

ALABAMA LAW REVIEW

Volume 56

Summer 2005

Number 4

EULOGY FOR HOWELL T. HEFLIN

*Steve Raby*¹

I would like to begin by sharing with you a statement from Tom Heflin, on behalf of the family.

STATEMENT OF TOM HEFLIN

Howell T. Heflin's legacy—his words, life, character, and progressive leadership—serves as a compass for today's leaders.

While Howell T. Heflin was a public figure, our family is very proud of him as a husband of 53 years, a father, a grandfather, and his many accomplishments as a Marine, lawyer, judge, and Senator. He was among the greatest of the greatest generation.

I am proud of him as my father. He taught me the necessity of hard work, duty, and compassion. Of his many accomplishments, his fight for racial equality means the most to me.

He loved his country, this beautiful state and Tuscumbia, his hometown. He loved, and was proud of his grandchildren, Will and Mary Catherine.

The family appreciates everyone in attendance today, the overwhelming support and expressions of sympathy from friends throughout the state and nation. He will be missed.

EULOGY

I am reminded of a comment that Judge Heflin made in the presence of his friend, Senator John Warner of Virginia, who was husband number five for Elizabeth Taylor: "Just like Liz Taylor told John Warner, I'm not gonna keep you very long."

Volumes have been written and much has been said about the man for whom we pay tribute today. My words are but a feeble attempt to honor

1. This eulogy was delivered at Senator Heflin's funeral on April 3, 2005.

him. As I have thought about my words, I realize there is nothing that can be said to bring honor to him. He has lived his life and served his fellow man in such a way that he has already brought honor to himself and his family.

Neither is the day long enough to recount his many accomplishments. Reporters, writers, and political scientists have for four decades attempted to define or label him, and without success. Therefore, I take but a few moments to talk about the man.

As a young man, as did hundreds of thousands of his generation, he joined the Armed Forces to serve his country in World War II. Howell Heflin chose The United States Marine Corps. The Corps has as a Latin motto "Semper Fidelis," translating to "Forever Faithful," or "Always Faithful." The motto signifies the dedication that individual Marines are expected to have to their fellow Marines for the rest of their days and beyond.

Semper Fidelis. Always Faithful. A core belief that remained with the man after he hung up the uniform. A dedication that he held, not just to the Corps. It begins to define the man we remember today.

Semper Fi. Always faithful to his family. Faithful to his wife of over fifty years, faithful to his son and daughter and grandchildren. Faithful to his father and mother, and to their memory. Once, *The National Inquirer*—that pillar of journalistic institutions—published a list of ten members of Congress that were space aliens. Heflin was one of them. A reporter asked the Senator for a comment, his response, "I always knew my mother was heaven sent." He often used his father as the reason for his being born in Georgia, a potential political problem for an Alabama politician. "Well, you know my father was a Methodist preacher and he was over in Georgia doing missionary work amongst the heather."

And even his family of politicians—his uncle, U.S. Senator Cotton Tom Heflin, who was controversial by today's standards—he never apologized for him. And a great uncle, U.S. Congressman Robert Stell Heflin, not much was ever said about him. He was a Congressman not from Alabama, but Georgia, and he was a Republican. He never apologized for them. He was faithful to his family. He could recite his relatives in every county of the state. Whoever was traveling with him would get a history lesson in his relations.

Semper Fi. Always faithful to his friends. Political or personal, Republican or Democrat, black or white. That faithfulness is evidenced here today with this tremendous crowd. There are at least a thousand stories that could be cited from each one present today. Judge Heflin had said, "One problem living to be so old is that no friends are left to come to your funeral." Judge Heflin had more friends than even he realized.

Semper Fi. Always faithful to his fellow man. As a Marine he earned medals for saving the lives of others, not his own. As a public servant, he was a principled conservative that thought government could help people who needed it. He was proud to be called "a friend of the farmer," "a champion for working families." He was often attacked for his role in confirming

African Americans to the federal bench, but he was faithful in his conviction that all Alabamians should be represented. He truly believed and practiced the words of our founding fathers, that “all men are created equal.”

Semper Fi. Always faithful to the Methodist Church. His father, Reverend Marvin Heflin, was a Methodist Minister. He grew up in the Methodist Church. He attended Birmingham Southern, a Methodist college. He was an active layman in the Methodist Church. Howell Heflin always avoided mixing politics and church. That is, until he received an invitation to speak in a Methodist Church; then, the schedule would be rearranged. He was specific that this day “his Methodist Choir” be included. He even enjoyed, in his words, “the sacred bird of Methodists, fried chicken.”

Semper Fi. Always faithful to his state and country. His service as a Marine, Chief Justice, and U.S. Senator need no further commentary.

Semper Fi. Always faithful to his Creator. Scripture teaches us to whom much is given, much is expected. Howell Heflin was given many talents and he used them. He used them to help, not to harm. He used them to heal, not divide. He used them to correct injustice, never to inflict it. He used them to serve, not to be served. He was faithful to the gifts and the Giver of the gifts.

