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THE WRISTON
LECTURE:
A VENUE FOR IDEAS

WALTER WRISTON MUST BE a very confident host. I once caught sight of him just a few hours before one of the lectures named in his honor. I was walking up Fifth Avenue; he was sitting at the window of a club, reading the newspaper as calmly as if he were expecting one person to dinner instead of 500.

Perhaps Mr. Wriston was so calm because he knew that the most difficult work on his series lay behind him. There must have been 100 lecture series already in business when the Manhattan Institute's Wriston Lectures launched in 1987. How absurd to imagine that this new series could ever become a significant intellectual venue—that the ideas expressed by the lecturers could ever make an impact on the culture and governance of a city as vast, noisy, bureaucratic, and self-satisfied as New York. But by the time I walked past Mr. Wriston's window, his lecture series had done all of that.

The story of the Wriston Lectures is a demonstration of the power of ideas—and of the boost that good ideas can get from a (usually) fine meal in a beautiful room.

The Changing Fortunes of New York

Fifteen years is not really such a long time. But for the city of New York, the decade and a half since the first Wriston Lecture has been a time of transformation. In 1987, New York was riding a Wall Street economic boom, but it was one that made even many of its beneficiaries uneasy. Wall Street and the Upper East Side might be pulsing with easy money and lavish display, but the city around them was visibly rotting. As Tom Wolfe reminds us in his great novel of the 80s boom, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, even the city's Masters of the Universe knew that one wrong turn could send them into a neighborhood where law and order had collapsed. The financiers of New York were hauling American business and industry into a new era of techno-progress, but their own town was apparently tumbling backward into a chaos of crime, drugs, corruption, and racial hatred.

And now? Financial New York has experienced its most prolonged and severe recession since the oil embargo of 1973. Lower Manhattan is a gaping ruin. The city knows itself to be the prime target of the most cruel and ruthless foreign enemy America has faced since the Third Reich went out of business. Yet New Yorkers, I think it's fair to say, feel more confidence and more optimism than they ever did in the gaudy years of the 1980s. They know that their city is governable, that crime and drugs can be conquered, that a boom in the financial markets does translate into jobs and prosperity for all—and, most important, they know that when it matters most, New Yorkers of all races and backgrounds become one united people: Americans.

The Wriston Lectures can shed a little light on this history. In 15 years, the lectures have hosted the powerful and the honored: two Nobel laureates, a billionaire businessman, a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, the National Security Adviser to the President of the United States. Yet some

of the most memorable lectures (as with any lecture series, of course, not all the talks have been of the same caliber) have come from people who have no authority other than the power of their arguments: writers, teachers, and the pastor of an inner-city church.

The range of opinion presented has been wide: former Manhattan Institute chairman Roger Hertog one year welcomed to the lecture “admirers and skeptics, respected liberals, muddling moderates, pushy libertarians, libertines for that matter, those who are pro-choice, those who are anti-choice, those who choose to waffle, and those who are merely leaning; silent majorities, boisterous minorities, vegetarians, flesh-eaters, humanitarians, animal rightists and animal companions; devolutionists, evolutionists, strict constructionists, and the home constructionists; fellow-travelers, stay-at-home moms, people of color, people of power, pinkos, reds, conservatives of every stripe and hue.” Some of the lecturers have indeed been conservatives by anybody’s definition, others have politics that elude definition, and one—Philadelphia mayor Ed Rendell—would go on to serve as a future chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

Some of the lectures have been startlingly personal; others have dealt with large social forces. But they have on several occasions given us new understanding of our times and insight into what’s ahead.

A Lens on Our Age and on the Future

Probably the very best prediction offered in any of the lectures came courtesy of Carver Mead, co-founder of Intel, in the first Wriston event, all the way back in 1987. At the time, the tech industry had collapsed into one of its cyclical slumps. Many feared that the whole semiconductor industry would soon pick up stakes and move to Japan, or maybe Taiwan. Mead sketched the technological possibilities that still lay ahead and then urged the audience not to give up yet on high-tech in America: “We’re not going to need the federal government to come in and bail out our electronics. We’re going to do just fine, thank you. There’s as much or more innovation and creativity in this industry as I have ever seen, and

there's a lot of places to go in the future." That, as it turned out, was putting it mildly.

Rupert Murdoch proved equally prophetic in 1989, when he offered this assessment of the potential political impact of cable television: "The American media elite is a fairly tight-knit group that is significantly further to the left than the overall population," he observed. "But in television, the increase in the number of channels that's coming will allow a much wider range of voices on the air, although that certainly isn't evident yet." It would become evident, however, when Murdoch launched Fox News a decade later.

Václav Klaus, then prime minister of Czechoslovakia, anticipated in 1996 a question that carries even greater resonance today, as America accepts large new responsibilities in the Middle East. "The relative weaknesses or strengths of institutions of a newly formed free society are only one aspect of the whole issue," Klaus observed. "What about the people? Are they ready for such rapid change? Does a free society presuppose...some set of values or moral standards that would properly anchor that society? Do the people need an interim period of schooling? Is such schooling realizable? Are there teachers for such procedure? Are the people willing to be educated? My answer to these and similar questions is rather simple. My answer is that the people are always ready and that they do not need a special education. What they need is a free space for their voluntary activities, the elimination of controls and prohibitions of all kinds."

Six years after Klaus spoke, Condoleezza Rice's Wriston Lecture inscribed the faith that "the people are always ready" into the foreign policy of the United States: "We reject the condescending view that freedom will not grow in the soil of the Middle East or that Muslims somehow do not share in the desire to be free."

