


individual liberty, generally fail to foster deep conceptions of civic obligation. Westbrook put that claim to the test, attempting to excavate the political philosophy implicit in the artifacts of everyday life—advertisements, cartoons, posters, Norman Rockwell paintings, and even the pinups of Hollywood starlets—distributed to Americans with federal sanction during the war.

Through a discerning and at times colorful analysis of these artifacts, Westbrook concluded, in accord with the political theorists, that the reasons for which Americans fought were to carry out essentially private obligations—to families, children, parents, and “an ‘American Way of Life’ defined as a rich (and richly commodified) private realm of experience.”

Westbrook was drawn to Rochester 25 years ago by the prospect of teaching and working alongside Christopher Lasch, the historian and social critic who taught at Rochester from 1970 until his death in 1994. Over the years, Westbrook has consistently attracted a loyal following of undergraduates as well as graduates to his courses on American intellectual history, American culture during the Great Depression and World War II, and many others in a wide and ever-changing repertoire.

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen '92, the Merle Curti Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who took several courses with Westbrook as a history major, calls him “transformative” in her personal and intellectual development.

“I’d grown up in a shopping mall. I said ‘like’ every sixth word. I didn’t come in a package that at all announced that I could be a scholar,” she says. “But he took me deadly seriously, hearing past the ‘likes’ and ‘you knows’ and could see what was possible in me and helped me cultivate that.” These days, Ratner-Rosenhagen is among the scholars to whom Westbrook regularly sends his essays for feedback.

Says Kloppenberg (with whom Ratner-Rosenhagen studied in graduate school): “Robb has left a lasting imprint on the fields of American intellectual history, American political science, and the history of American philosophy. Those are three distinct fields. And not many people make a mark in more than one academic discipline during their careers.” 

McCally is an associate editor at Rochester Review and earned her PhD in history, under Westbrook’s supervision, in 2002.



NAMESAKE: Cunningham studied history at Rochester while waiting to be called to active duty and later established a career as an attorney in Washington, D.C.

Joseph Cunningham: ‘A Lifelong Interest in History’

“I was born and raised down the street from the University,” says Joseph Cunningham ’67 (MA), recalling “sledding on the slopes behind the football field” and playing basketball on campus. Urged by his mother to attend a Catholic college, he earned his bachelor’s degree not at Rochester, but at John Carroll University, he told the audience in Rush Rhees Library’s Hawkins-Carlson Room last May at the installation of the first Joseph F. Cunningham Professor of History.

After college, he pursued a law degree at Columbia. In 1962, a newly minted attorney who was also a commissioned officer awaiting a call for active duty, Cunningham had the time and the inclination to sample Rochester’s academic offerings. He eventually pursued a master’s degree in history, for which he was awarded a tuition scholarship.

“I’ve had a lifelong interest in history, and a great regard for the University of Rochester,” says Cunningham. He says he and his wife, Andrea, endowed a professorship out of “gratitude for the spontaneous generosity that the University extended to me when I wanted to pursue graduate studies.”

Cunningham’s master’s thesis, “Religious

Aspects of American Government in the Philippine Islands,” was a first-rate work of scholarship, says Stewart Weaver, a professor of history and chair of the department, who checked it out of Rush Rhees Library and read it prior to Cunningham’s visit to campus in May.

“Joe’s thesis anticipated by decades the recent scholarly interest in the cultural dimensions of Western colonialism and might well have been published had his career not taken him in other directions,” says Weaver.

Cunningham has practiced law for more than four decades and is the founder of the Washington, D.C.-area firm Cunningham & Associates, specializing in insurance defense and civil litigation. He has also taught law at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland.

Says Weaver: “The endowment of the Cunningham Professorship is a tribute not only to Joe’s extraordinary generosity but also an important statement of faith in the historical discipline. It will heighten substantially the visibility of our program and make it possible to retain and benefit from the presence of one of our most outstanding scholars.”

—Karen McCally