Written by Charles Scaliger on July 29, 2011

A.G. Heinsohn: Not Cottoning to Oppression

A given name such as Augereau was bound to get a boy in trouble, especially in Texas at the turn of the 20th century. Whether or not Augereau G. Heinsohn (pictured), who was born in 1896 and lived near Houston as a small boy, was aware that his namesake was the brother of Revolutionary War hero Lafayette, he developed early a fighting spirit as a result of being teased about his name. Although as an adult he was known as A.G. or "Heinie," Heinsohn's fighting spirit never diminished, and drove him to become an uncompromising foe of Big Government for decades.

A.G. Heinsohn's father, who worked in Gulfport, was employed in the shipping industry. Before A.G. was grown, his family moved from Texas to Minneapolis and then to New York City. Along the way, Heinsohn developed formidable athletic talents and earned a full athletic scholarship to play football at Princeton University. As a quarterback for the freshman team, Heinsohn led Princeton to a victory over archrival Yale and was picked as an All-American by the legendary Walter Camp.

The Princeton win cemented Heinsohn's reputation as a football player, but he soon met a foe even more formidable: calculus. As Heinsohn began a promising sophomore year, it was brought to his attention that Princeton expected him to excel in academics in addition to football. And Heinsohn, for all of his obvious intelligence and pugnacious determination, had so far been unable to grasp calculus. A tutor was provided for him, but the former quit in frustration after a few weeks.

With World War I raging in Europe, Heinsohn's Princeton career began to lose some of its luster. Anxious to be a part of the fight, Heinsohn enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps, dreaming of becoming a pilot and of dueling with renowned flying aces such as the Red Baron. Arriving in France with a group of like-minded young Americans, Heinsohn learned to his dismay that, owing to a bureaucratic oversight, there was no money to pay the volunteers. They were stranded in Paris flat broke.

Fortunately, the father of one of A.G. Heinsohn's companions was a well-to-do banker and sent them funds to tide them over. Thus provided for, the American pilots-to-be began their pilot training under French commanders.

If Heinsohn entertained any lingering illusions of glamor regarding the mission he had embarked upon, they were quickly dispelled by his first assignment, issued by the mustachioed French master sergeant assigned to train the upstart Americans: build a latrine. When Heinsohn protested that he had come to learn how to fly airplanes, not build commodes, he was told firmly that he had come to do whatever his superiors ordered, and he was being ordered first to build a latrine.

Owing, we must suppose, to his academic inclinations, Heinsohn wound up becoming a flight instructor for other pilots with the 95th Aero Squadron, First Pursuit Group, and did not see as much time in combat missions as his fighting spirit had hoped for. However, in surviving the war, he was to find

ample scope for his combative instincts — but in an arena he would never have imagined.

Arriving home from Europe, Heinsohn got a job at a cotton goods commission house in New York City, a brokerage firm that acted as an intermediary between the textile mills of the South and the garment industry in Manhattan.

While Heinsohn had been away in Europe, Mercedes, a distant cousin of his mother, who, with her husband, had witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, had returned to New York with harrowing tales of revolutionary peril and warnings of a nascent communist menace that would soon arrive on American shores. Recalled Heinsohn many years later:

> She constantly tried to drill into me the menace that this Bolshevik upset in Russia posed for the entire world, including the United States. I frankly considered Cousin Mercedes slightly balmy. For the life of me I could not see how a small band of rag-tag conspirators, led by unknowns with names like Kerensky, Trotsky and Lenin, offered any threat to the United States.

Out of politeness I listened, but my mind was on what kind of fun the coming weekend would provide and where I could pick up a couple of bottles of bootleg gin.

Heinsohn missed the thrill of flying, and decided to seek more glamorous employ outside the New York textile industry. He visited the Sikorsky Company, an avionics firm on Long Island, to see whether his pilot's credentials could get him a fresh start. The young Russian who interviewed Heinsohn told him there were no job openings; many other former pilots, unhappy with their civilian jobs, had already come seeking employment. The Russian had made a point of interviewing every one, because he had something to tell them:

> He then told me how his father, his mother, his brother and his elder sister had been shot down in cold blood in their own home by the Russian Bolsheviks. He had escaped, because at the last moment his mother had made him lie quietly concealed under a pile of soiled clothes in a closet. As the only surviving member of his family, he had managed to escape to the United States, to get an education, and to become an American citizen.

