

# Charles Hill, 1936–2021

by Justin Zaremby

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Charles Hill, a retired diplomat who taught at Yale University for nearly thirty years, was a visual thinker. In the classroom, he would distill complicated theories of politics and philosophy into simple charts on the blackboard. He taught students to parse the works of Thucydides, Aquinas, and Tocqueville—diagramming concepts of war, glory, law, and religion just as students once learned to diagram sentences. His students would leave these sessions in breathless awe, aware that they had witnessed the remarkable results of a capacious mind engaging with challenging texts.

That visual approach took other forms as well. Professor Hill enjoyed introducing students to Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1873 painting, *L'Eminence Grise*, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The painting depicts an imagined scene from the court of Louis XIII. A group of courtiers line a grand staircase and bow to Cardinal Richelieu, who has just moved out of view. Because the viewer is unable to see Richelieu, it appears as though the sycophants are bowing to an ascetically dressed man whose gaze is focused on a book. That man is Richelieu's advisor: François-Joseph Le Clerc du Tremblay, a Capuchin friar commonly known as his "Gray Eminence" (in contrast to the red robes of the eminent Cardinal). Richelieu, guided from behind the scenes by Père Joseph, transformed European foreign policy in the seventeenth century by centralizing power in France and allying France with Protestant nations in opposition to the Catholic

Habsburgs. Gérôme's painting slyly calls attention to the influence of those quiet, studious counselors who shape diplomacy.

Professor Hill was our gray eminence. Before arriving at Yale, he spent decades as a member of the foreign service and as an advisor to America's top diplomats. Following a career in public service, he devoted himself to teaching and advising Yale students who gratefully flocked to his lectures, seminars, and office hours. Yet like the friar in the painting, he always stood apart, and it was that splendid isolation that made him such a compelling professor.

He was born in 1936. After graduating from Brown and the University of Pennsylvania (where he received both a master's degree in American Studies and a law degree), he opted out of a legal career and entered the foreign service. He served in Zürich, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Vietnam before returning to Washington in a policy role, serving as a member of the State Department's policy planning staff and as a speech writer and advisor for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. He held a series of roles in Middle East affairs, including as Director for Israel and Arab-Israeli Affairs and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Middle East, before becoming Executive Aide to Secretary of State George Shultz. From 1992 to 1996 he advised the United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He went with his wife, the humanities scholar Norma Thompson, to Yale and remained there until his sudden death in March 2021.

I first encountered Professor Hill as a freshman in Yale's Program in Directed Studies, an interdisciplinary introduction to Western thought. From the head of the seminar table, he guided us through defining works of ancient political theory. The suit he wore to class (a rarity among the professoriate) evinced a seriousness of purpose, as did his rigid posture. Whenever students made wild speculations about Herodotus or Plato, he would delicately but firmly encourage them to defend their views through reference to the text. He expected us to read closely and write concisely. He did not regularly offer praise to the budding philosophers in the classroom, and many of us experienced our first-ever C- at his hands. Professor Hill was not afraid of giving honest grades.

Unlike many practitioners who teach at America's colleges and universities, Hill never boasted about his remarkable career. He would not violate the confidence of the leaders he counseled or ask students to bless the decisions made at the State Department during his time in public service. Because his goal was not to teach students to regurgitate what they read in *The New York Times*, his courses often seemed divorced from contemporary foreign policy. They were not named "The Middle East Peace Process" or "Foreign Affairs after the Cold War" but instead sported evocative and humanistic titles like "The Architecture of Power," "Intellectual Circles," and "Strategic American Fictions." Although he might spend afternoons on the phone advising Secretaries Kissinger or Shultz, in the classroom he encouraged students to think about timeless principles of politics and diplomacy. His goal was to teach students the lost art of statecraft.

What did Hill mean by statecraft? World affairs, he explained, were shaped by a combination of strategy, power, politics, religion, art, and culture. The practice of statecraft required understanding how individuals interact with institutions, institutions with cultures, cultures with nations, and nations with other nations. Statecraft was a learned practice which, like the law, offered a framework for managing the variety of impulses,

needs, and conflicting priorities of families, tribes, and nations. It was a higher-order concept than policy planning, which Hill often viewed as reactive or narrow in scope. The culmination of statecraft was the creation of the international state system—the arrangement of sovereign states that was established in 1648 to end the religious conflict of the Thirty Years' War. That system, he explained, has been maintained through careful diplomacy, but remains under regular attack from extreme versions of nationalism, religious fanaticism, and globalization.

For Hill, the world's future leaders (a club to which his students regularly applied for membership) lacked a basic understanding of statecraft because they didn't know how to read. In his book *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (2010), Hill wrote that the "international world of states and their modern system is a literary realm." His goal as a teacher was to awaken students to the structure of international affairs and its origins by teaching them to read classic texts and to put those texts in conversation with each other. He expected us to read Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, as well as Montaigne, Austen, and Whitman. As a student I would regularly visit his office, not only to seek his counsel, but also to see what he was reading. Professor Hill was Borgesian in his command of the published word and—to paraphrase Borges—his universe seemed to be a library.

Hill's agenda, however, was more radical than simply encouraging students to read important books. Statesmen, he explained, understood that the books they read remained relevant across time and geography. "Prior to sainthood," he wrote, "Thomas More read Roman poets and playwrights. Queen Elizabeth I read Cicero for rhetorical and legal strategy. Frederick the Great studied Homer's *Odyssey* as a model for princes. John Adams read Thucydides in Greek while being guided through the 'labyrinth' of human nature by Swift, Shakespeare, and Cervantes." Each of these figures made decisions within the limitations of the time in which he or she lived, but they all *thought* across time. For Hill,

few problems were new problems, and ideas remained available for use decades or centuries after they were originally written down.

In his lectures and writings Hill reveled in dramatic or unexpected parallels. Talleyrand, the French diplomat who survived multiple revolutions, sought inspiration at the tomb of Richelieu. The War in Iraq might be understood through a theatrical production at Yale of Friedrich Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy. The *Oresteia* elucidated *Huckleberry Finn*. A schoolboy history of Rome was a useful tool for critiquing Livy. Hill's courses introduced students to the written word, as well as to how those words were received by later generations. He encouraged his classes to engage with authors and their interpreters. He suggested that there was a larger conversation to which great thinkers, great statesmen, and his students were invited.

Many at Yale criticized this anti-historicist tendency. Contemporary academic practice prioritizes the study of authors within their context, rather than the creation of grand narratives. The historical study is praised for being detailed, humble, and incremental. The grand narrative is criticized for being brash and reductive. Hill was not a historian or a political theorist or an economist; he did

not need to be a member of the English department to play the literary critic. Professor Hill had no reason to follow the rules of traditional academic disciplines. He taught whatever courses he chose and as often as he wanted, even when faculty encouraged him to "stay in his lane." But because his lane was statecraft, he decided that he should have access to the full range of human expression.

Students loved Charles Hill because of this intellectual defiance. He taught us not only to read difficult authors, but also to listen for their echoes. We found comfort in the fact that, after a lifetime in diplomacy, he turned to a life of unadulterated intellectual curiosity at Yale. Although we looked up to him as a father figure, I actually think we adored him because he seemed a bit like us. He retained the curiosity of an undergraduate who has not yet been funneled into a major or a career. He encouraged us to tackle large questions that spanned disciplines and to approach them with patience and method. His intellectual agenda was young, even if the books he studied were old. If he could muster such love of learning after a lifetime navigating the corridors of power, it seemed obvious to us that someday we would be able to do the same.