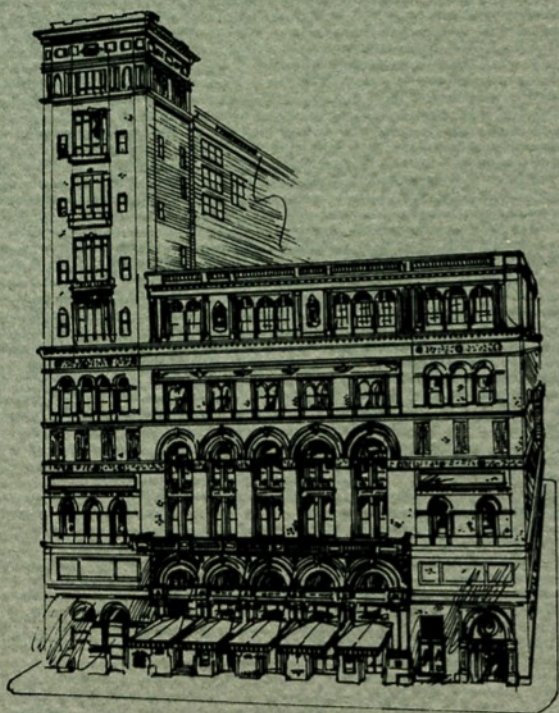


Today and Tomorrow In Tom Wolfe's New York

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The reviews of Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities described an essentially literary event—the transformation of America's greatest journalist into a first-time novelist. To be sure, Bonfire is a literary phenomenon of the first order. But it is more than that. New Yorkers are also talking about The Bonfire of the Vanities as a social phenomenon. Wolfe's acerbic anatomy of power and privilege in the nation's richest city has added indelible, even essential new phrases ("social X-ray," "lemon tart") to the vocabulary of every literate New Yorker. Moreover, the candor with which Wolfe discusses race relations in New York has already changed the euphemism-bound rules of public discourse in polite society.

The Manhattan Institute convened a panel to discuss what Bonfire has to say about the social, political, and economic realities of life in New York. Chaired by Manhattan Institute Fellow Walter Olson, the panel explored the degree to which Wolfe's bleak vision of New York today is exaggerated—and speculated on what the world of The Bonfire of the Vanities will be like in the decade to come.

Today and Tomorrow In Tom Wolfe's New York

A Lehrman/Manhattan Roundtable

Walter Olson
Chairman

Peter Huber
Myron Magnet
Charles Murray
Terry Teachout
Richard Vigilante
Walter Wriston

Participants

Peter Huber is an attorney and author whose book *Liability: The Legal Revolution and Its Consequences* will be published by Basic Books in 1988.

Myron Magnet serves on the Board of Editors of *Fortune* and is the author of *Dickens and the Social Order*.

Charles Murray is a policy analyst and author whose book *In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government* will be published by Simon & Schuster in 1988.

Walter Olson is a writer living in New York City.

Terry Teachout is a member of the Editorial Board of the New York *Daily News*.

Richard Vigilante is a writer living in New York City.

Walter Wriston is a banker and was a key architect of New York City's fiscal recovery in 1975.

Today and Tomorrow In Tom Wolfe's New York

Walter Olson—The first question that comes to mind in considering Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is this: Why did it take a novelist to tell us so many of the striking truths (or, at least, assertions) about New York City which this book contains? Why *didn't* the working press of New York do it first? When I asked Terry Teachout about this recently, his reply was: "That's easy. Novelists can get away with things that journalists would never dare say in print." What exactly is Wolfe getting away with in this book?

Terry Teachout—He is saying publicly things that most people in New York are only willing to say behind closed doors and not for quotation. In particular—and this aspect of the book has received the most criticism from unsympathetic readers—*Bonfire* flies in the face of any number of pieties about the nature of ethnicity and race relations in New York City.

New York is a virtual laboratory of liberal pieties, a place where all of the old-fashioned liberal assumptions about the proper role of government have been carried out to their furthest extremes. If you want to see a real-life experiment about how a policy as absurd as, say, rent control really works when systematically put into practice, this is the place to go. Moreover, merely to suggest in public that any of these assumptions might be untrue is to be immediately found guilty of first-degree heresy.

