

Claudius O. Johnson (1894-1976): Ode to a Pioneer in Political Science
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Channeling CO

A member of the Quarter of the Century Club at WSU, I have been channeling CO Johnson for some time now. On my third stint as Claudius O. and Mary W. Johnson Distinguished Professor in Political Science at Washington State University since 2008, I have a very special connection to CO. Since 1994, I have been a member of the School of Political, Philosophy and Public Affairs, that he founded in 1928 as the Department of History of Political Science; from 2016 to 2020 was the Faculty Advisor to the Alpha Theta Chapter of the National Pi Sigma Alpha Political Science Society, which he established in 1939 and for which he served as faculty advisor for 10 years; and for the past four years, was Chair of the committee that awards CO Johnson Student Scholarships. Called by those who knew him well Claude, but by most, Dr. Johnson; I like to just go with CO.

So when Sean Twombly, Executive Director of Pi Sigma Alpha, asked me to write a short biographical essay on CO Johnson as part of the association's centennial celebrations given CO's service in establishing the Pullman Chapter of PSA, as a member of the Executive Council of the national associate and as President, I was delighted. I put my research skills to work in what has turned out to be quite a long essay. Indeed, not only did I want to pay tribute to CO's legacy for the PSA centennial, but also I wanted to honor he and his wife, through their endowment of my professorship at WSU, which has allowed me to better pursue my work as a comparative feminist policy researcher and co convener, with Isabelle Engeli (University of Exeter), of the Gender Equality Policy in Practice Network.

Through my research, I was able to construct a picture of a man who was driven and committed to political science in an strikingly all-encompassing way – through teaching, research, political service, and administrative leadership at the level of his University, his state, his region, his country and on a global level as well. I relished greatly doing the detective work to paint this picture; combing through the 10 boxes of his archived papers in our Manuscripts, Archives, & Special Collections, having the opportunity to talk with several of the remaining few who knew Claude, not many given he passed away 44 years ago when I was teenager, pouring through his scholarship – 22 articles and five books all solo authored—and other document shared with me by the Sean at Pi Sigma Alpha. My major take-home: that CO Johnson left an indelible imprint on the discipline through working with and teaching thousands of people during the span of his adult lifetime is an understatement.

My mission to pay tribute to my predecessor became even more pressing to me as my research unfolded given that CO is an unsung hero for those of us who pursue a policy relevant, problem driven political science that serves scholars, students, activists, practitioners and citizens alike. In every aspect of his being and work, CO was not only a pioneer of the discipline of political science itself but also of a problem driven approach to political science that was not put on the US political science roadmap by the Perestroika movement in the early 2000s, a quarter of a century after his death. A collective of political scientists demanded that American political science eschew faddy pseudo-scientific

methodological hegemonies inspired by behavioralism to be more accurate and methodologically pragmatic to develop approaches that seek to solve real-world problems and connect to policy and politics through a combination of scholarship, teaching and practice. This legacy lives on in our School of PPPA today with our faculty and graduate program's focus on problem-driven, policy relevant and multi methods research and resonates deeply in my own work on feminist policy implementation and state feminism -- back to channeling. Given all of this, what follows is my ode to CO--his leadership, life, and legacy.



Early Days 1894-1928: A Well-Educated Southern Boy with Cosmopolitan Experience Heads Out West to Help Build a Land Grant Legacy

CO was brought to WSU in 1929 just prior to the depression to set-up the new Department of Political Science and History at Washington State College, created in the second wave of land grant schools in 1890. He was born in Greenville, Virginia, on January 6th in 1894 and attended the University of Richmond from 1913 to 1917. He never lost his southern twang and approach—"he retained the homespun directness and speech traits of the region of his origins (*WSU Press Release*, 2-27-1976)". There was nothing homespun, however, about his education. After managing to avoid frontline duty in WW I as a Superintendent of Schools at the Camp D'etat in Le Mans, France, he gave being a high school principal a try and went back to his native Virginia for a year. After that, he left the world of primary education behind without looking back and started his trek West.

He received an MA at the University of Chicago in 1920 and then a PhD in 1927. His dissertation on Carter Henry Harrison was published by the University of Chicago Press a year after he defended it. The research he did for his thesis on this major political figure -- a member of Congress and Mayor of Chicago who was assassinated while in office -- ignited a passion for documenting and discussing political leaders in action in American Politics. In the last year of his PhD work, he received funding from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to study international organizations in Holland, France and Switzerland in the summer of 1926. During that year, he was also a delegate to a peace conference in Geneva. It was this time on, that an international and comparative perspective became a theme that continued throughout his career.