To show his appreciation he made it a point to see every ex-soldier who applied for a job…. He pointed out how wonderful it was to live in a free country such as America, where firing squads did not compel obedience to bureaucratic masters in government, as was the case in Communist Russia. He hammered on this and entreated me to be forever on guard to resist all attempts to impose governmental controls upon the American people.

The Russian further encouraged Heinsohn to take satisfaction in the job that he did have, and not to let it "lick him." He took the man's advice to heart, and returned to his job. "From then on," he later recalled, "I tried to learn all I could about selling cotton goods and instead of loafing on the job, I really worked at it…. To my dying day, I will thank this Russian gentleman … for lending a helping hand to a disillusioned youngster who badly needed it."

Within a short time, Heinsohn's fortunes at his job began to turn. Nor did he forget the Russian's and his cousin Mercedes' warnings about the dangers of communism and Big Government, though for the time being, the distractions of a rising career and family life claimed his attention.

Cherokee Mill Challenge

In the early 1920s, Heinsohn married Margaret Lylburn, with whom he shared, among many other things, a love of horseback riding. In 1935, not long after the birth of their second son, Doug, Heinsohn

finally got his first big career break. Following the sudden death of its president, the Cherokee Mill in Knoxville, Tennessee, asked A.G. Heinsohn to take over management. It was not necessarily the opportunity of a lifetime; in the depths of the Great Depression, Cherokee Mill was in desperate financial straits, and knew it had no chance of attracting someone more qualified. Concerned that the firm might fold underneath him, Heinsohn took the job with the assurance that he could return to his former job in sales in New York if Cherokee went under. He would be expected to learn about manufacturing and mill management while continuing to travel to New York to be involved in sales. For this he was made vice-president and paid the then-respectable sum of $8,800 annually.

The situation at Cherokee was almost unsalvageable. Only when the mill's directors agreed to pledge their own assets as security was Cherokee able to negotiate a 10-year mortgage to clear some of its current debts. Heinsohn adopted a policy of openness and honesty with mill employees, persuading everyone, from himself on down, to take a 10-percent pay cut to make the mill's operations more profitable. Heinsohn then convinced the mill's directors, much against their inclination, to publish the mill's latest statement of condition along with a detailed explanation of how the business was run and what costs were incurred. This approach boosted employee morale in those most difficult of economic circumstances, leading to a surge in growth that propelled Cherokee from the bottom of the textile-manufacturing heap to near the top in very short order. From 1935 through 1941, the economy remained mired in the Great Depression, yet Cherokee somehow made the best of a bad situation, paying off the 10-year mortgage lifeline in full in a mere seven years, and bringing Cherokee's relatively inexperienced new leader to the attention of the rest of the struggling textile sector.

In 1939, Heinsohn was asked to take over management of a second mill, in Spindale, North Carolina, that was in even worse financial condition than Cherokee had been. Reluctant to take on another such challenge, Heinsohn eventually saw the potential that such a merger would create for opening a joint sales office in New York, a venture that would enable them to greatly reduce the expenses associated with sales brokering.

Years later, A.G. Heinsohn attributed his success in bringing those two moribund firms back from the dead to his policy of openness and square dealing with his employees:

> We enjoyed a wonderful relationship with our employees, who seemed ready to trust us and with whom we were more than glad to share profits by means of a year-end bonus. We were and still are convinced that management can win the confidence of employees by laying the cards face up on the table.... In the September 23, 1954 issue of *America's Textile Reporter* will be found comparative five-year averages showing the percent of profit to sales of twenty-two textile companies. For the five years in question (1949-1953), Spindale stood number one on the list and Cherokee stood number two.

But even as A.G. Heinsohn's star rose, other forces sought to squelch the ambitions and achievements of successful American businessmen like him. The enemies of freedom that his cousin Mercedes and a grateful Russian émigré had warned him about years earlier had set up shop on American soil, and were working tirelessly to undermine and destroy the American free-market economy in which men such as Heinsohn were able to flourish.