Semper Fidelis.

To appropriately remember Senator Howell Heflin we have to remember his humor. He was a funny man. It was not the jokes, but how he told them, the quick wit that created them, and how he could use it. He used humor to entertain, to make a point. He could take any boring subject, like bankruptcy reform, and deliver an after-dinner speech weaving in stories of his old friends—No-Tie Hawkins, Beltless Bill, Sockless Sam, Brother Ham Benderson, or the Ledbetter family—and entertain any crowd.

Judge Heflin could use his humor. Humor was used to diffuse tension. One Senate Committee meeting was late into the night and it was tense. Debate was hot, tempers were surfacing. Judge Heflin sought recognition, “Mr. Chairman.” Now, when Senator Heflin sought recognition—and for any of you who ever watched him on C-Span, you know he would lean into the microphone and raise his finger, must have been something he learned in the second grade—“Mr. Chairman, I’m reminded of a story back home, an old friend of mine, Brother Ham Benderson. Now Brother Ham was a great observer of people and a sage philosopher. One day he happened upon a very unusual site. A car was on the side of the road and there were two Catholic nuns walking around the car with a bedpan. What Brother Ham didn’t know as these two sisters had run out of gas, walked down to the next farm and asked for some gas. The farmer said they could have some gas but the only container he had to carry the gas was a bedpan. It was at this time he pulled up. He watched these two nuns pour out of a bedpan into the gas tank. Brother Ham was awestruck by this site, and said to his boy, ‘Now I’ll tell you right now if them sisters get that old Dodge to crank, me and you are trading cars and switching churches.’ Now, Mr. Chairman, the solution to a problem is not always what it appears to be.” “Is the Senator from Ala-

bama suggesting we use a bedpan?" "Well, you could. But the real issue is knowing what you are pouring out of it."

He used his humor to disarm adversaries and even define political opponents. His last election is a perfect example. Never did the campaign really get to the discussion of issues. No discussion of deficits, tax reform, or social programs. Howell Heflin's humor is part of political folklore and many of you here heard his stump speech. I cannot resist repeating it: "Now my opponent is one of them silk-stocking boys. A part of the Grey Poupon crowd. He's a Mercedes-driving, polo-playing, Jacuzzi-soaking, Gucci-wearing, Perrier-drinking, debutante-dancing, ritzy-rich Republican from Mountain Brook with a summer home in Kennebunkport." With his humor, the Judge defined an opponent without getting in the gutter.

I pause for a moment to mention one thing. When the Heflin biography was being written, Howell Heflin chastised everyone that was interviewed by the authors of the book, because no one talked about his flaws. He said, "Every man has his flaws, for history to judge a man you have to talk about his warts."

His warts. Well here are a few warts. Senator Howell Heflin smoked cigars. After the conspiracy of the doctors and Mrs. Heflin to cease the habit, he smoked cigars. Even after the press releases said he stopped lighting the stogies, he smoked cigars. Yes, he chewed cigars, but he smoked cigars. Cigars were responsible for burning holes in 24 ties, 17 shirts, three suits, two sports coats, and the front seat of Mrs. Heflin's car. All after he stopped smoking. Cigars were—now this is the truth—responsible for two fires in the garbage can in his Senate office. Now, Judge Heflin, your flaws and warts are exposed.

For whatever his flaws, this man we remember today was a man of honor and integrity. Never from a political opponent in three decades was there an accusation of wrongdoing. You may not have agreed with the way he voted, the decisions he made. Or you may not have liked the way he talked, or how he looked, but no one questioned his honesty or ethics. There was never even political gossip of impropriety.

Howell Heflin held firm to his conviction to uphold the public trust. He was a man that lived his commitment to this State and its people. A man that, every day, shared the values of the people he represented. He was a soldier when his country called, a judge of men when duty demanded it, and a statesman when our democracy needed it.

Judge Heflin was given advice once and he passed it along to many people: Anytime you speak, give the people *hope*. Whatever the circumstances, give them hope.

On this day, this solemn occasion, I mention two offerings for your consideration. First, the Great Depression forged Howell Heflin's teenage years. He witnessed the poverty and struggle in the South, and from this experience he learned to give, and to help. As a young man, he was tested in the ravages of World War II, and from this experience he learned to serve, and to preserve the peace. Whatever his circumstances, he found not ex-

cuses, but reasons to forge ahead and make this nation better than he found it, for his generation and for the generations to come. Second, because of his faith in our Lord, he has the greatest of all hope, hope in the resurrection. I am sure he has already heard the words of Matthew 25:21: "The master said, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things, come and share your master's happiness.'"

I want to thank the family for giving us Howell Heflin for so many decades.

God bless you, Howell Heflin, for making a difference in the lives of so many.

