Personal Recollections of Sam Francis

Jared Taylor

Samuel Todd Francis was the premier philosopher of white racial consciousness of our time. No one did more to alert whites to the crisis they face, and no one called them more eloquently to action. His intellectual sweep was of course much broader than this—he was an expert on Machiavelli, a James Burnham scholar, a learned critic of H. P. Lovecraft—but it is for his pioneering work in modern race-realist thought that he will be remembered. His work will endure, esteemed by both scholars and activists.

What we have lost forever is the man himself, and tens of thousands of readers who knew him only through his writing will never know that man. Any reader quickly discovers the power of Sam's mind, the depth of his erudition, his sly humor, but behind his supple prose there was a complexity that was sometimes at odds with his public figure. Perhaps that is why some of us who had the good fortune to call Sam a friend have tried, as best we can, to put his extraordinary personality into words. Those who admired him from a distance may want to know more about the man who influenced their thinking.

I knew Sam for only the last 15 or 16 of his 57 years, so there are chapters of his life that are closed to me. I did not know the precocious student and beloved little brother who was quickly marked as the family genius. I did not know the university and graduate student who, after flirtations with liberalism, was already moving toward conservatism. Nor did I know the Heritage Foundation scholar or Senate aide, with a reputation for careful research and brilliant analysis that established him as an authority on terrorism. Sam kept friends from all those periods of his life, and their perspective is longer than mine. Still, I am glad to have known the later Sam Francis, the one who brought immense historical learning to bear on the formulation of a distinctive understanding of the world, which is his special gift to our times. In this sense, I believe I knew the real Sam Francis.

It was in 1988 or 1989 that, like so many others, I first met Sam through his writing. I was determined to make his acquaintance, and we first corresponded in connection with a race-oriented publication I had decided to start, and which eventually became *American Renaissance.* He wrote for the magazine, and served as one of the founding members of the non-profit organization established to run it, so ours was a professional collaboration that grew into friendship.

It was a surprise for me to discover that the author of such bold, slashing essays was a shy man. Sam hid his shyness behind a gruff, even forbidding

manner, and it took me some time to learn his secret. It was only during the last eight years of Sam's life that I lived near enough to see him frequently face to face, so before that period we met at conferences and spoke on the telephone. In the first years of our friendship, telephone calls had a ritual beginning. "Hello," he would answer, with a dour tone that discouraged conversation. "Oh, Jared," he would add, in the same dour tone, as if I were a bill collector or carpet salesman, and then keep me on the line for 45 minutes. He was glad to talk, and happy to hear from me, but it was years before his "Oh, Jared" had any spark of welcome or pleasure.

For those who penetrated his reserve, Sam was famous for good conversation. At ease and among friends, he could delight companions for hours as he ranged from Plutarch to horror movies to foreign affairs to stories about the people he had known. He enjoyed a glass of good cheer—sometimes quite a few glasses—but I never saw him in the slightest way impaired. There was no one with whom one could spend a more enjoyable and instructive evening.

It was a pity Sam did not make his delightful, affable side more available. At conferences and meetings, he did not try to meet new people, but sought the comfort of old comrades. And yet, of course, his circle of acquaintances was very wide, because so many people admired him and managed to cut their way through his reserve.

I think his desire for comfortable surroundings was of a piece with his shyness, and also due to his distaste for sharp disagreement. For someone whose very existence was a provocation to much of America, Sam did not enjoy forceful debate, but preferred instead to explore the perspectives of people with whom he agreed, to share insights, to compare notes. He generally declined invitations to take part in television or radio debates, because he had no patience for the self-righteousness and ignorant moralizing to which he would be subjected. His contribution was to write and speak; thoughtful people would recognize the truth.

Sam's distaste for conflict led to a certain reticence. His religious views, for example, he kept to himself. His close circle ran from militant scoffers to devout churchmen, and he saw no reason to sow discord or provoke unnecessary argument. This is not to say that Sam trimmed his arguments; only that he kept silent when to speak would cause pointless discord. Nor did he hesitate to contradict what he took to be foolishness. If anything, he reserved his frankest disagreement for those he trusted best, and I know from experience what it was like to face the full force of his aroused intellect!

My favorite conversations with Sam were those that were at first the least expected. It was no surprise that a man with a Ph.D. in history would know the British Empire inside out, could discourse on the classics, and always bolster an argument with an illuminating example from American history. But where had he picked up such a deep knowledge of Joseph Conrad, how did he know

so much about Alexander Pope, and when had he gone to the trouble to learn by heart some of Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales for Bad Children*?

Sam had a real love of literature, and sometimes spoke yearningly of the life he might have led as a writer of fiction. I once showed him a short story I had published and was thrilled when he said he envied me for having written it. Somewhere in his papers there are sure to be experimental sketches that would throw yet another light on his fascinating personality.

