
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

March 2020

Jeff Cox and the future of the Left

Writing an obituary is akin to filling a Mason jar with the sand and seashells of a cherished beach. It's an act of remembrance. Therefore, writing an obituary about someone you never met is a fearful business.

In February, I set out to write about Jeff Cox's death for the Press-Citizen. I picked up the phone to call friends, coworkers, and family. The process is a dismal triage. I never can talk to everyone who mattered to him or whom he mattered to. Some are too busy to speak. Others I won't know to call. Still, some things become clear.

Cox was a thinker. I'd ask people for stories but they returned me to ideas he'd left them; thoughts they still kicked around. To aid my research, Dave Leshtz let me into the Prairie Progressive's archives to get to know his co-editor. Searching through a pile, I found myself cackling at one of his columns from 1994:

"I suppose those of us who hoped the election of (Bill Clinton) a Democratic president

would usher in national health insurance will have to settle for an invasion of Haiti."

Reading Cox quickly and broadly, a thesis emerges. For Cox, the tragedy of the Left is not that its ideals aren't inspiring or that the public lack the imagination for them. It's that the Left never found the right vehicle for them.

**Jeff Cox
1947-2020**

"Our problem in America is not that the American people are too right wing," Cox wrote. "It's that progressive and humane Americans receive so little of the self-confident and inspiring political leadership that has driven American liberalism in the past."

It's why when he found champions, he stuck by them. Cox spent barrels of ink and countless campaign hours for names like Karen Kubby and

Bernie Sanders. They were leaders he believed could push the needle for "progressive and humane Americans."

After one day of reading Cox's fiery column-work, I know he would argue against each grain of sand and seashell set aside to remember him. But through his work, I learned more about Iowa City than any of my last three years writing about this place. And I have a feeling his thesis is finding traction.

In the caucus crowds this year, "healthcare is a human right" was as much a rally chant as a policy position. It seems to me the forces driving liberalism's future are finding the inspired voice Cox wanted.

*—Zachary Oren Smith writes
for the Iowa City Press-Citizen*

Relentless

Jeff Cox was my friend, my political ally, and we became mentors to each other.

Jeff was a person who recruited people to run for office at all levels. He was relentless at this task. When Dave Loeb sack announced he would not seek re-election, he heavily recruited me to run. He came in every other day until I told him to stop. He focused much of his recruitment efforts looking for women and minorities to represent us. At his memorial service, I learned he has been a champion of women in his academic life as well.

Jeff was my Treasurer for 15 years. This also meant he was part of our core campaign team. Guiding our strategy, policy, fundraising, and marketing aspects of 5 campaigns for city council. When we started in 1985, no one knew me. I knew a bit about local government and wanted to learn more. I did dumb things. I said dumb things. Nowadays, if this happened, everyone would turn and run for the hills. Not Jeff. He sat me down and with respect, talked to me about these incidents. This compassionate and savvy treatment taught me deep lessons about how to be the best political person I can be. Work hard, speak truth to power, be clear about being a democratic socialist feminist, be loyal, and provide direct coaching when needed. These lessons have served me well. I pay these lessons forward frequently—in my personal, professional, and political lives.

Jeff would be my escort to Democratic Party functions. As I was a third party, card carrying Socialist, I wasn't part of the Dems. He would introduce me and tell people they needed to support my campaign. He was a true campaign ambassador.

I used to muse that when Jeff was the Chair of the Johnson County Democratic Party, the biggest difference between their platform and that of the Iowa Socialist Party was that the ISP platform stated that police officers should not carry guns.

Jeff was a champion of progressive taxation and was part of defeating at least two campaigns for increasing the local option sales tax. He advocated for decriminalizing drugs, so that students would not be burdened with a record as they went through life. He successfully crusaded against a new jail twice. Each time he was part of a community that begged for first tackling disproportionate minority contact and better services for people with mental health issues before making more jail space for them.

He was not the most organized man, especially with his paperwork. As Treasurer, he would miss a few filing deadlines and the campaign paid some fines. Not bad for 15 years of tracking our contributions, which at the time were record-breaking.