Heinsohn's first major brush with the specter of Big Government was a labor dispute. Part of FDR's New Deal, the Wagner Act and Fair Labor Standards Act, empowered the federal government for the first time to micromanage labor-management relations, dictate work hours and working conditions, and even compel workers to unionize even if they were unwilling to do so. These two laws were not neutral

sets of rules, as Heinsohn observed:

> Never before had there been a law so completely one-sided as this one. It recited in detail what a labor union could do and what an employer could not do, but there was not one word to tell what a union could not do and what an employer could do.

In 1942, the Textile Workers Union of America began trying to organize a union among the workers at Cherokee. Because the Wagner Act prohibited employers from speaking to workers about union-related issues during an organizing campaign, Heinsohn cautioned all of his supervisors to obey this law since, in the anti-management climate of the day, the Labor Board would not hesitate to pounce on any violators, perceived or real.

Before long, the workers at Cherokee were bitterly divided. When a group of pro-union workers tried to forcibly pin union buttons on workers opposed to the union, Heinsohn decided to act to prevent violence, while trying to maintain the neutrality that the new labor laws required. He drew up a letter and sent it to every employee. Even after so many years, the letter is a gem of tact. Explaining that the law required management to remain neutral on whether or not the workers should unionize, Heinsohn spelled out the issue plainly and fairly:

> It is your privilege to form a union and to try to get your fellow workers to join.... We feel it our duty, however, to advise that some of the methods now being used in an effort to persuade fellow workers to join your organization are causing friction in the plant, and this is adversely affecting our production of war goods.... Should we continue, we will without doubt fall behind on delivery of sorely needed materials to the Army and Navy. We urge you to soberly reflect before you heap abuse upon fellow workers who may not want to join your union. We urge you to refrain from punishing them by interfering with their production.... It is just as much their privilege not to join as it is yours to join, and if this is a free country, then there is no place for threats, abuse, and coercion on the part of either the union or the management.

As a result of the letter, things settled down, and a few days later, when the vote over unionization was held, the union lost by 37 votes.

Unfortunately, the union, angry at the rebuff, refused to let matters rest. Complaining to the Labor Board that management at Cherokee had violated the law, union organizers managed to secure from the Labor Board a directive nullifying the results of the union vote and ordering another to be held within weeks.

Combating Character Smears

Angry at having his character thus impugned and his reputation smeared, Heinsohn protested strongly, and the dispute attracted the attention of two local newspapers, both of whom came down on the side of A.G. Heinsohn and his associates. There followed a public attack by one Paul Christopher, the president of the Tennessee Industrial Union Council, who published a long diatribe in the newspapers accusing Heinsohn of labor-baiting, of committing “intimidatory acts,” and, in general, of sowing “un-American confusion and disunity.”

A.G. Heinsohn the fighter, who had once defended his name against Texas schoolboys, fought back, issuing to the papers a brief, to-the-point response to Christopher’s allegations, which was published shortly before the second union vote was held. He pointed out that he and his associates had been tried and convicted, in effect, without evidence, and that the National Labor Relations Board would not even inform him why they had ruled against him. Heinsohn also denied ever acting in a discriminatory

manner, and dismissed the slurs impugning his patriotism.

“Apparently most of our employees could read and they must have resented this false charge against management,” Heinsohn recalled. The second vote wasn’t even close: The anti-union votes carried the day by a two-to-one margin.

Determined to clear his name of any wrongdoing, Heinsohn pressed ahead with a series of pointed letters to the National Labor Relations Board, repeatedly requesting that they inform him as to which portions of the letter he sent to his employees before the vote the Board found objectionable and coercive. Heinsohn received reply after evasive reply from a Mr. Millis. It was only when Heinsohn threatened to bring the matter to the attention of a congressional committee that Millis became accommodating. He informed Heinsohn that some of the labor agitators at Cherokee had taken offense at his letter’s claim that the electoral strife was adversely affecting the company’s ability to produce needed goods in wartime, believing it to be an attack on their patriotism. He confirmed that Heinsohn had not tried to interfere with any employee’s right to vote, while sheepishly admitting how arbitrary the actions of the Labor Board sometimes were.