Another pattern that was established for CO during this early period was a focus on the intersection of local and international issues. While his dissertation zeroed in on a regional figure from Chicago, he also sought academic training abroad through a prestigious foundation on international issues. In some ways, CO's polyvalency was not that extraordinary since training in political science in general at that time was far less specialized. While doing his PhD at Chicago he continued his move toward the West and sowed the seeds for his pioneering role in Political Science. He worked first as an instructor starting in 1919 and then as professor until 1926 at the University of North Dakota. Circling back to his native region, he was a professor at University of Tennessee for a time just prior to moving out to Washington State. Thus, when he was recruited to be the first chair of the Department of Political Science and History at WSC he was a 32-year-old single man with excellent credentials from the USA and Europe, two solid university teaching jobs under his belt as well

as his dissertation published with a top press. That said, at this point in time, publications were not the currency for professional advancement that they are today. Most of all, he was willing and able to move to a highly rural area in the Wild West to help build the dream of a land grant institution; simply put, CO was an academic pioneer.

It is worth noting in the context of channeling CO, I share with him deep connections to Chicago, the East Coast, Europe and the Palouse. I was born and raised in the Chicago area, worked on a doctorate in French Studies and Politics at New York University and Sciences Po Paris. My parents actually lived near the University of Chicago for a time and I spend a significant part of my professional life in Europe with no intention of leaving the depths of Northern Idaho where I live with my husband.



A Career on Fire, 1928-1960: Making his Mark in Administration, Teaching, Scholarship and Service

Hired in the Fall of 1928 at a starting salary of \$3,600 for a 9-month contract, according to his personnel file at WSU, CO took a significant leadership role at Washington State College in the nascent department he had been hired to establish and grow and at the emerging state university. Like many academics from the East, he came West to help grow the new land grant universities, so much at the heart of the development of democracy in the USA. In 1959 the college was renamed Washington State University. Rumors have it that CO stridently argued at the time that the Pullman campus should be relocated in the larger city of Spokane, a quite unpopular proposal that received little support. In his first year in Pullman, he met his wife Mary Wilson Maxwell who was a physical education instructor at the College. Mary and CO were married the following year, and she was forced to resign from her job due to nepotism rules at the College. She continued to work with the physical education program over the years “as an advisor (WSU Press Release, 2-27-1976),” most likely without pay (so much for women’s rights).

CO quickly became a regionally and even nationally known public figure in the 1930s. In 1932, he had a public feud with cowboy philosopher Will Rogers which is still recounted by many at WSU today. Launched by a speech that CO gave to the Pullman PTA in which he warned his audience about Roger’s limited knowledge of foreign affairs, Rogers was notified of this slight and challenged CO to a debate at WSU which he called “Ignorance versus Knowledge and I’m going to be Ignorance” (Telegrams between Rogers and Johnson). The debate never took place due to the illness of Roger’s wife that year, and Roger’s untimely death in a plane crash in 1935. Nonetheless, CO and Rogers sparred through the print media in writing for a year or so.

By 1933, CO published his first textbook on American Politics, *Government in the US*. This was well-before the large industrial teaching of political science classes had begun so his book was a welcome resource for the emerging curriculum in the discipline. The Governor of Washington State appointed him to the state Constitutional Revision Committee which met from 1935 to 1936. CO also served on the National War Labor Board in the mid-1930s. In the summer of 1938 CO returned to the East Coast to be a visiting Professor at Rutgers University. CO completed his first decade at WSC by growing the department despite the turbulent times and established the Alpha Theta Chapter of the Pi Sigma Alpha, the Political Science Honor Fraternity, in the Spring of 1939 “expecting the chapter to be the means of expanding and strengthening work in political science (PSA Newsletter 4-3-1940).” This quote captures the strong emphasis CO placed on

rigorous and challenging undergraduate education in political science; a reputation he established in his own teaching and through the faculty he recruited as chair of the department until 1951.

In the 1940s after WW II, in the context of the growth of the department and influx of many new students to the College, CO took up leadership roles in the Discipline of Political Science as well; first as a member of the PSA Executive Council from 1948 to 1950 and then being elected President from 1950 to 1952. Under his leadership new PSA chapters were added and the first essay prize to promote political science research and publications was created (*PSA Newsletter* 1-11-1952).

