

# U.S. Senator Harris Wofford, 1926-2019: A Major Figure in the History of the World Government Idea

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“Count no man happy until he dies,” declared Sophocles 24 long centuries ago, in the immortal final line of *Oedipus Rex*. The sages of ancient Greece understood that the purpose, the meaning, the verdict on a life couldn’t be rendered until after it had run its course – and perhaps not until decades or centuries later.

The obituaries in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for Harris Wofford Jr., who died on January 21st at 92, focused mostly on his work as an aide to candidate and President John F. Kennedy, and then later as a U.S. senator. But it may turn out, in the very long run, that his greatest legacy was what Harris told me was “his first love in the world of ideas,” and the first great cause of his life. Because in 1942, during the darkest days of the Second World War, teenage Harris Wofford founded a nationwide youth movement which proclaimed that after the end of that war the human race could abolish war, by creating a “United States of the World.”

## THE 1940S STUDENT MOVEMENT FOR A WORLD REPUBLIC

I met Harris seven years ago, in January 2012. He was speaking at a small under-the-radar Ethiopian history event in Washington D.C. (He had served in the early 1960s as the first director of Peace Corps programs in Africa.) I approached him afterwards, told him I knew a bit about his even more remote personal history, and asked him, well, if he still believed any of that stuff. “It’s totally still how I think about the direction of history,” he replied. “And you’re the first one to ask me anything about it in maybe 25 years.” So he invited me to come by for a visit sometime in his Foggy Bottom apartment. Soon I did. And I invited myself back many times thereafter, pretty much every two or three months for the next seven years, to interrogate him about the almost completely forgotten movement in the 1940s to bring about One World.

One night early in 1941, Harris told me, as WWII raged prior to America's entry, he was sitting in the bathtub in his family's home in Scarsdale, New York, simultaneously trying to complete his Latin homework and listen to Mr. District Attorney on the radio. The crime drama reached its denouement, and the radio station switched to talking heads at the Waldorf-Astoria. "Had the contraption been within reach," he said, "I would have quickly turned the dial." But the captive audience of one, instead, was forced to listen to a panel, including New York Tribune columnist Dorothy Thompson, Nobel laureate author Thomas Mann, and future congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce, all proselytizing for something they called "A World Federal Union of Free Men." "Democracies must do what our 13 states did long ago," said Luce, "unite to face a common peril, form the nucleus of a world government ... and expand around the world until it becomes the United States of all mankind." [1] Harris later wrote that "prophets and visionary statesmen had proclaimed the idea of a Federal World Republic for centuries ... But for me the idea was born that night." [2]

Harris recounted this origin tale in his 1946 book *IT'S UP TO US: Federal World Government In Our Time* – written at age 19 while he served in the U.S. Army Air Corps, published by Harcourt Brace, and edited by the legendary publisher Robert Giroux. It was well told again in Gilbert Jonas's 2001 *iUniverse* book *ONE SHINING MOMENT: A Short History of the American Student World Federalist Movement 1942-1953*.

A year later Pearl Harbor had brought America into the war, and that moved 15-year-old Harris to act. One evening early in 1942 he and classmate Mary Ellen Purdy set out on their bicycles, rode around Scarsdale, knocked on doors, missed their suppers – but enlisted themselves and eight other classmates as the inaugural chapter of the "Student Federalists." "Those of us who would later come under Wofford's charismatic spell," wrote Jonas, "know full well how difficult it must have been for his peers to resist." [3]

Harris Wofford's Scarsdale home became the outfit's bustling headquarters. A perpetual teenage conclave in the living room, backyard and kitchen was mostly tolerated by his equanimous parents. His grandmother endured misadventures like a couple of stumbling boys bursting into her bedroom while she was half dressed, because "we thought this was the supply closet." Nevertheless, magnanimously, she began to contribute \$5 per month.