A great many of these pieties have to do with ethnicity. Even though most New Yorkers subscribe wholeheartedly to the notion of ethnic identity, it is simply not socially acceptable to draw general conclusions

about the predictable behavior of ethnic groups in a set of given circumstances. Not only does Tom Wolfe do that in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, he dares to draw *negative* general conclusions—something that it has long been impossible to do in New York without being ostracized from polite public discourse.

Charles Murray—The particular piety Wolfe treads on most unforgivably has to do with blacks and whites. He says out loud things that have been said at cocktail parties for years. He talks about the massive racial antagonism that's been out there for years, something nobody can talk about.

Back in the mid-1970s, when I was evaluating a program on juvenile delinquency, I first became acquainted with the statistics on who gets arrested for juvenile crime. I saw that juvenile crime is predominantly a black phenomenon and that juvenile crime rates were skyrocketing. Looking at those numbers, I said to myself, "This is really explosive. People can't ignore it for very long. It's really going to hit the fan when these numbers become common knowledge." Well, it never did hit the fan. People will talk *privately* about juvenile crime as a black phenomenon, but nobody has ever been willing to talk about it officially, publicly, in print. This is what Wolfe has done in *Bonfire*.

Myron Magnet—The first piety which Wolfe has broken, in fact, is to say that what the average middle-class white is worried about is black people. Note *Bonfire's* recurrent theme: the white man who is restored to primal maleness by taking on and triumphing over a young black man.

Walter Olson—With the aid of several thousand pounds of metal.

Myron Magnet—Well, the point is that Sherman McCoy's Mercedes is an extension of himself. That particular fantasy is something that nobody would have confessed to, even in private, before *Bonfire*.

Walter Wriston—Tom Wolfe is probably the only writer around who can say these things without getting people angry at him.

Terry Teachout—But lots of people are terribly angry over *Bonfire*.

Walter Wriston—They're not *vocally* angry. If anyone else had written a book that says what this book says, Al Sharpton would be denouncing him on the evening news. Maybe that has happened, but I certainly haven't seen it, and that's one of the most extraordinary things about Wolfe's skills as a writer.

Terry Teachout—To the extent that this is true, it's in large part because *Bonfire* is a novel. The fictional treatment puts a kind of prophylactic distance between the action of the novel and the reality of everyday life.

Peter Huber—Another reason *Bonfire* has not triggered as much antipathy as one might have expected is precisely that it's not exclusively about the vanity of black-white relations. Interestingly enough, most of the New York liberal critics have read it as a book which deals not with the poor or the legal system or race, but with the vanities of the wealthy. That doesn't capture the spirit of the book at all. *Bonfire* savages people right, left, and center.

Walter Wriston—That's why nobody's attacking Wolfe. He hasn't singled out any one group—he evenhandedly exposes them all.

Richard Vigilante—I think Wolfe has correctly assessed certain facts about racial and ethnic groups in New York. I also think he has correctly concluded that the old liberal pieties are beginning to fall away of their own weight. The message of *Bonfire* is that in race relations in the late 1980s and certainly the '90s—which may be very hot indeed—the pieties will be largely gone.

This may not be all to the good. One ameliorating factor in the great racial disturbances of the '60s was the fact that the average white American, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, with a few blatant and obvious exceptions, approached this difficult time with enormous goodwill because he expected that the race situation would eventually be settled, and in a decisively better way.

Today, by contrast, you have a rising generation of young black leaders who have never experienced a significant civil rights victory and who want action. At the same time, you have a white populace which has grown substantially more cynical about the prospects for immediate improvement in race relations. Wolfe hasn't so much violated convention by stripping away

the liberal pieties as he has announced—just a little bit ahead of the curve, in his usual fashion—that those pieties are falling away.

Walter Olson—I don't think it's just the respecting of some ancient liberal piety that causes Wolfe to make at least half of his black characters reasonably sympathetic. Mrs. Lamb, for instance, is no worse than a pawn, and her son is as much a victim as anyone in the book. It seems pretty clear that Wolfe's real target is Reverend Bacon and the system that created him, and he is painting most of Bacon's supposed constituents as his victims, too. This may explain why the charge of racism can never really be made to stick to *Bonfire*, why it's a more devastating attack on the New York political system than any simpleminded racist tract could ever be.