In 1950, he was elected President of the Pacific Northwest Political Science Association; yet another connection to Political Science at WSU. Nick Lovrich, a longtime member of the Department and Regents Professor Emeritus, was also President of the Association. Richard Elgar, also faculty in PPPA, is now serving as its Executive Director. Nick has also been a major proponent of a problem-driven approach in political science through his voluminous scholarship and leadership of the highly reputed Division of Government Studies and Services, which he lead from 1977 until 2010 and helped to nurture close connections to the Department that CO had founded a quarter of a century earlier. CO moved on to become a Vice President of the American Political Science Association for a year in 1958. He continued to do visiting professor stints during the 40s and 50s at the University of North Carolina, the University of Minnesota, the University Illinois and the University of California, Berkeley. In 1953 he was awarded a Fulbright to be a lecturer in Australia for the academic year.

CO pursued these institution and program building efforts while conducting research and carrying out an active publication agenda; something that was quite unique for academics prior to WW II. Following up his dissertation book with the University of Chicago Press, he published a well-known biography on Governor Borah of Idaho in 1936 with Longman, Green and Company in NYC, and put out a second edition of his textbook on US politics in 1937. In the 1940s and 50s he published over 20 journal articles on regional politics and elections and key political leaders – George Turner, George Norris and Jerry Voorhis -- in a wide range of regional journals such as the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, the *Washington Law Review*, the *Pacific Historical Review*, the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, and the *Western Political Science Quarterly*. As these journals suggest, while CO identified strongly with being a political scientist he also was quite interdisciplinary, cross-cutting with legal studies and history. Here, the channeling continues, given my own interdisciplinary PhD training and that my research intersects a great deal with multi-disciplinary feminist studies; however, at the end of the day I pride myself in being a tried and true political scientist.

CO turned into a veritable textbook machine during this period, publishing two additional editions of his first textbook and two new textbooks on national and state and local US government – the first time anyone had focused on sub national politics in a major textbook. He updated all his textbooks into the 1960s; used copies of all three can be still be purchased on Amazon today. It is interesting to wonder whether the substantial estate that was left to WSU after his death was not in part a product of the royalties he received from these textbooks.

While to be sure this was a different era for publications in terms of impact, citations and use, it was clear that CO was highly productive and his work had a lasting impact on teaching through his textbooks and on thinking about political leaders and western politics. In 1967, he had 22 articles listed on his curriculum vitae, with his two scholarly books and three textbooks; an extremely high level of productivity for the 60s. A google scholar search of his publications today produces a total of 124 citations, which again is significant for the time period during which he published. His Borah biography, republished in 2010 in the Kissinger legacy print series, was cited 94 times, the lions share of the citations.

“The Mythic Figure of the 8th Floor of Johnson Tower”, 1960-1976



Although CO Johnson retired in 1960, he did not slow down. He continued to conduct research and to publish as well as to teach at WSU and other universities throughout the USA and abroad. He received a second Fulbright for work in Greece in 1961 and was given accolades from all who he had touched through his career. In 1958, his colleagues at WSU successfully nominated him to deliver one of WSU's first invited addresses, “Strain and Restraint: The Impact of Subversive Control on Personal Freedom.” This topic is of interest for its connections with Political Theory, for which he was not really known in his scholarly work; once again showing his generalist take on political science. A former student of his, who had become a regent, lobbied hard for the new building that would house his department to be named after him. Johnson Tower was completed in 1966. CO held regular office hours in the Department, which was and remains housed on the 8th floor of the building bearing his name, until his health failed him at 81. In 1967, he received the Governor's Certificate for Contributions to the Cultural Life of the State of Washington to accompany his many awards.

Throughout his long and varied career as a teacher he was a major inspiration to all his students. As his obituary stated in the *Idahonian*, he had been known as "one of the most stimulating people who ever entered a classroom at WSU (2-21-1976)." A book of letters from former students I found among his papers was given to him at his retirement in 1960. Together, the letters capture the breadth and depth of his teaching as well as his quirky and phlegmatic style in the classroom. The student letters recounted how he would often dazzle his students with captivating stories and even play different characters from history with his Southern accent. He was a memorable professor and a formative influence. Many of his former students became movers and shakers in their own right, like the famous journalist Edward R. Murrow. This excerpt from Murrow's letter for the retirement book, on stationery from the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, complete with strangely placed ellipses and an absence of capital letters, captured well this deep appreciation,

i doubt that anyone who ever listened to you has been able to let his curiosity curdle ... in Britain you would have been raised to the peerage long ago... and unless you had refused (which I think is likely) and would have deserved the title..." lord stretcher of the horizons" ... that is what you did for me... i am grateful... i cherish your long lean line of jaw, your slightly abrasive tone of voice, and that you allowed your students to travel with you ..