And the Student Federalists began to spread far beyond the boundaries of Scarsdale. Funds were raised. Speaking tours were organized. Literature was printed. Essay contests were launched. A "Model World Constitutional Convention" was undertaken just a few weeks before D-Day. *TIME* magazine published a flattering article on the organization's founder on November 20, 1944. [4] During one cycle the National Debate Tournament topic for all American high schools was: "RESOLVED: That a federal world government should be established." The chancellor of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins, assembled a group of eminent scholars and designated them "the Committee to Frame a World Constitution." (Harris, by then a UofC undergraduate, served as advisor and chief bottle washer for the Committee.)

It must be admitted that the Student Federalists were hardly a model of diversity. Most of the members were white, well-off, and privileged. Harris made a point of telling me this the very first time I visited him at his home.

But that same fundamental flaw was not evident when it came to gender. The Jonas book is full of photographs of young women right in the thick of things, obviously not relegated to clerical duties. The Wellesley College Student Federalist chapter alone boasted 200 members.[5] Indeed, one of the organization's earliest leaders was a champion high school debater from Minnesota named Clare Lindgren, who went on both to serve as third president of the Student Federalists and to marry Harris Wofford in 1948.

By 1947, the Student Federalists had enlisted several thousand members – many of them battle-tempered WWII veterans – opened ten regional offices, and established chapters on 367 high school and college campuses around the country.[6] In February of that year, they combined with a half dozen similarly thriving world government advocacy organizations to form the "United World Federalists" (UWF). One of the leading brokers of the merger, by all accounts, was 21-year-old Harris Wofford. That organization has remained in continuous existence ever since – small, obscure, struggling, but endeavoring to keep the flame alive -- and is known today as Citizens for Global Solutions (CGS).

#### A BRILLIANT YOUNG MAN'S THINKING ABOUT A WORLD REPUBLIC

Two years after his 1946 book, Harris wrote a sequel monograph called ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC. The foreword was written by Stringfellow Barr, longtime president of St. John's College in Annapolis (and founder with Wofford's own greatest mentor Scott Buchanan of the Great Books Program there) -- who had resigned from St. John's to become president of a new "Foundation for World Government." In these two works, Harris Wofford demonstrated that he possessed more than just the personal magnetism that Gil Jonas described, but a deep and probing intellect as well.

With the new United Nations only a few months old, Harris illuminated both its impotence and undemocratic character. "We should work to develop the General Assembly into a world law-making body by delegating its real powers ... Assembly delegates should be elected directly by the people of the respective nations." [7]

He emphasized the bedrock idea that world government would not eliminate local institutions or identities. "By becoming a world citizen we maintain citizenship in our city, province, and nation, and gain a higher and more precious title ... This means a world government that is federal, with power in all fields truly international in scope but with lower levels each continuing in the fields it can govern best ... Only such a federal union can protect the diversity in the world and still secure the needed unity." [8]

Yet at the same time it might enact and enforce standards within states as well. How? "A World Bill of Rights ... should include freedom of religion, thought, speech, press, assembly, elections, and fair trials. The world government must assure these rights to all its citizens everywhere, with no prejudice to race, nationality, class, or sex." [9] That first sentence is quite similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which came into force in 1948 – though of course without any global mechanism to enforce it. When I pointed out to Harris that his second

sentence would be greeted today as politically preposterous, he immediately agreed. But the alternative, he insisted, was to resign ourselves forever to the dismal fate of women in so much of the Muslim world, and of gay men in so many African nations, and of political dissidents in Russia and China and so many other lands.

He recognized that what he proposed would mean epochal historical transformation. “World federal government would be the greatest political step ever taken by man. The idea of moving from the national to the world level of citizenship is the most revolutionary proposal in history ... A whole new world would open to man once he moved from his present confining nationalism into this great, truly global civilization.”[10]

And he called unapologetically for philanthropists to step up. “Carnegies and Nobels are needed. There must be some men and women who will leave their millions to this cause instead of to private schools, libraries, or homes for stray cats. A share in building world federation would be the greatest memorial anyone could seek.”[11]

During our many conversations in his apartment, I found that a couple of ancient episodes moved Harris Wofford still. In IT’S UP TO US, he related that one classmate would shout “Union Never” whenever passing a Student Federalist in the hallways of Scarsdale High.[12] This, Harris told me, is what he yearned to reawaken. An active debate about whether something like a world union might actually be a desirable destination, or whether instead it’s something that would on balance do more harm than good for the human condition. He very much lamented that the topic, in both the high school hallways and the digital public squares of today, has become conspicuous only by its absence from the debates of the 21st century.