Richard Vigilante—I think that's very right, and that's why I disagree to some extent about it containing things that people wouldn't say even in private. *Bonfire* is obviously not a racist book. It's not about condemning black New Yorkers for not having achieved more. It's a book about the fact of racial animosity and the opportunities that it gives people like Bacon.

Terry Teachout—It's true that many of the black characters in the book are portrayed sympathetically—as pawns in Reverend Bacon's game. But what we carry away overwhelmingly from the book, as far as Wolfe's portrayal of the black community goes, is the image of Reverend Bacon himself.

Granted, *Bonfire* is a caricature, and there's nothing wrong with that. But anyone who takes Wolfe's portrayal of New York at face value will inevitably see the black community of New York as an opinion monolith. That's an oversimplification. Just before the Tawana Brawley case, the *Daily News* did a survey of public opinion in the black community in New York. We found out, among other things, that name recognition among blacks for Alton Maddox, Vernon Mason, and Al Sharpton was in single digits. You don't see that kind of thing in the book, because it doesn't suit Wolfe's purposes to present the black community of New York in three dimensions.

Richard Vigilante—We do see it, though. We see it, for instance, in the black cops of *Bonfire*. Wolfe is not

so much portraying an opinion monolith as he's portraying a kind of media agitprop politics. The black community is certainly not monolithic in opinion, but the portion of the black community that can be mobilized to make noise tends to be the portion that's willing to make noise about the issues that have typically been raised in the past.

Walter Wriston—Is the character of the newspaper reporter 100 percent accurate?

Terry Teachout—That's not *my* paper.

Walter Wriston—All I mean is that we're talking about things we really don't know firsthand.

Terry Teachout—That's absolutely right. New York journalists—the white ones, anyway—don't cover the black community very well. We don't know much about it.

Walter Olson—Wolfe's critique of the reporter in *Bonfire* is not just that he didn't really know what was going on in the black community—that's taken for granted—but that he was a cat's-paw of manipulators. Wolfe is also saying that Reverend Bacon is in some ways the creation of the white establishment. It would probably be hard to find a significant white institution that had not helped to create Reverend Bacon.

Myron Magnet—We err if we focus on Bacon as the only reality of race relations in the novel. One thing that can happen to whites in the world of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* is that they can be assaulted by blacks. The race question of the novel is at least as centrally focused on the shadowy existence of that man in the fourth chapter who yells out "Yo!" at Sherman McCoy as it is on the machinations of Reverend Bacon.

Unless we believe that there is an authentic threat contained in that man, unless we are willing to entertain fairly seriously the possibility that McCoy and his mistress are about to be mugged, then it's hard for our feelings to be much engaged in what happens in the rest of the novel. If all one can say is that Henry Lamb is a misunderstood victim of the social circumstances coming out of the shadows to help these poor travelers as they pass through, that these victims of stereotypical thinking rush away and accidentally kill one poor victim, this novel doesn't make any sense.

What, really, are the relations between the rich and the poor in this book? How are they connected? Everybody is saying that *Bonfire* is a “Dickensian” novel. But one of the things that Charles Dickens does so successfully is show how this ragged boy and that respectable middle-class member of the community are in labyrinthine and hidden ways closely connected with each other. That’s the weakest part of *Bonfire*, the fact that Wolfe is not interested in exploring these direct connections. Instead, he anatomizes a variety of little subcultures. He’s brilliant on each one, but they don’t come together to form the large coherent whole which is New York.

That may actually be Wolfe’s message—that what we’ve got is a bunch of little groups, all coherent in themselves, and all capable of banging up against the other groups. A rich guy can change his life by running over some poor guy, but it’s an accident. The relations among socioeconomic groups in *Bonfire* are quite accidental.

Terry Teachout—Wolfe says that the rich are doing their best to minimize the contact that they do have. They use their money to buy “insulation.”

Peter Huber—There is a very profound and important difference between *Bonfire* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a novel which in many respects is Tom Wolfe’s point of departure. At the end of *Gatsby*, you’re left with the sense that there will be some justice for the characters. Yes, Gatsby himself gets shot, and that’s an injustice, but one still has the sense that something beneficial will come out of the action of the book.