Like so many people of distinction in their own fields, Sam had an omnivorous, wide-ranging curiosity, and this was why he could speak so interestingly not just about novelists and poets but movie-makers, politicians, military commanders, and even economists and scientists. I soon learned not to be surprised at what he was likely to know, and always looked forward to hearing what he would say about the latest novel I had read or curious bit of history or psychology I had stumbled upon.

Given his powerful mind and wide reputation, it was no surprise Sam was always a popular conference or dinner speaker, and perhaps never so much so as at the biennial *American Renaissance* conferences at which he spoke without fail from 1994 to 2004. And yet here, too, Sam had a surprising touch of vulnerability. Although he had transfixed audiences scores of times, Sam still worried over how he would be received, and usually asked me to put him on the program early so he could put his work behind him and enjoy the rest of the conference.

When Sam spoke, his shyness sometimes concealed his real stature. He wrote out and read his speeches for fear of losing his train of thought if he spoke only from notes, and though what he wrote was brilliant, his head-down delivery could blunt his message. A new Sam would emerge when he finished his remarks and took questions from the floor. Here, suddenly, was the unscripted Sam, charming an audience of hundreds as if it were a dinner party of eight. His unrehearsed wit and insight were a perfect complement to his prepared thoughts, and as the years passed, I eventually persuaded him he did not need a full text. By the time he died, Sam often spoke from notes, and increasingly his speeches came from the heart, as well as from the page.

Sam was not without faults, and the gruffness with which he hid his shyness sometimes left wounds. Everyone who knew Sam appreciated his wit, but sometimes his sallies touched on the faults or vanities of others. He was a lifelong bachelor, and this may sometimes have dulled him to others' sensitivities. He must have had dinner at my house twenty times before he had anything more to say to my wife than "Is Jared there?" when she answered the phone. How, she used to wonder, could a man who had been so companionable the night before treat her like the answering service? But Sam meant no disrespect; it was just his manner. My wife noticed that he came to dinner empty-handed, but after a word from me he always brought wine or flowers.

Sam was not exactly a ladies' man, but he appreciated female attention. Once he walked into my house with several companions. My daughter, then seven or eight, who had seen him many times, ran to him and threw her arms around him. He turned to the other men, with a happy smile on his face, and said "*I* get a hug."

I never knew Sam to be extravagant. He was unimpressed by the material ways in which people display wealth or status, and he lived simply. For many years, he drove a faded maroon Chevy Caprice that belched smoke for what must have been the last twenty thousand of its two hundred thousand miles. It was a solid, Sam-like car of the sort police departments use for cruisers, but it always tickled me to think of so hard-headed a man driving something called a "caprice."

Like many bachelors, Sam would have had no idea how to entertain people at his own house, to which I was invited only once despite our close acquaintance. It was a modest, suburban tract house in Prince George's County, Maryland, and I believe it was the only house he ever owned. He showed me upstairs and down, proudly pointing out the family pieces that were so large a part of the furniture and decor. In the basement was his office, with shelves and shelves of books—nearly three thousand, I believe he told me. Although he had an office in Alexandria, Virginia, Sam often worked at home and was clearly very comfortable there.

Sam's house was in a part of Maryland that was rapidly becoming "diverse." He worried that property values were dropping, and sometimes wondered whether he should move to Virginia. There was not much violence in Sam's immediate neighborhood, but he was prepared if it ever came. He believed in an armed citizenry, and his weapons did not just gather dust. I have been to the range with Sam, and am quite sure he would have shot an intruder through the heart.

Sam preserved his privacy as carefully as any man I know, and also did not drag his career into his private life. At the time of his funeral on February 26, 2005, his sister and cousins were staggered by the number of out-of-town strangers who came streaming to Chattanooga to pay final respects. To them, he was still their dear, local boy. They had only vague notions of the figure he cut in the larger world. Just as Sam kept his private life separate from that of the writer and activist, he kept his career out of his private life.

Indeed, Sam's love of privacy was so strong that he might not have approved of this recollection I have written of a man rather than of a body of work. If he is looking down upon us now, I hope he will forgive me, and understand that many are eager to know something of the man whose writing moved them.

At the same time, I confess that I write also for myself. Sam's loss has been a harder blow than I would have expected. Sudden death is always a shock, but especially when a man is only in his fifties. Sam was just a few years my elder, and though I have built up a grim accustomedness to the deaths of people of

my parents' generation, Sam is the first close friend of my own generation to be struck down.

I grieve for Sam, therefore, not only for the great things he had yet to do for our movement, but for what he meant to me as a friend. He had just undertaken to write what promised to be his greatest contribution yet to racial scholarship and activism, and we are all the poorer that this book will never be written. At the same time, as I realized a few days after he died, aside from my immediate family and associates, there is no one whom I saw or spoke to more frequently. He leaves a gaping void both in our movement and in our hearts, and to remember and write about Sam is the closest I can come to having my dear friend with me once again.

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