Another was the tale he told in ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC of Duncan Cameron, an 18-year-old boy who refused induction into the British Army, “preferring prison rather than violence in support of national interests.” But young Cameron was no pacifist. He declared his “determination never again to serve in the army of a nation-state,” but simultaneously announced “his readiness to serve in a World Police Force to enforce world law.” British authorities put him on trial for treason. Harris called it instead “loyalty to the world community.”[13]

## THE ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC

“The living owe it to those who no longer can speak,” said the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, “to tell their story for them.” That seems especially true when a Harris Wofford dies at a time when so many demagogues, both here and abroad, seek to divide our one humanity by race, class, gender, religion, and nation.

Every time we got together, I could tell that it meant a great deal to Harris that one person during the twilight of his life, me, knew something about and asked him about and cared about his opening act on the stage of history. And he demonstrated his enduring commitment to the dream of a politically unified human race. We coauthored two articles about it for The Huffington Post and the Public Interest Report from the Federation of American Scientists. These pieces were

decidedly not ghostwritten by me. We worked on them together for weeks, and at age 88 he haggled with me over every word. We also made three joint speaking appearances together about it -- at the Brearley School in Manhattan (which had maintained a thriving Student Federalist chapter seven decades earlier), at the Woman's National Democratic Club in Washington, DC, and before the University of Chicago Alumni Club. And just about a year ago, he reengaged with the organization he did so much to create, Citizens for Global Solutions, joining its newly reconstituting Advisory Council after I showed him the organization's newly reconceptualized mission statement, committing to "a democratic federation of nations with the power to enact enforceable world law to abolish war, protect universal human rights, and restore and sustain our global environment."

Nineteen-year-old Harris Wofford dedicated *It's Up To Us* "To Jim, Tom, Bruce, Dwight and all the sons of a fighting earth, who died so that democracy might live and mankind have a chance to move forward in our time to the United States of the World." Classmates at Scarsdale High all, dispatched by their country to war but never returned. Dwight and Jim were killed in Germany, Bruce on Iwo Jima, and Tom on the USS Indianapolis – likely drowned or devoured alive by sharks in one of the most horrifying episodes of a horrible war -- after delivering to Tinian Island the atomic bomb that would be detonated a week later over Hiroshima.

These young men all died in their early 20s, while their classmate Harris Wofford lived until his early 90s. And he died with the hope in his heart that the daughters and sons of our still fighting earth, today, might once again ignite a new youth movement for global citizenship and planetary patriotism and human unity. Might once again mount a campaign to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Might produce a few more Duncan Camerons. And might generate an irresistible historical current, so that their own daughters and sons might someday be born into a united world.

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[1] Harris Wofford, *IT'S UP TO US: Federal World Government In Our Time*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946, p. 4.

[2] Wofford, *IT'S UP TO US*, pp. 4-5.

[3] Gil Jonas, *ONE SHINING MOMENT: A Short History of the American Student World Federalist Movement 1942-1953*, New York: iUniverse, 2001, p. 3.

[4] Jonas, p. 16.

[5] Jonas, p. 24.

[6] Jonas, pp. 12 and 18; Wofford, *IT'S UP TO US*, p. 39; Harris Wofford and Tad Daley, "JFK, One World or None, and a New Effort to Achieve World Law," *The Public Interest Report*, *Quarterly Journal of the Federation of American Scientists*, Summer 2014.

[7] Wofford, IT'S UP TO US, p. 128.

[8] Wofford, ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC, p. 44; Wofford, IT'S UP TO US, pp. 113-4.

[9] Wofford, ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC, p. 45.

[10] Wofford, ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC, pp. 25-26, Wofford, IT'S UP TO US, p. 115.

[11] Wofford, ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC, p. 73.

[12] Wofford, IT'S UP TO US, p. 25.

[13] Wofford, ROAD TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC, p. 62.