In the great social novels of the nineteenth century, too, one is left with some feeling that there’s an exit, that there’s something to build on, that there’s a shared morality or rule of law. There’s no exit in *Bonfire*. At least I don’t find any. You end up with a sense of unrelieved gloom and despair. Even in New York, until very recently, we’ve always had the sense that somewhere down the line there might be justice and a rule of law. In *Bonfire*, that sense is gone. The only good guy in the book, the only good *legal figure*, is Judge Kovitsky—and he gets thrown out of office by the machine as soon as he takes a stand for anything decent.

Walter Wriston—At the end of the book, Sherman

McCoy is asked, "What do you do?" He replies, "I'm a professional defendant." As a person with a few lawsuits against him at the moment, I can relate to that.

Walter Olson—Sherman McCoy is really standing in for the class that he comes from. They may not realize it, but they are all in the dock. Some choose to defend themselves. Others—as when McCoy couldn't tell his little daughter what he did and why it was productive—plead *nolo contendere*.

Myron Magnet—But let's not be too sympathetic to McCoy. Another way the classes are held together in this book is by a general decadence. McCoy seems to love his family in a moving way, is loyal to his class, and cares about his firm, at least until the end of the book. But, in fact, there's nothing he won't do to gratify his own appetites, and if this gratification requires the utter wreckage of his family, he's willing to do it.

It is very difficult to find anybody in *Bonfire* who has any kind of moral authority whatsoever. At the end of the book, with the net closing around him, Sherman McCoy goes to his father, and he realizes that his father is just a grown-up boy like him, also impotent in some important way, also without power, also simply playacting at being a man. This scene is very touching—in a modern kind of way. But it's also slightly pathetic. McCoy is saying "OK, we're all boys and this bad thing happened and it's too bad and my life's going to be ruined, but it's not really my fault" instead of "I'm a man who made a choice and acted in the world, and my fate is to some degree my own making."

Charles Murray—Take almost any other novel of the last 20 years or so that has had genuine political resonance. Those novels have all implied some kind of political solution—usually a state in which there is a more equitable distribution of things. By contrast, the political projection from *Bonfire* is altogether scarier.

Walter Olson—Let's see if we can formulate exactly what this awful vision is. It seems to tie in with the title. The Bavardages and all their friends seem totally unmindful of the social forces that are bubbling up underneath them. They are doing nothing to come to terms with these forces. They're simply going to be knocked off the top of the volcano at some point.

Charles Murray—But one of the things that I took from the book was the sense that they were not in jeopardy in terms of their power.

Richard Vigilante—I agree. *Bonfire*, however, is about fragmentation and encapsulation and a complete absence of civic virtue. In that environment, although there is great reason to doubt that the city will prosper, there is no great reason to believe that the Bavardages, whom I would call hustlers, will not prosper.

Sherman McCoy made a mistake, but his downfall was certainly not an inevitable result of social forces. As Wolfe himself says in interviews about the book, in many ways the city is in the middle of an economic boom. It has enormous social problems, but I don't think there's any particular reason to expect the disappearance of the Bavardages, who are doing very well.

Myron Magnet—The extraordinary thing is that there is no sense of economic exploitation in this novel. Take a typical Victorian social novel—Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for example, where you have poor Tiny Tim, who will die if Scrooge doesn't raise Bob Cratchit's wages. But in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, we're really talking about an underclass. Wolfe asks, "You think the future can't cross a *bridge*?" Well, if Salomon Brothers were suddenly to offer jobs to all of the folks over the bridge, nothing would happen, because that isn't the problem. They wouldn't take them.

Charles Murray—The incendiary thing about this book has less to do with blacks racially than with the "victimology" with which blacks have been so closely identified. I think there is a terrific weariness on the part of the people who have been holding up the orthodoxy of the victim all these years. In a sense, Wolfe has given them the sanction to be openly cynical.

Myron Magnet—Some novels are social landmarks. They sum up the ethos of their era, and the huge response to them is as much a part of their reality as the words on the page. This book is one of them.

