

## Obituaries

James S. Denton, journal editor who led programs to advance democracy, dies at 66

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by [Matt Schudel](#) June 23 at 11:47 AM [✉ Email the author](#)

James S. Denton, the publisher and editor of *World Affairs* journal who also led programs to advance democratic norms to rising leaders in countries emerging from the old Soviet bloc, died June 18 at his home in Washington. He was 66.

The cause was prostate cancer, said a brother, Michael Denton.

Mr. Denton came to Washington in 1980, the same year his father, [Jeremiah A. Denton Jr.](#), was elected to the Senate as a Republican from Alabama. The elder Denton was a Navy aviator who spent almost eight years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam after being shot down in 1965.

During a filmed interview from his cell in 1966, Jeremiah Denton used his eyes to blink out the word “torture” in Morse code. He was subjected to torture again after reaffirming his support for the U.S. mission in Vietnam.

Jeremiah Denton was released in 1973, the same year his son graduated from college. After attending Officer Candidate School, James Denton — like several other members of his family — entered the Navy and was on active duty until 1979.

He worked for a travel business in Norfolk before coming to Washington. In 1984, he became director of the National Forum Foundation, an educational and research organization founded by his father to promote predominantly conservative ideals. The foundation merged in 1997 with Freedom House, a long-established nonpartisan organization, and James Denton became executive director of Freedom House.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Mr. Denton developed a series of programs to introduce future leaders of Eastern European countries to western concepts of a democratic society, including human rights, the free press, free markets and an open, multiparty political system.

He worked in more than 30 countries, training nearly 1,000 political leaders and members of the media. In 1994, he established a grant-making program in Eastern Europe to help support think tanks throughout the region.

Mr. Denton left Freedom House in 2001 to become director of Heldref Publications, which was affiliated with the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation and published more than three dozen journals related to international affairs and public policy. The publications were sold to a British publishing company in 2009.

In recent years, Mr. Denton was director of the World Affairs Institute in Washington and editor of its journal, which was previously edited by one of his mentors, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations [Jeane J. Kirkpatrick](#).

In 2014, Mr. Denton launched the [Transatlantic Renewal Project](#), under the aegis of the Smith Richardson Foundation, to promote closer social, political and economic ties between the United States and European nations.

James Steele Denton was born July 5, 1951, in Lakehurst, N.J., and spent his childhood at various naval bases in the United States and Europe. When he completed high school in Virginia Beach, his father was in his fourth year of imprisonment in North Vietnam.

Mr. Denton graduated in 1973 from what is now Elon University in North Carolina. After five years in the Navy as a communications and anti-submarine warfare officer, he served in the Naval Reserve until 1984, reaching the rank of lieutenant commander.

In 1988, Mr. Denton was a principal editor of “Grinning With the Gipper,” a book subtitled “A Celebration of the Wit, Wisdom, and Wisecracks of Ronald Reagan.” He was a speechwriter for the 1996 presidential of Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.).

Over the years, Mr. Denton was a consultant to a wide array of groups and individuals, including Polish president Lech Walesa, news organizations and cultural groups, such as the North Carolina Ballet and Folger Shakespeare Library.

As a consultant to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, he had a major hand in developing the “America at a Crossroads” series of documentaries that aired in 2007 about challenges facing the United States after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Mr. Denton's survivors include his wife of 42 years, the former Marilyn Grisham of Alexandria, Va.; two daughters, Kathryn Earnest of Washington and Caroline Denton of San Francisco; four brothers, Jeremiah A. Denton III and William Denton, both of Virginia Beach, Donald Denton of Haverford, Pa., and Michael Denton of Richmond; two sisters, Madeleine Doak of The Woodlands, Tex., and Mary Lewis of Atlanta; a companion, Holly Vandergrift of Washington; and two grandchildren. Mr. Denton's father, who served one term in the Senate, died in 2014. His mother died in 2007.

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida.  Follow @MattSchudel

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