Jeff and Lois welcomed me into their home. They claimed daughter Flossie became a vegetarian at age 8 so she could be my roommate. He had this characteristic chortle, that enhanced the southern spice in his speech. It somehow softened the hard line he was taking on any issue.

Jeff touched a lot of lives. He provided the cushions of the bowling alley of life that helped people guide themselves down the lane. Sometimes for a gutter ball, sometimes for a strike.

—Karen Kubby ran for Iowa City City Council twice before winning in 1989, and won two re-election campaigns with the assistance and comradery of Jeff Cox

Amazing grace

I have so many memories of Jeff. I loved the stories he made up for his children. One concerned a character that lived in College Hill Park across the street from their house. This was a very bad fellow, known as Bad Wolf—probably Jeff's scheme to keep the little children from running across the busy street. I liked to discuss gardening plans with Jeff. One memorable year he decided to dig a hole in his backyard and make Kimchi. He invited me to sample the finished product, but I declined.

Jeff was the consummate Southern Gentleman. I don't remember him ever making an unconsidered comment or purposely being rude, even at rowdy dinner parties. I like to read history and I enjoyed hearing Jeff talk about his research, but I noticed he avoided having a deep discussion with me on that topic, probably not wanting to flaunt his deeper knowledge. He was careful to defer to me when I had the better understanding of a topic.

I loved hearing him sing "Amazing Grace" at birthday parties and other celebrations.

I tend to be a little to the left of Jeff, politically, but we shared a hope that Bernie Sanders might become the candidate in 2016. I'm glad Jeff got to see that some of Bernie's "radical" ideas have now become mainstream. One way or another, I think we are headed for health care as an entitlement, like food, shelter, and free public education. It's been a long time coming.

—Carol Thompson is a former Johnson County Supervisor

Comrade

Jeff Cox was a brilliant, gregarious man who devoted his life to trying to make the world a better place.

I first got to know Jeff in the early 1980's when we were among a small group who formed a chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. We were Democrats who, in the Reagan era, wanted to push the Democratic Party to the left. Our core values were union solidarity and economic and racial justice. Our members included Jeff, myself, Jae Retz, Roberta Till-Retz, Shel Stromquist, Peter Fisher, Kim Jones, and a few others.

One of the highlights of our chapter's short history was sponsoring DSA co-founder Michael Harrington's visit to Iowa City in May of 1989. Harrington had been an important voice on the left since the publication of his 1962 book *The Other America*, an account of poverty in the United States. The book's findings helped push Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," which included the establishment of Medicare and the expansion of food stamps. Harrington gave a great speech, and we then had an opportunity to socialize with him at Jae and Roberta's house.

Beginning in the late 1980's, Jeff was a star on my bi-weekly Public Access Television show *The Sanders Group*. This was a take-off on Public Television's *The McLaughlin Group*, which featured three political pundits making rapid-fire comments around a table on the issues of the day. On my show the three pundits were Jeff from the left, Marlene Perrin (then the editorial page editor of the *Press-Citizen*) from the center, and a revolving set of commentators from the right. The most spectacular right-wing guest was Robert Novak,

from the actual McLaughlin Group, who was in Iowa City giving a speech. Jeff more than held his own going up against Novak! After the demise of the Sanders Group, Jeff and I would bump into each other regularly for the next 25 years, and he would always effusively greet me: "Comrade!" We would talk about politics (local, national, and international), labor unions, history, Hawkeye basketball, and a million other topics. A few weeks ago at Prairie Lights, he exclaimed how great it was that a new edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had been published (I had to confess that, unlike him, I had only read bits and pieces of it). Later that same week he was reading the *New York Times* and drinking coffee at New Pioneer Co-op. We talked for a long while about the Democratic Party's presidential nominating process, focusing, of course, on Bernie. It was a horrible shock to get an email at on Sunday, February 9, that Jeff had died.

The *Gazette* and the *Press-Citizen* had excellent articles about Jeff, each from a different perspective. I urge people to read them both at the library or on-line. Jeff and I were close in age, both 1947 babies. He was from Texas and I was from Michigan, and we both somehow wound up in Iowa City in the late 1970s. I, like so many others, will miss him dearly.

