

The Vietnam experience is all here, from the Bob Hope shows, “that Barbara McNair is really a beautiful Negro and she can really sing,” to combat fatigue: “I’m so sick I really am,” wrote Jeffrey Fields, “I’m tired physically and mentally—I’ve got 60 rotten, filthy days left” (p. 63). Also included is the diary of pilot and prisoner of war Fredric Flom, who wrote of his fear and torture while being imprisoned for over six years in Hanoi, and the thoughts of service personnel toward protesters back home, which are surprisingly mild.

Stevens and his assistant editors have produced an excellent volume, one full of emotion, courage, and frustration. *Voices from Vietnam* is a credit to all veterans and necessary reading for historians of America’s longest war.

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The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education. By John K. Wilson. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. Pp. xv, 205. Notes, index. Clothbound, \$44.95; paperbound, \$14.95.)

This is a book by a veteran of the culture wars. A senior at the University of Illinois when he first encountered the phrase “political correctness,” John K. Wilson wondered why he had not experienced the leftist “thought police” that national magazines reported were controlling campuses across the nation. Assigned Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) as a freshman and Plato’s *Republic* five times in his later undergraduate career, Wilson’s experience told him the canon was still alive and well. Moving on to the University of Chicago, graduate work with the Committee on Social Thought there, and editorship of *Democratic Culture*, the newsletter of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, he found less political correctness than chilling evidence of racism, sexism, and homophobia on campus.

Wilson’s thesis is that conservative critics of higher education in the early 1990s seized upon the phrase “political correctness” as a rallying cry “behind which all of their enemies—multiculturalism, affirmative action, speech codes, feminism, and tenured radicals—could be united into a single conspiracy” (p. 1). A network of conservative writers, their efforts nourished and underwritten by several conservative foundations, were able, he argues, to parlay anecdotes, half truths, and misleading reporting into a larger myth that found ready acceptance among reporters and a public already angry about rising college costs and a tight job market for new graduates.

The author is at his best in chronicling the way in which the notion of political correctness swept into the national consciousness. Borrowing from the old political left, who applied the term *politically*

correct to individuals as a kind of mockery, conservatives of the 1980s transformed the phrase into *political correctness*, a label for an ideology that had corrupted the nation's colleges and universities. Pinpointing 1991 as the year when the phrase took on a larger significance, Wilson identifies a University of Michigan commencement address by George Bush as a key moment that captured national media attention. Major treatment of stories about political correctness had earlier appeared in *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and a special issue of *New Republic*; but in the weeks after Bush's speech, political correctness was the focus of seven national television shows (*This Week with David Brinkley*, *Nightline*, *Good Morning America*, *Crossfire*, *MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*, *Evans and Novak*, and *Firing Line*).

Frequently reporters focused on anecdotes in which faculty or students were portrayed as victims of militant feminists, gays, and others out to destroy the traditional curriculum and suppress free speech. Wilson does not deny that episodes of suppression did occur. Moreover, he admits that some of what conservatives attacked was just plain silly. He cites, for example, Smith College's handout to incoming freshmen castigating "lookism" for "the belief that appearance is an indicator of a person's value; the construction of a standard for beauty/attractiveness and oppression through stereotypes and generalizations of both those who do not fit that standard and those who do" (pp. 93-94). Similarly, Antioch College's much ridiculed sexual conduct policy, which admonished students to obtain verbal consent before initiating sexual or physical contact, was ripe for parody by George Will as "sex amidst semicolons" (p. 119).

The central purpose of Wilson's book, however, is to dissect the myth behind the political correctness label. The edifice of political correctness was built on four ideas: the teaching of western culture is being destroyed, students' and others' rights to free expression are being decimated by rigid speech codes, students and teachers alike are intimidated by sexual correctness and militant feminism, and, finally, educational standards are being lowered by reverse discrimination.

Wilson argues, for example, that accounts of multiculturalists' takeovers of the undergraduate curriculum at such prestigious universities as Stanford (the focus of repeated attacks by then National Endowment for the Humanities Chair William Bennett and Dinesh D'Souza in his *Illiberal Education* [1991]) and the University of Texas (assailed by *New York Times* reporter Richard Bernstein and Martin Anderson in his *Impostors in the Temple* [1992]) did not bear up under close scrutiny. Rather, he says, they were built on sensational anecdotes persistently retold and unsubstantiated claims. On the oft-repeated story of Jesse Jackson leading a group of Stanford protesters in a chorus of "hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture has got to go," Wilson reports that Bennett later had to admit "perhaps the Reverend Jackson was not chanting" (p. 67). On the charges of Stan-

ford faculty's being intimidated by crowds of demonstrating students during a key debate and vote on replacing "Western Culture" with a new "Culture, Ideas, and Values" course, Wilson cites evidence that many of those involved perceived no intimidation and were in fact unaware of any demonstrators. About the more general claims of the decline of western civilization in the curriculum, he asserts that he has been unable to document any instance of a traditional classic text being banned from a classroom for racist or sexist content. "Contrary to the fears of traditionalists," he concludes, "it is the traditional curricular view—not the multicultural one—that prevails at nearly every college in the country" (p. 88).

Some speech codes, Wilson admits, have been "ill advised" and as a result struck down by the courts. Still, he believes, sensational accounts of thought police patrolling the nation's campuses bear little relationship to reality. He cites studies which show that only about half of the institutions of higher education have such codes, and few instances of students being penalized under them have been reported.

Sexual harassment codes, Wilson would argue, have been little enforced and remain badly needed. He is perhaps most successful in countering conservatives' reporting on sexual "correctness," marshaling ample evidence that sexual harassment and even violence are far more widespread on campus than administrators in higher education like to admit.

On the issue of reverse discrimination Wilson points out, as have many others, that by indicators one can scientifically measure—salary, tenure status, and so forth—white males are doing very well in academe. He blames much of the myth of reverse discrimination on a poor job market for new Ph.D.s which fosters a sense of victimization on the part of those left out.

All in all, this is a useful and thought-provoking book that should be read by all those involved in higher education or in cultural institutions that have been a major front of the culture wars.

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