy, curiosity, and dedication to “the world’s fight” that characterizes the best of our Rhodes community. He also demonstrated early on the uncanny ability to bring together the insights of diverse domains that later characterized his impact on US policy and the world. As an undergraduate at Yale, he excelled in both experimental Physics and Medieval History – including publishing his thesis and performing sophisticated research beyond Yale on quarks – and developing his place at the intersection of the frontiers of science and the wisdom and folly of human experience. At Oxford, he completed a D.Phil in Theoretical Physics while a member of St. John’s, deepening his expertise as well as his commitment to public service. His Rhodes classmates from that time also recall him demonstrating this dual focus through countless pages of theoretical physics calculations on an ever-present legal pad, as well as happy hours with his classmates during Eights Week. After Oxford, he became a post-doctoral fellow at Rockefeller University and then a Research Fellow at MIT. While at MIT, he drew first the ire and then the respect of President Ronald Reagan when he published a paper claiming the US administration’s “Star Wars” proposal for a space-based shield against nuclear attack – in his own words from many years later – “simply wouldn’t work.”

That set of interactions helped lead to a career in public service that reflected his special combination of talents. It began with a brief tour of duty at the White House, and then led him to Harvard, where he led the Kennedy School of Government’s International and Global Affairs faculty while serving as Ford Foundation Professor of Science and International Affairs. He did this while simultaneously leading the collaboration between Harvard and Stanford on “preventive defense” and, from 1990 to 1993, chairing the editorial board of the journal *International Security*. He also advised Senator Dick Lugar (a fellow Rhodes Scholar) on what became the Nunn-Lugar Act, a critical piece of arms control legislation. In 1993, he joined the Department of Defense as an Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy under President Bill Clinton. Following his time at the Defense Department, Carter returned to academia, but maintained his deep impact on foreign affairs and national security, serving on a dizzying number of policy-related advisory boards, panels, and commissions for the US government, while continuing to build our understanding of science, technology, and their accelerating importance to international affairs. Rejoining the government as Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics in 2009, he was later elevated to the position of Deputy Secretary of Defense, number two in the Department, until 2013. He returned briefly to academia until being called back by President Obama in 2015 to serve as the 25th Secretary of Defense.

Along the way, Ash Carter brought his special mixture of art and science, together with an unyielding courage to seek truth and drive necessary change, to a broad range of the nation's problems. He led critical arms control negotiations, helped streamline acquisitions to make possible the fastest procurement since the Second World War of a new major piece of equipment, the "MRAP" vehicle - which saved countless lives from improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan and Iraq, and helped ensure the latest technology was available to modernize military medicine - saving countless more during the critical first hour for emergency treatment following a combat injury. While Secretary, Ash Carter laid his steady hand to managing the immense challenges of the multiple wars he inherited in the Middle East and Central Asia, while working tirelessly to move the U.S. Department of Defense - sometimes against its will - into a future demanded by the rise of China, the increasing bellicosity of Putin's Russia, a rapidly evolving society both at home and abroad, and the constant transformation of the technology that he understood so well. He sponsored, founded, and personally shepherded a myriad of innovations aimed at bringing the Department into the 21st Century, including standing up the Strategic Capabilities Office, the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, and others. Just one important example of this prescient focus was the Defense Innovation Unit, which built much-needed bridges between the Pentagon and Silicon Valley's burgeoning tech sector.

He also acted with both principle and courage in furthering equality and equity in the military, ensuring that opportunities to serve were open to all Americans, and that America's national defense would have access to America's diverse pool of talent, regardless of background. He opened all military occupations and positions to women without exception, despite significant resistance from some parts of the Pentagon establishment. He ended the ban on transgender officers in the military. And he worked tirelessly and with force toward the goal of eliminating racial bias in selection, training, and promotion for both uniformed troops and civilian employees.

Following service as Secretary of Defense, Carter returned in 2017 to Boston, taking up a typically interdisciplinary joint appointment at Harvard and MIT, including leadership of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. From there, he continued his work on building the collaboration between academia, private industry, and government in the furtherance of the public good, and on helping to shape the next generation of leaders in science, technology, international affairs, and public service.

For this incredible record of achievement, Ash Carter was the recipient during his life of a huge number of honors and awards, including five separate awards of the Defense Department's highest civilian honor, the Distinguished Public Service Medal. He is the author of 11 books and more than 100 articles on physics, technology, national security, and leadership.

But perhaps his most powerful legacy is in the people he led, inspired, and mentored. In the midst of this remarkable career, and his immense responsibilities and frenetic pace of contribution to society that characterized it, Ash Carter somehow found the time to make a fundamental, lasting difference in the individual lives of so many around him. He made himself

available for counsel, gave insightful advice - even when it was hard to hear, and helped create opportunities for growth and impact for a vast constellation of “mentees” ranging from senior officials to undergraduates. Speaking personally, Ash Carter changed my life, and inspired me to be a better leader, officer, public servant, citizen, mentor, friend, and person.

At every step of his storied life, Ash Carter demonstrated a unique ability to bridge disciplines and worlds in a way that enriched the people around him and, when combined with his steadfast determination to public service and his relentless focus on lasting results, truly made the world a better place. He will be sorely missed, but his example and impact will be felt for many years to come.