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Above, the late pundit Mark Shields at home in Chevy Chase, Md., in 2020. Below, Harkness Tower on the Yale University campus in New Haven, Conn.

# Mark Shields had Ivy League fatigue — and he had a point

BY JIM SLEEPER

When President Obama, a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard Law School, nominated the former Harvard Law School dean Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court in 2010, the PBS News Hour's Jim Lehrer asked its commentator Mark Shields what he made of the fact that, with her confirmation, all nine justices would hold degrees from Ivy League universities.

Shields, a son of Weymouth whose death last month has left a hole in the soul of TV punditry, gave Lehrer an unvarnished answer: "I am so tired of Ivy Leaguers, I really am. I want somebody who went to a state university . . . who worked nights, maybe, to pay for their own books, who either was in . . . the enlisted ranks of the United States military or knows somebody who was, somebody who . . . is west of the Hudson and east of Malibu. Why do we . . . restrict it to this pool . . . ? I really just think it is terribly elitist, I mean, it sounds like the British ruling class."

The Ivyed overgrowth that rankled Shields wasn't rectified by President Trump's appointments of justices Neil Gorsuch (Columbia University, Harvard Law School, Oxford PhD) and Brett Kavanaugh (Yale College, Yale Law School). Only Amy Coney Barrett (Rhodes College, in Memphis, Tenn., and Notre Dame Law School) has broken the pattern. Shields, himself a University of Notre Dame alumnus who respected her qualifications, nevertheless considered her rushed, partisan confirmation "a sham or just a pretense."

His quick wisdom came from a Massachusetts Irish Catholic working-class-parish sense of right and wrong, tempered with compassion and an impish appreciation of absurdity. When he deadpanned that some hypocritically censorious public authority would "ticket you for double-parking outside the orphanage on Christmas Eve," his point — that political hacks wouldn't let even a good deed like giving toys to poor kids on Christmas go unpunished — reflected his sense that bureaucracy and

consumerism were draining the life out of what G.K. Chesterton had called "a nation with the soul of a church."

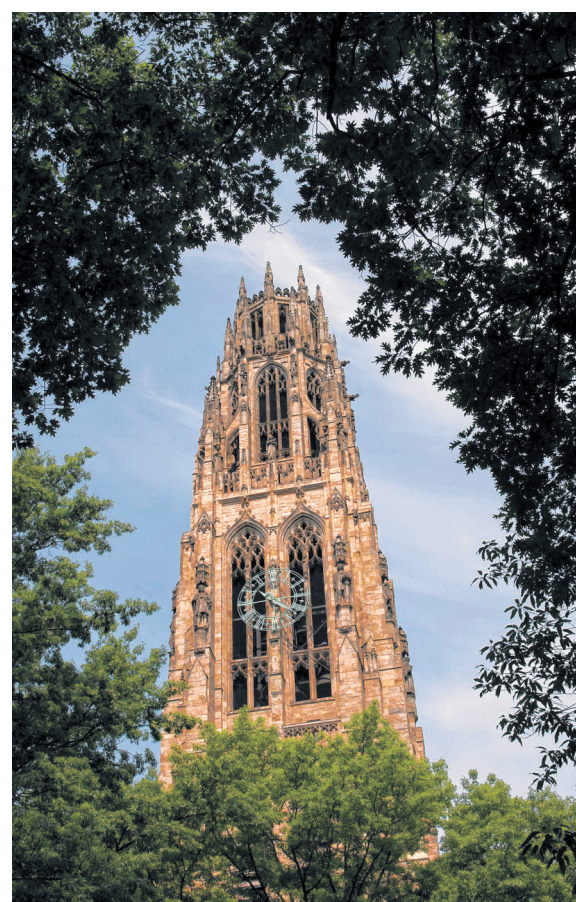
Since Shields's death, I've been thinking a lot about my own experiences inside the elite bastions about which he was so skeptical. I was a Jewish public school kid from Western Massachusetts who'd never heard of the WASP, patrilineal private preparatory schools of the Yale classmates I'd found aristocratic and chilly when I first arrived in New Haven in 1965.

Early one morning in 1969, stumbling across a residential college courtyard after an all-night party, I came upon two groundskeepers contemplating trees festooned with streams of toilet paper hurled by my drunken classmates. I tried to commiserate, but a stolid veteran of such cleanups cut me short. "It's OK," he said. "You guys deserve it once in a while. You've got a lot on your minds. You're up late most nights studying." I remember thinking, If only he knew how little it's true.

Now, that man's successors' trust has likely curdled into easily tapped anger. And today's elite college graduates scramble out of their gilded incubators lacking civic compasses and commitments deeper than platitudes and shareholder values. Rare among them will be those who make the time or have the inclination to double-park outside an orphanage on Christmas Eve.

And yet, the old colleges were founded to nourish dedication to the public good. The old colleges knew that the world isn't flat but that it has abysses that open unpredictably beneath our feet and in our hearts, and that students need coordinates to plumb those depths and to face down the demons in them and in themselves. That root has been displaced by STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — to which faith and virtue are instrumental but not foundational.

Shields knew that a good society needs to ground meritocracy in civic trust. He knew that the best leaders might come from Little Leagues as much as from Ivy Leagues. He knew they arise from state universities, historically Black colleges, and religiously denominational colleges like his own Notre Dame. And he knew they



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were to be found among immigrants, union halls, and civic organizations and movements.

Many of those civic crucibles were opened and led by Ivy League alums, but I wonder how many of my former students appreciate that nation-building achievement. Shields spoke for Americans like the two groundskeepers I met that morning in 1969, before colleges like Yale and Harvard became career-networking centers and cultural gathering places for a global elite that is no longer accountable to any democratic polity or moral code.

America feels a long way from the days of civic-minded Ivy grads such as Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy and his brothers Robert and Teddy, and Barack Obama. I wonder: Do the old colleges still balance students' training for worldly success with the arts and disciplines of citizen leadership and truth seeking, whatever the political or economic risks?

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