—*Gary Sanders is a former columnist for the Iowa City Press-Citizen*

Starlings

Jeff Cox was one of my closest friends for almost 50 years. We met in graduate school, in the early 1970s, and I lived with him and Lois in London in the middle of that decade, when he and I were researching our doctoral dissertations. When Jeff and Lois moved to Iowa, I visited them there almost every year.

Jeff Cox was the best and wisest person I have ever known. When I had a moral problem, he was the person I wanted to discuss it with. In presidential election years, I looked to him for political advice. His literary, intellectual, and artistic interests influenced me deeply. He was also a wonderful raconteur. I'll mention just two of his stories. One day, he explained to me how you can distinguish a genuine survival of a traditional ritual from an attempt by middle-class enthusiasts to revive one: people participating in real traditions will be extremely bored, whereas the enthusiasts will be full of excitement. He also explained why there are starlings in New York City: in the 1850s, "some fool" brought over all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare that were not native to North America.

I feel angry at God for taking this wonderful man away from us. But I also feel grateful to God for making him our friend in the first place. Rest in peace, Jeffrey Lee Cox.

—*Roger Draper lives in New York City*

What would Jeff say?

With Jeff Cox's passing just two weeks ago, we not only lost a dear friend and political comrade who for more than 40 years helped breathe vitality (and good humor) into the left in Johnson County and the state of Iowa, we lost an astute historian and critical observer of our politics.

Jeff played a pivotal role in launching Bernie Sanders' first campaign in Iowa (and nationally). He helped persuade the Senator that a run was both feasible and desirable. To have a self-declared "democratic socialist" run for president was in many ways fulfillment of Jeff's own socialist aspirations to which he had devoted years of work in the local trenches of Iowa City as a recruiter of progressive candidates, as a highly visible supporter of Karen Kubby (Iowa City's socialist city councilwoman), and as a general advocate for left-wing causes. He took pride in the success of Sanders' second run for the presidency and the solid foundation of support he had helped build in Iowa. All this suggests that Jeff saw the unfolding of a "social democratic moment" in which the prospect of success for a socialist running for the highest office seemed a real possibility.

But Jeff, historian and social critic, was aware we face a unique and confounding moment in this fourth year of the Trump presidency. So many signs point not to an ascent of what can best be called "proto-fascism." Jeff was too good a historian to traffic in superficial historical analogies. This is not 1933-34 in Germany or Austria. The autocratic tendencies we face are in many ways shaped by the peculiarities of our own history and the defects of a constitutional democracy designed to contain popular movements (through checks and balances, an overbearing Senate, and the electoral college) but

which turn out to provide only limited capacities to curtail the centralization of power by a president determined to expand his control.

The reality of this political moment is that we are living under a corrupt presidency enabled by a morally bankrupt Republican Party. As the depths of that corruption have unfolded, we have also come to realize that we are not simply contending with ignorance and fear-mongering, with the annihilation of truth telling, and the prostitution of key institutions—the Congress, the federal judiciary, the Constitution itself—that we thought served as guard rails against undemocratic practices. What has come into focus with Trump's mass rallies, his uncritical following, his mobilization of race hatred against immigrants and people of color, and the resurgence of armed militias and internet-facilitated mobilization of hate, are the outlines of a deeper threat to democratic institutions than we ever imagined—an American version of proto-fascism as potentially dangerous as those of the past.

So, are we in the throes of a proto-fascist moment? Here is where we most badly need Jeff's perspective. What is the way forward? Do we seize the social democratic momentum that Sanders has been able to mobilize, especially among younger people, and push for victory? What risks does that carry? Or, is this a moment in which we need to build the broadest possible coalition to defend our core democratic institutions? Do we need a new anti-fascist popular front? Do we merge our socialist aspirations into a broadly progressive, unifying program, or do we hold firm to those aspirations and hope to build a mass movement capable of winning power at the national level (the presidency

and Democratic control of the Senate and House?) Are we running the risk of re-fighting the 2016 battles within the Democratic Party in the very different milieu of 2020?

What do you think, Jeff?

—*Shel Stromquist co-authored with Jeff Cox Contesting the Master Narrative: Essays in Social History*

Every article had a point

For its first 25 years or so, I had the pleasure of formatting each issue of *The Prairie Progressive*. Laying out Jeff Cox's article was simple. He filled Page Two in almost every issue. Maybe there was room for a pull quote, usually not. Every Cox article had a point, and every sentence was in service to that point. Democratic socialism was a common theme.