The lessons of this particular saga were not lost on the editorial staff of the local newspaper:

> It should be in the minds of all of us that only rarely in human history have men lost their freedom in one sudden, overwhelming catastrophe. Most often they lost their rights by a gradual process; by a method of having a little freedom taken here and a little more there; by agreeing one at a time to small concessions which, collectively, reduce them to virtual slavery.

That could happen to this country; it could happen to us; it could easily happen if there were not always a few Heinsohns left with enough courage and vision to fight, singlehanded if need be, battles in the issues of which the rights of the masses are concerned.

No less a personage than James Madison expressed similar reservations, noting that freedom is more frequently lost via “gradual and silent encroachments by those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations.” In the years that followed, Heinsohn was to come into conflict again and again with such nitpicking encroachments, and each time, he fought back with characteristic determination.

Pushing Pushy Politicians

A couple of years after his dealings with the textile workers’ union, Heinsohn came under bureaucratic scrutiny by what he later characterized as “the craziest of all the more than two thousand New Deal bureaus,” the Office of Price Administration. The OPA, true to its name, spent its time (and taxpayer dollars) sifting through invoices and other pricing data in order to tell manufacturers what they were allowed to charge — price controls, in other words, a concept alien to America prior to the New Deal. Heinsohn found OPA bureaucrats, who presumed to dictate to him how articles should be priced in an industry they knew almost nothing about, to be more amusingly vexatious than menacing. In the end, he simply ignored many of their trivial and pointless instructions on pricing, and was not held to account. “Humour, coupled with a determination not to give in, seemed to be the successful recipe for slapping bureaucrats down,” he wrote.

While the price-control regime of the New Deal ended after World War II, the wage-control program, to Heinsohn’s dismay, did not. Even after the election of Eisenhower, a supposedly conservative Republican, highlighted the country’s distaste for New Deal socialism, minimum-wage legislation was not repealed. Now a seasoned political gadfly, Heinsohn fired off his first salvo opposing the minimum wage in 1949, to the Tennessee and North Carolina delegations. “If a business is to continue,” he wrote,

"a worker cannot receive more than he produces." He continued, in the crisp, persuasive style that was his hallmark:

> Any attempt by politicians to establish high wages by passing a law hurts the man who works for a living, because no politician can force citizen consumers to purchase against their will. If citizens refuse to buy because prices are high, then business must cease until selling prices are lowered.... History shows that God's natural laws cannot be lightly brushed aside by politicians and bureaucrats; it is inconceivable that adversity, honest hard work, decent self-support and other human factors can be removed from the American scene by passing laws.

The politicians were unmoved, although one of them, Senator Estes Kefauver, did take the time to answer Heinsohn's letter with a condescending defense of laws such as the minimum wage in a less-than-perfect world beset with "greed and selfishness," and where the golden rule was too often excluded from business dealings. To these warmed-over Marxist platitudes, Heinsohn replied tartly:

> As far as greed is concerned, it is not certain that any one class in America has a lock on that human trait. I gather that greed for public office causes some politicians to stoop to the despicable level of fanning class hatred and I suspect that greed for political power activates your patrons in the Political Action Committee of the CIO. What trait other than greed causes certain people to clamor for a law to deliver something for nothing?

Heinsohn remained in the thick of the minimum-wage controversy during the Eisenhower years, when the minimum wage was raised rather than repealed. The persistence of this pernicious new doctrine — that government ought to have a hand in determining what employers pay their workers — started to persuade him that perhaps the new era of government control ushered in by FDR and his zealots was a serious and enduring concern.

No less of a concern to Heinsohn was the inexplicable popularity of the federal government's controls on agriculture, another child of the New Deal which, like wage controls, continued unabated into the era of President Eisenhower and his fiery Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson. Here, too, he employed his letter-writing talents, but as with the minimum-wage controversy, his concerns, along with those of other Americans like him, fell on deaf ears in Washington. Regarding the popular notion of "parity" (a buzz word reflecting the supposed outcome of farm price supports), Heinsohn in 1949 appealed to constitutional authority in a letter to North Carolina Congressmen:

> Where is the word "parity" to be found in the Constitution? It is not there.... Where in the Constitution is authority given to Congress to force some citizens to give up their money so that prosperity may be guaranteed to others? Nothing but the most dishonest interpretation of the power of Congress to regulate commerce between the states could permit such a procedure.

