September 8, 1982

Tribute to Louise Overacker, at APSA conference

David R Mayhew
June 1, 1982

Professor Herbert Alexander  
Director  
Citizen Research Foundation  
University of Southern California  
3716 South Hope Street  
Los Angeles, California 90007

Dear Herb:

I have arranged to hold a Denver APSA panel (on PACs) in honor of Louise Overacker, She recently died, as I am sure you know, though I arranged it several months ago at a time when I thought she might be able to attend. She wrote me: "I shall be happy to be honored at the APSA meetings in September. It is reassuring to know that attention is being given to PACs at this time."

The panel is listed on page 325 of the spring 1982 issue of P.S. The important thing I have to do is to compose a testimonial to Louise Overacker, for delivery at the opening of the panel (and probably for later publication in P.S.). I wonder if you have any materials, or ideas where I might find some, about her career — anything that would help me put together a testimonial.

Sincerely,

David R. Mayhew  
Professor

DRM/san
February 16, 1982

Professor Louise Overacker
110 Wood Road M-3
Los Gatos, California 95030

Dear Professor Overacker:

This letter follows up Beverly Cook's phone call to you. I am delighted you have agreed to let us honor you in one of the APSA panels at the Denver convention this coming September. The panel will be on campaign finance:

Panel: **In Honor of Louise Overacker, An Examination of Campaign Finance: "Political Action Committees: Operations and Implications"**

Chair: Michael J. Malbin, American Enterprise Institute

Papers: Frank J. Sorauf, University of Minnesota: "Accountability in Political Actions Committees: Who's In Charge?"

Edward Handler, Babson College: "The Corporate PAC Experience: Implications for Public Policy"

Discussant:

F. Christopher Arterton, Yale University

Either Mike Malbin or I will read a testimonial to you at the beginning of the panel, discussing your pioneering work on this subject of campaign finance. I will send you a copy of the testimonial, and also copies of the papers delivered on this and another panel on PACs. (PACs turn out to be the hottest topic among people giving papers in the parties field this year.)

Sincerely,

David R. Mayhew
Professor

DRM/aan
cc) Sheila Mann
        Beverly B. Cook
A year ago Beverly Cook brought up the idea of honoring Louise Overacker at a panel on campaign finance at this convention, and it made obvious good sense. No one has done more than Overacker to make campaign finance a subject of scholarship, at age 90 she was the senior figure in the field, and as late as February we thought she might be able to attend this panel. Her health did not allow it, though she wrote me:

"I shall be happy to be honored at the APSA meetings in September. It is reassuring to know that attention is being given to political action committees at this time." Then in April she died. Sadly this is a posthumous tribute.

People who knew her are the best witnesses to her full, exemplary career, but I should perhaps recall here some of its features: an early and deep interest in political parties—in particular direct primaries and campaign finance—which stayed with her during a full research and teaching career and a quarter century beyond; undergraduate and masters training at Stanford under Victor T. west; war-related work in a Washington agency during World War I and in the Paris office of the YMCA just afterward; a Ph.D. at Chicago in the 1920s under Charles E. Merriam and in the company of Harold Gosnell, Joseph Harris, Harold Lasswell, and R.O. Key, Jr.; her book with Merriam on primaries; decisive scholarship on the party systems of Australia and New Zealand, regaining research trips to Australasia in 1946, 1951, and 1965; enthusiastic participation in electoral campaigns in Massachusetts, in California at the time of the Democratic Club movement, and even on visits in Australia and London; three S.S.R.C. awards, a Guggenheim fellowship, and election to the American
Academy of Arts and Sciences; service in the A.P.S.A. as a council member (the first woman elected), a vice president, a member of the program committee, and a member of the A.P.S.A. editorial board, though not as A.P.S.A. president--this seems an oversight and an injustice; and her 32 years of teaching at Wellesley College, where she built a political science department and inspired several generations of women students to undertake careers in teaching and research, law, politics, and journalism. Overacker's own account of her career and her reflections on it appear in the record of an oral history interview conducted two years ago by Professor Cook. What was it like for a woman building a career as a political scientist six decades ago? It wasn't impossible -- Merriam in particular was helpful -- but it wasn't easy either. The oral record leaves no doubt that Overacker enjoyed her position at Wellesley, but it makes it pretty clear that at least one research university denied her a beginning position for the reason of sex.