The Iowa City City Council and the Johnson County Board of Supervisors are much, much improved thanks to the efforts of Jeff Cox. It is a monumental achievement.

Jeff is a shining example of what a university faculty member who fully engages in the political fights of his or her local community can do. He had the facts and the analysis...and he helped candidate after candidate get the money and votes to win.

In 2020, we must follow Jeff Cox's advice. Grassroots, issue-based, working class campaigns are how we will beat back the wolves at our doors.

—*Rusty Martin lives in Des Moines*

Onward!

I will miss Jeff: a gentleman, a scholar, a kind person, a good friend, and a truly Progressive politician. Despite being a professor of history, he was basically an optimist.

Jeff was a stalwart ally in the local political struggles for openness in Iowa City government and achieving the creation of some jail alternatives rather than building a much larger county jail. He was someone who could be counted upon to do leafletting and stickering at the Farmer's Market and in the downtown area, contribute to meeting the cost of printing publicity, sticking a sign prominently in his front yard on Dodge Street, and writing letters to the newspapers. He was an advocate for keeping students out of the legal system for such minor offenses as simple possession of marijuana, open container, and possession of alcohol under legal age in bars. Rather than taking time for lengthy explanations, he quickly agreed to use a much condensed version of the issue to gather petition signatures in the ultimately successful effort to reform the City Charter, buttonholing people at the market and asking conversationally, "would you like to help make it easier to petition the City Council?" and marveled at the ease with which nearly everyone quickly agreed and signed. He was

prominent among the staunch group that managed to defeat the jail bond referenda. Jeff was a faithful supporter of New Pioneer Coop, the Iowa City Public Library, and the local labor movement. Prior to the Iowa caucus he advocated tirelessly for Bernie Sanders, as he also did in the primary campaign of 2016.

The last conversation I had with Jeff was at a chance meeting we had at the UI Information Technology Center when we both were having computer problems; he was asking me to agree to come to a meeting to look for a liberal candidate to take Dave Loeb'sack's Congressional seat; I agreed to discuss this further the next day at an ACLU chapter board meeting – but by the time of the meeting he suddenly was gone forever, and no longer able to be concerned about either local issues or the deepening crisis that is turning our federal government into an autocracy.

Jeff was unwavering in his principles and had an unflinching attitude in the face of depressing circumstances and ideological adversity that was reflected in his invariable conclusion of "Onward!" It's up to the rest of us now. —*Caroline Dieterle has been a longtime board member of New Pioneer Co-op*

Fascinated and charmed

I met Jeff Cox in fall of 2015. I'd come to Iowa for The Nation to see if Bernie Sanders could win back the working class—the voters who'd made Tom Harkin a lion of the Senate and then just seemed to disappear. I can't recall now how I got to Jeff, but I remember him insisting on paying for our lunch—even though I was the one traveling on expenses. When he found out I'd grown up in Memphis, he also insisted on a post-prandial bourbon. I took out my notebook and got a short course in the history of the Left in Iowa. Then the conversation turned to the present. "I've seen a lot of Bernie signs around Iowa City," I said, tossing him a slow one right over the plate. "Not so many for Hillary." But instead of taking advantage of my ignorance, Jeff admitted, "I put a lot of those Bernie signs up myself. Keep 'em in the trunk." I'd have trusted anything he told me after that. So when the latest caucus results went, as they say in England, "tits up," I asked Jeff and his Prairie Progressive comrade Dave Leshtz (whom I'd met on the same trip) to explain it to our readers. Which they each did.

A few years later Jeff came to London, where I was then living, on one of his working trips, and my wife and I had him to dinner at our house. This time we got a short history of the Cox family, and the sociology of rural Texas, which fascinated me and completely charmed my wife. I didn't know Jeff very well. But I was honoured to call him my friend. — *D D Guttenplan is the Editor of The Nation*

Thank you!
to our loyal readers and
subscribers.

