

## *Introduction*

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Jean Bethke Elshtain, one of the most provocative thinkers on religion, political philosophy, feminism, and ethics, died August 11, 2013. She was the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics in the Divinity School, Political Science, and the Committee on International Relations at the University of Chicago. The contributors to this section participated in a retrospective roundtable on her work at the 2014 American Political Science Association.

### **Jean Elshtain, Defender of the Family**

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In 1951, when Jean Elshtain was ten, she contracted polio. In the small Colorado town where she grew up (then as now, the population was under 200), the medical system did not understand well how to deal with polio. Her doctors sent her to a hospital, separated her from her parents, withdrew fluid from her spinal cord without anesthetic, and, for fear of contagion, sequestered her in a single room where even the nurse feared contact. Elshtain said later, “The only person I saw during that time was a nurse who [would] . . . put a meal down and leave a bedpan.” After the nurse hurriedly left the room, this ten-year old girl faced the walls and her condition by herself.<sup>1</sup>

Her mother had had no more than eighth grade schooling because her immigrant parents had needed her help working in the northern Colorado beet fields. But she was, in Elshtain’s words, “fiercely dedicated to her

1. The details of Elshtain’s life and the quotations from her in the first five paragraphs of this essay are taken from Zoba 2003, reprinted with misattribution to Randall C. Zachman at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2726> (accessed August 2, 2014).

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