Overacker's major statement on campaign finance is Money in Elections, published in 1932 and reprinted in 1974 by Arno Press. Presidential Campaign Funds, published in 1946, is a supplementary statement covering the Hatch Act of 1940 and the entry of the C.I.O. as a bankroller of campaigns. The 1932 work, in the judgment of Herbert Alexander, is "a landmark and a classic covering the early years of American experience with political finance and its regulation." He continues, in a letter to me, "I require my graduate students to read Louise's writings. Clearly she pioneered in a difficult area to study at that time, and her work inspired Alex Heard and myself in the subsequent work we have done." Money in Elections, like Heard's
Costs of democracy three decades later is mature a comprehensive treatment of campaign finance in the American system, using several kinds of evidence to deal with levels and patterns of campaign contributions and expenditures, why people contribute, the social bases of campaign money, and the origins and effects of state and national laws governing campaigns, and offering ideas on statutory reform. Overacker's use of quantitative data on contributions and spending is especially arresting. In the oral history interview she tells of ferreting out data from the old House Clerk's office, "on a shelf in the washroom in disarray" and of smuggling out some records so her secretary could type over the weekend. The result of patient labor was a breakdown of national contributions by occupational categories, a fundamental and most familiar set of summary statistics which later allowed her to track the considerable shift in the parties' money bases with the emergence of the C.I.O. in 1936.

The political universe portrayed in Money in Elections is in many respects familiar, though it had its particularities. Big-money campaigns aroused comment then as now. Overacker tells of the Fusionist campaign to re-elect John Purroy Mitchell mayor of New York in 1917 -- it didn't work -- which cost $1.3 million, about $10 million in 1982 dollars, or again in 1982 currency about $62 for each vote he received. The Senate sat in those years as something of a common-law court, taking up and appraising a series of expensive Senate campaigns, twice in the 1920s denying victorious candidates their seats partly -- though not entirely -- because they spent what was thought to be too much money trying to win them. Run-of-the-mill campaigns Overacker got her best fix on by inspecting data for
the state of Oregon, which had uniquely assentive disclosure laws. She estimates that, in the years from 1910 through 1928, only about one in ten Oregon candidates for a U.S. House seat spent more than about $25,000 (this is 1982 currency) in a November campaign, and spending in the House primaries ran at around the same scale. An especially brisk November campaign for the Oregon governorship might cost about $65,000, and for a Senate seat about $160,000 (both figures in 1982 currency). The correlation between money spent and votes won was about .8 in Oregon House primaries, and about .6 in statewide primaries, though a great many of the top spenders lost. One of the splashier events of those times was an Al Smith radio appeal for money in 1928, bringing in $126,000—or some $700,000 in 1982 currency. But Overacker, like many of us today, concluded after careful inspection that the cost of campaigns was not changing much: total money spent per vote cast was about the same in the 1928 Presidential election as in 1912. The ins and outs of regulating campaign spending were largely mapped out by 1932. Overacker wrote, for example, on the already vexed matter of regulating expenditures by independent actors: "If John Jones in a burst of enthusiasm for his fellow townsmen who is a candidate for Congress hires a hall and a brass band and advocates his election, how is this expenditure to be reached?" In general, Overacker came down in favor of reporting and disclosure requirements and against ceilings on contributions and expenditures. Many years later, she expressed approval of an innovation of the 1970s, as reported in the oral history transcript: "I was always in favor of public financing in some form. I may not have advocated it, but I did suggest it as a way. I never expected to see it in my lifetime, and I think it has achieved its main objective at the Presidential level."
For all the continuity in thinking and behavior, I came away from Overacker's works with a strong impression of flux. She like scholars today dealt with a politics hard to hold in place. The shift to direct election of Senators upset old financing arrangements. Radio campaigning burst forth in 1928. The CEA destroyed an old somnolence in the parties' money roads by giving the Democrats a new option in 1936. Reformers and ordinary politicians kept changing state and national statutes, generating new effects and causing political actors to adjust the passage of the Hatch Act in 1940, for example, disoriented Presidential candidates during that year in something of the fashion of the 1975 reform with its effect of candidate bewilderness in 1976. And the material available for analyzing campaigns changed too, the federal disclosure statutes of 1974 and 1976 giving Overacker the leverage she needed to do her analysis—though surely the leverage we enjoy today. What Louise Overacker did was to get, painstakingly, the best evidence available on campaign finance in her time, analyze it with great care and good sense, and lay out in her scholarship a complex political reality a wide audience could appreciate and applaud. She pioneered in doing this, setting examples for her successors, and she is one of a handful of scholars in this century who have done it extremely well.