Equally dismaying to Heinsohn were unconstitutional, socialist-inspired programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and America's massive foreign aid program, all birthed in the great surge of statism that accompanied the Great Depression and World War II. His indefatigable pen produced letter after letter, to newspapers, members of Congress, and leaders of industry, all in the cadences of an increasingly well-informed and alarmed citizen expecting that truth and common sense, properly couched, would carry the day.

At some point, Heinsohn came to realize that the efforts of one man, however energetic, would not be sufficient to turn the tide of creeping totalitarianism; only organization and planning could make a lasting difference. In 1949, Heinsohn and a small group of like-minded friends met at his house and

planned a rally at the Knoxville courthouse. The group, who called themselves the Fighters for Freedom, made it clear that they were non-partisan, non-sectarian, and favored no class or interest group above another. They were united and driven solely by a desire to defend the U.S. Constitution and to prevent socialism/communism from taking over America.

The first issue of focus for the Fighters for Freedom was the Korean War, in which Americans were fighting and dying without a constitutionally mandated declaration of war, under the foreign authority of the United Nations. Unfortunately, the fog of war appears to have overwhelmed this first movement, which did not last long into Truman's war.

In 1957, Heinsohn was involved in the founding of the Tennessee chapter of a non-partisan national organization called the National Committee for Independent Political Action. This organization, founded by the eminent Dean Clarence Manion, former head of the law school at Notre Dame, aimed to establish chapters in every congressional district to support all candidates in favor of the Constitution, states' rights, and limited government. Launched in a flush of national enthusiasm, the network lasted until the early 1960s.

It was not until the launch of Robert Welch's John Birch Society in December 1958 that A.G. Heinsohn found a patriotic organization with staying power. Although he was unable to attend the founding meeting in Indianapolis, he did attend the third meeting of the Society and joined immediately. Robert Welch appointed him to the executive committee of The John Birch Society, a position he held for the rest of his life. The John Birch Society had objectives similar to those of Heinsohn's own Fighters for Freedom, and was organized along national lines not unlike the intended structure of the National Committee for Independent Political Action (though it is unlikely either of these organizations influenced Robert Welch in his design of The John Birch Society).

A.G. Heinsohn was an appalled witness to the nationwide defamation campaign conducted against The John Birch Society in the early 1960s, in which the Society was smeared as a racist, intolerant organization cut from the same cloth as the Ku Klux Klan. The smear campaign took a toll on the Society, but the organization, thanks to the leadership of Robert Welch and associates such as Heinsohn, persevered.

A.G. Heinsohn passed away in July 1980. This author asked his surviving son Doug what his father would think of America in 2011, if he were alive to see it. "He would not recognize it," was his response. And no wonder: Many of the things that angered A.G. Heinsohn, and against which he fought with such vigor, are not only still with us, they have become widely accepted as indispensable to the new American system. Foreign aid, farm subsidies, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the minimum wage, the United Nations, and involvement in undeclared wars such as the Korean War have all become the norm. Few are left alive who remember America before all these legacies of 20th-century Big Government run amok were in place. And no one draws breath who can remember an America before the income tax, before the Federal Reserve, and before the fatal plunge, in the First World War, into minding the military business of the rest of the world.

A.G. Heinsohn's letters — speaking truth to power, as we would style it nowadays — are, unfortunately, a voice from another age, when reverence for the Constitution and the free market were still widespread, and when so-called "conservatism" had not yet been diluted and perverted into a "neoconservative" parody of itself by the likes of William F. Buckley and Irving Kristol. A.G Heinsohn, self-made man and uncompromising fighter for American liberties, was an eloquent spokesman for a generation that would be monumentally disappointed if their descendants fritter away the last vestiges

of freedom, in the name of security, fairness, compassion, class envy, or any other pretext.

— Photo: AP Images