

A Memorial for E. Victor Milione
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I have looked up to, and learned from, Vic Milione since the age of twenty-two. He was my first boss, and he set such high standards for what to expect in a boss that I have been choosy about my bosses ever since. In fact, the only bosses I've ever had have been Vic, Ronald Reagan, Ed Meese, and the ISI board of trustees. Even in that company, Vic stood out for his sure and certain expectations, coupled with gentle reassurance and an understanding of human failings.

Vic's public impact was in the world of ideas, but that was only one side of Vic. On what he knew to be the more important side, there was Mali, the love of his life, and his devoted son Lou, Lou's family—and Vic's best friend over a lifetime, Charles Hoefflich. Vic never let disputes about abstract ideas confuse him about what was most important to the human heart.

Still, it was in the world of ideas that Vic made his career; it was for the world of ideas that he crafted his beloved ISI. Since his passing in February, I have been looking over the essays he published from time to time through the years, and I have been noting the authors he characteristically quoted. They can be grouped into a few categories that point to the heart of Vic's deepest concerns. First, there is the American experience—such writers as Tocqueville, Lord Bryce, and the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. Then there is the mission of a university—Cardinal Newman, Christopher Dawson, Jacques Barzun, and Mark van Doren. There is also the matter of faith and unbelief—Max Picard and C. S. Lewis pre-eminently. And finally there are writers addressing the crisis of the twentieth century—Sorokin, Ortega y Gasset, and Richard Weaver, among others. Behind the totalitarian threat of Soviet communism that loomed over the century just past, behind the “revolution of nihilism” that convulsed the world in the Second World War, lay a deeper and more pervading problem in modern times that could only be addressed at the level of ideas. It was a problem of forgetting: of *forgetting* the foundations of the achievement that is the West.

As Vic saw it, the central task of our time was therefore one of *enculturation*—a term he took from the historian Christopher Dawson. Tocqueville had seen that under the conditions of modernity, “every fresh generation is a new people.” In that fact lies the promise of progress—but there is also a great and usually unrecognized peril. The young have always been given to hubris, failing to recognize the debts they owe and so falling into ingratitude. But the progressive tendencies of modern times fan this hubris to a white heat—and at length, the ideologies proclaim that piety is a superseded virtue, perhaps even a retrograde vice.

Here, then, was the central insight behind Vic's work. If the great tradition of the West is to continue, there must be a nurturing of the timeless principles that undergird our civilization among those who will be coming on the scene. In the absence of continuity, “No generation could link with another. Men would become little better than [Burke's] flies of summer.”

Lacking a firm grounding in our heritage, the young would be prey to every fleeting enthusiasm and every totalitarian promise.

This question of enculturation—the transmission of our inherited culture from one generation to the next—is the question which animated Vic’s every tactic. Unlike many organizations with a point of view, ISI eschews the current battles in politics and public policy and instead focuses on securing the allegiance of the new generation to the values of America and the West. Vic quoted Will Herberg to the effect that “Politics is important, even partisan politics, but beyond politics, there is political philosophy, and beyond that, there is the philosophy that has always preoccupied the best minds of the West and that plumbs the deepest depths of being and of human being in history.” So, as important as politics are, that was never Vic’s ultimate concern.

He was concerned, rather, with encouraging new generations of students to learn, better than their fathers, the lesson that our own great heritage must not be taken for granted. This heritage must be studied, understood, nurtured, and transmitted. It is the purpose of ISI to provide resources, guidance, and encouragement to students and scholars to make themselves into informed and thinking beings, on whom the survival of so much of the best of our own culture depends—and, in the process, to help those young people become stewards of the funded wisdom of mankind we call civilization.

But how to transform this insight into a living, breathing institution, one that could reach significant numbers over long periods? For one thing, Vic was convinced that the early conservative movement’s concentration on economic education had to be broadened to all the humane studies. From such breadth, world views are formed which can either affirm or utterly sweep away arguments of economic efficiency.

For another, Vic saw that for every means of doing damage commanded by the Academy, ISI must have a constructive alternative for the student discerning enough to know that something is missing. If ISI was denied schools, it could have summer schools. If the classroom was out of reach, there was the independent lecture and the seminar. If ISI could not assign texts, it could make available alternative libraries of books and journals via the mails. In short, Vic brought to ISI an insistence on intellectual breadth and variety, so that the essential needs of the rising young scholar could be met.

In the plentitude of intellectual resources that Vic made available through ISI, one thing he refused to provide was a creed, a doctrine, or any other ideological party line. Vic has not so much propounded answers as he has urged that the young honestly confront the perennial questions of the human condition:

- What is man’s relation to the Divine?
- What is worthy of duty?
- What do the lives of great men teach us of the noble and of the base?
- How does the sweep of human experience inform the tension between liberty and order?
- What does history teach us about the rise of civilizations and about their decline?

Vic counseled us to seek answers to the enduring questions, not through introspection, but by immersing ourselves in the best that has been thought and said. Through his beloved ISI, he helped the best of several new generations acquire the hard-won wisdom of their fathers and to translate that wisdom into the lexicon of their own time in history. As Whittaker Chambers wrote in the last line of his last letter to Bill Buckley, “Each age finds its own language for an eternal meaning.”

Vic had always wanted ISI to have its own campus, and he lived to see us move into the handsome Georgian building in Wilmington. But when ISI’s bricks and mortar are a rubble, when all of us here this afternoon have resolved ourselves into a dew, the legacy of Vic Milione will live on. Because one day in 1953 he picked up the gauntlet and became a champion of the unseen things that do not die. In introducing countless thousands of young people to those great, unthreatened truths, he has written upon eternity.