Of course, the lecturers have not always agreed with one another in the way that Klaus and Rice did. There have been conflicts and contrasts, explicit and implicit. In 1992, the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood came to talk about his innovative approach to public housing—and to fire a blast at those who believe in private-sector-led growth: "In American cit-

ies, the public and private sectors are coming together to build convention centers, baseball fields, overgrown fish tanks, harbor and river and ocean places. More low-wage, no-benefits, part-time jobs are sure to follow.”

The year before, though, Milton Friedman had warned against putting too much trust in the public sector: “If a private enterprise is a failure, it is closed down—unless it can get a government subsidy to keep it going. If a government enterprise is a failure, it is expanded.” Thomas Sowell took up the argument again in 1998, summing up the Left’s view: “The freedom of individuals must be overridden if social justice is the overriding goal.”

Overarching Themes

Yet as one rereads these lectures by these very dissimilar lecturers, several shared themes emerge.

The first—despite Klaus’s admonition—is an emphasis on the preeminent importance of culture and values. “We are entering the last years of the twentieth century,” James Q. Wilson said in 1994, “with every reason to rejoice and little inclination to do so.” He continued: “We feel that there is something profoundly wrong with our society. Not with our own lives, mind you; the majority of Americans are satisfied with their own conditions. They are dissatisfied with the conditions and prospects of their communal life.... What these problems have in common in the eyes of most Americans is that they result from the weakening of the family.”

Cultural problems may seem intractable. But another theme of these lectures is the determination not to be controlled by fate—to solve problems rather than be overmastered by them. Thus, Mayor Rendell explained in 1993 how he had persuaded Philadelphians to accept his reforms in city work rules: “I started during the [election] campaign and I never stopped from the day that I took office. We communicated two very, very sound and correct facts: One, that we were out of money—no joke, we were out of money. Two, that the benefit package compared to what the average Philadelphian got was out of control.... [The workers]

went on strike and in 16 hours the strike folded.” Thus, too, Irving Kristol’s assessment of the future in 1995: “For the past three centuries culture has trumped religion. It is now conceivable that religion will once again trump culture. The challenge for some of us sympathetic to this revival of religion may yet turn out to be how to preserve the cultural heritage of Western civilization within a new religious context—a context that is not all that friendly to culture *per se*.”

Behind this theme of determination is a third theme: universality. Human beings, these lectures often tell us, are at bottom more alike than unlike. The values on which American greatness has been built are not the exclusive property of Americans or of white people, but are available for the benefit of all. John McWhorter in 2001 urged black Americans to lay aside their sense—diagnosed by W. E. B. DuBois—of belonging to two cultures, one black, the other American. “We must realize that for [DuBois] the double-consciousness was not a status badge of pride. It was a problem to be gotten beyond. As he put it, it was the longing to attain self-conscious manhood to merge the double self into a better and truer self. There are many signs that this merging into a better and truer self is an ever-nearer possibility for black America.” Or as V. S. Naipaul observed in 1990’s lecture, though he was born to a Hindu family in Trinidad, it was Western culture “that both gave the prompting and the idea of a literary vocation; and also gave the means to fulfill that prompting; that civilization that enables me to make that journey from the periphery to the center.”

A fourth great theme is awareness that we live in a time of technological transformation—that the machines we have invented are changing our society and our economy at a pace that can only be compared to the Industrial Revolution itself. George Gilder offered an arresting statistic to illustrate the transformation in his talk in 1999: “Between 1977 and 1997,” Gilder observed, “the value of GDP per American citizen rose from just over \$19,000 to just under \$27,000. But the weight of the output, the mass of the output, dropped by 23 percent, or nearly half a ton a year per capita and its value per pound doubled.”

Yet another important theme is the celebration of commerce—as

something valuable in itself and as something indispensable to the health of great cities. “I am here to proclaim,” said Norman Podhoretz in 2000, “that the American economic system and the American culture on which it is rooted have created a society in which there is more liberty and more prosperity than human beings have ever enjoyed in any other place or any other time. I am here to maintain that these blessings are more widely shared than even the most visionary utopians ever imagined possible. I am here to submit that this is an immense achievement and that it is what entitles the United States of America to an honored place on the roster of the greatest civilizations the world has ever known.”

A Coherent Vision

Together, these five themes add up to a something approximating a coherent point of view. It’s an optimistic problem-solving point of view. It defends the American tradition against its critics and champions bourgeois, commercial culture against its enemies. The point of view argues that in a time of rapid change, freedom is still the answer to our gravest problems, from economic growth to education. And it shows that a commercial society is not just a prosperous society but a good society.

These are the principles of the Wriston Lecture. They are the principles of the Manhattan Institute. They are the principles that saved New York City in the 1990s. And they are the principles that we are once again called on to defend in the great war in which the United States is now engaged. That war began with an attack on New York, and understandably so. As Tom Wolfe said in his lecture in 1988, “To people all over the world, New York City is the very apex of the American century. And for better or for worse, this has been the American century.”

Wolfe is a novelist with the gift of foresight, and the ominous undertone of his assessment of late-century New York carries redoubled power today. But just as New York was the first target of the war, so the New Yorkers at the Manhattan Institute have forged weapons for victory in that war. All the rest of us are in their debt—and especially in the debt of that generous, unflappable man in the clubhouse window: Walter Wriston.