Creative dissertation

I have no memory of why I decided to audit a British History class of Jeff's, but I found myself in a lecture of his with 40 undergraduates in 1981. He and I were almost the same age, and we were both from Texas. I had no trouble understanding him. But I noticed that a lot of the undergraduates were missing something in his lectures...the humor. His lectures were fact-driven narratives, with throwaway political commentary using contemporary analogies. It was obvious that his students knew neither history nor current events. I found myself making eye contact with him a few times after he knew he had sailed a reference right over his students' heads. He would almost smile and then do what I can only call an "eyebrow smirk."

A few years later, I had to form a dissertation committee that had to include a faculty member from outside the English Department. I was one of the last grads in the Department who was allowed to do what was called a "Creative

Dissertation," a joint project that had to be approved by both the English Department and the Writers Workshop. Mine was a political novel, so I immediately asked Jeff to be my outside faculty rep.

Back in those days, there was not much love lost between the English Department and the Writers Workshop. The "Creative Dissertation" for a PhD in English was a holdover option which the WW held in low regard. After all, if you thought you were creative, you ought to be in the WW, not academics.

I had taken courses in the WW, some of those notorious seminars which would sometimes degenerate into petty nit-picking and bloodletting. The WW rep had already returned his copy of my manuscript to me, every page margin crowded with question marks and exclamation points, along with such insights as "sophomoric" or "painful prose."

I knew that the formal defense was not going to be pleasant.

Unpleasant was an understatement. The WW rep made it clear that my writing did not meet WW standards. My work was a disappointment. I was not feeling optimistic about my future career---in any field. But Jeff interrupted, clearing his throat by starting in his nasal passages, and in that Texas voice of his, said, as close as I can recall, "I dunno. This reminded me of Gore Vidal's writing, and I really like his historical novels. I really liked this by Larry too."

The WW rep paused, and I expected some fireworks, but all he said was, "Well, I suppose it is publishable. It might sell a lot, but it is still not great writing." And then he stopped talking.

I made eye contact with Jeff, and I swear that I saw his eyebrows do that smirky thing. I coulda kissed him.

—Larry Baker is a former Iowa City City Council member

Ah love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, or light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

—*from Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold, read by Lois Cox at Jeff's funeral*

Renaissance man

Jeff Cox cooked.
He gardened.

He read every word of the New York Times and all the local papers, and listened to BBC World News, every day.

He took Tai Chi lessons.

When working on a book, he wrote 1,000 words a day.

He could tell you the difference between a primitive Baptist and a hard-shell Baptist.

He played the piano and sang beautifully.

He knew the score of every Rice football game.

He had an endless curiosity about people and the worlds they live in — their politics, their religion, their upbringing. That genuine interest in everything under the sun rubbed off on all of us. Any conversation I had with Jeff inspired me to think a little more deeply, a little less superficially.


What inspired me the most about Jeff, and I think many of us, was that he spoke truth to power. To me that phrase means that he knew his mind and he was unafraid to speak it. He would speak truth to state legislators, the school district, Democrats and Republicans alike, the city council, and even to the most powerful of all - the University of Iowa Athletics Department! His truth-telling was always underpinned by compassion, especially for children. Nothing upset him more than children in cages at

the border, children killed by drones, children dying of malnutrition.

For all of Jeff's bravery, he occasionally pulled his punches. More than once he expressed regret for saying or writing something that he knew would upset a close friend or associate. Jeff embodied a classic paradox: nothing was more important to him than expressing his honest and deeply-felt convictions...but he didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

That was the Jeff I knew. My thanks to the many Prairie Progressive readers - some who knew Jeff personally, and some who knew him only through his writings - who have sent their condolences and kind wishes following his sudden death.

—Dave Leshtz has co-edited *The Prairie Progressive* with Jeff Cox since 1986



CALENDAR

March 7
CommUnity Crisis Services
Pancake Breakfast
2301 E. Court St., Iowa City
7a.m.-1p.m.

March 7, 1965
Bloody Sunday on Edmund
Pettis Bridge

March 21
Democratic County Conventions
National Rosie the Riveter Day

March 23, 2010
Affordable Care Act signed
into law

March 31
Cesar Chavez Day



I want death to find me planting my cabbages.

—Michel de Montaigne

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**Special Issue:
Tribute to Jeff Cox**

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