Another former student's short letter eloquently stated, this time with capital letters and regular punctuation,

Words seem futile at a time like this. Especially when one is trying to express his deep feelings and gratitude to his teacher, colleague and friend. I appreciate your inspiration as a teacher and scholar. Your willingness to assist me anytime I have asked for help is a characteristic unique in a man of your stature. I shall always be grateful.

The people I spoke with who knew CO all agreed that he was a major force of nature and was looked at in awe by his students. One colleague of his described him as a mythic figure in the Department and the College. He was also known to be somewhat arrogant and prickly, often alienating colleagues. He was not known as a great supporter of junior faculty once they were there either, even though he worked hard to recruit and hire the best and the brightest for the department. A wife of one of the faculty members CO had recruited in 1949 told me that CO was notorious for interrupting junior faculty in mid-sentence at meetings. If he felt that they were talking too much, he would start saying "quack, quack, quack, quack" like a duck until they stopped. She was firm in her conviction that Mary, CO Johnson's wife, was much kinder and gentler than he was and did not hesitate to plainly state to me that CO was not a particularly nice person.

And What About Gender?

I would be professionally remiss if I did not look at CO Johnson's legacy through a gendered lens. CO was clearly not a feminist, along with most political scientists of his own generation. It is safe to say that at the time of CO's death in 1976 political science was a white man's world. There were no women who wrote letters in his retirement book. He did not propose changing the name of the PSA fraternity to a society, and he did nothing to help his wife Mary to keep her job at WSU after they were married. At the same time, Mary Johnson took the lead to perpetuate his legacy through establishing the Johnson endowment at WSU after his death. It was Mary who oversaw and negotiated the memorial fund that was set up jointly in both of their names and eventually was matched by contributions from the state. She remained engaged in the management of the fund until her death in 1992.

Whether Mary had no desire to have children and/or they made a conscientious decision not to have children so as to be able to pursue a mobile and jet-setting life while in a quite rural and isolated area remain unanswered questions. Mary had dedicated her career to sports education and was an athlete, 'sporty' as her friend said. She had a very public role in Pullman holding parties and "soirées" for the other faculty wives. Here, I seem to be channeling Mary as well as CO, since I decided early on in life that I did not want to have children, I am an athlete and do enjoy hosting a fun party now and again. Therefore, perhaps it is no coincidence that a women political science who researches feminist policy is channeling CO and Mary to somehow make-up for the gaps and silences with regards to gender equality issues in COs life and legacy.

Singing the Praise of CO Johnson's Legacy

In closing, CO Johnson was an incredible man for his times who was a pioneering figure in the development of political science at WSU, in the region, and at the national level. He was devoted to the mission and core values of the Pi Sigma Alpha Political Science Society investing much effort throughout his career in this endeavor and greatly contributing to PSAs historical impact and continuing success and vitality. Indeed, in taking up the reigns of the Alpha Theta Chapter these past 6 years, I have acutely felt the lasting imprint of his leadership; yet another instance of channeling CO. He deeply embraced the pursuit of excellence in political science education as a means to amplify the social and political impact of the discipline on American society. CO's prowess in the classroom and ability to inspire future leaders was grounded in his scholarly mastery of the empirical study of political leaders and local politics and fueled by his work experience and travel throughout North America, Europe and Australia. There is no doubt that CO and Mary brought the external world to Pullman.

The excellence he demanded of his students came out of his own pursuit of quality in his education and career. His contributions to undergraduate political science education on American Politics through his textbooks, his ample scholarly production, his service to the discipline and his real-world experiences as a policy expert combine to make his life, legacy and leadership a crucial foundation in the development of problem-driven research that holds the promise of making political science more meaningful and relevant today. It is my hope that this essay will make more people aware of CO Johnson as an exemplar for political scientists in these challenging times.

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Sources

- Biographical Information from PSA
- WSU Archives, Claude Osborne Johnson Papers (1901-1978) Cage 214 and an online descriptive biography on the digital archive
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