Terry Teachout—*The Bonfire of the Vanities* has sold something like 700,000 copies so far. One assumes that several hundred thousand of them were not bought in New York City. That has a lot to do with its potential influence. We live in New York. When we read *Bonfire*, we're not just reading a novel. We're

reading a chronicle of our experience of New York and our understanding of it, and we bring that experience to our reading of the book. We recognize the elements of caricature and we allow for them. But I gave a copy of *Bonfire* to my mother, who lives in a small town in Missouri, for Christmas. As soon as she read it, she asked me when I was planning to move.

Walter Wriston—That is extremely typical. I travel a great deal across the country and that's what people say: "My God, you *walk* to work every day?"

Myron Magnet—In most of Dickens's novels, there is a note of personal redemption. The protagonist, as a result of his experiences, undergoes a kind of personal transformation which will illuminate all his own personal relationships in life and provide a spot of light in what was otherwise a rather dark tableau. Dickens is continually pushing the notion of personal regeneration, with the implication that if we could all have this regeneration, the problems of those lower on the social scale would be solved.

Now suppose somebody like Sherman McCoy could have this kind of personal regeneration. So what? What would a bond trader at Salomon Brothers be able to do, being socially transformed?

Walter Olson—I think Wolfe answers your question with the constant misgivings he gives McCoy about whether it might not be better to change his style of life and become a pillar of an actual community, Knoxville. The grim implication does seem to be "Leave New York."

Terry Teachout—Leave New York and set the torch to your vanities. That's the only exit.

Richard Vigilante—We seem to agree that Wolfe is describing in *Bonfire* an enormous city without a center, with these encapsulated, non-interactive groups in conflict. Why is New York like that?

Walter Wriston—One reason is that it's a transient city. Frank Sinatra sings, "If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere." New York is a magnet for talent. Everyone who has made it here came from somewhere else.

Remember that Mayor Koch was elected by 29 percent of the registered voters in the last election. If he

has the support of only 29 percent of the registered voters in a city of 7 million, that says right there why the city can't be governed centrally. The coverage of the city in the local papers is another reason that New York is fragmented. We have no real coverage of the city as a city.

Terry Teachout—New York is also a town which in large part consists of people who are descendants of clearly identified ethnic communities.

Walter Wriston—But lots of people have come in. Like the Dominicans and the Haitians and the Puerto Ricans. Or like you, Terry.

Walter Olson—Here you have almost the reverse of the classic late nineteenth-century social structure in American towns, which had an upper class of natives and a lower class of immigrants doing the harder work and looking for advancement. The outsiders come into New York and get most of the fancy jobs and the natives still find themselves doing much of the hard work.

Terry Teachout—Which is why the natives see their salvation in the ethnic bloc, in the community bloc. It's that diversity of blocs that makes any attempts to radically change the system in New York hopeless. The paralysis of leadership that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* describes is exactly what Bill Buckley was talking about in 1965 when he ran for mayor. He spoke of New York as having reached a point of marginal disutility of bloc satisfaction. That's why Mayor Koch won with 29 percent of the registered voters. He couldn't get more than that—no one could.

Walter Wriston—New York has no establishment. It's the only city in the United States that doesn't have one. We found that out in the fiscal crisis. We have fractured this city with local school boards, local environmental groups, all sorts of other local groups. Whole new alliances have to be built. The result is that there's no place in this city where it's actually run.

Richard Vigilante—I'll take the ideological plunge. New York is the country's most nearly socialist large city. Here, as in most socialist societies, people live without a natural expectation of justice. Everything is premised on being able to make a deal or pull a string

or, as they say in the black community, “get over.”

New York’s most important reality is real estate, which is socialized. In an environment where some people have \$200-per-month three-bedroom apartments and some people have \$2,000-per-month studio apartments, people don’t assume that the reward for working hard is getting ahead. They don’t have a natural expectation of justice.

Terry Teachout—Which explains *Bonfire*’s emphasis on what Wolfe calls the “Favor Bank”—a system in which the “contract,” the exchange of favors, is the principal medium of social interchange. Wolfe implies that these reciprocal favors are based solely on personal loyalty without regard to the ethical propriety of either side of the deal.

Richard Vigilante—It’s the modern social contract.

Walter Olson—Note the pivotal role that the rent control system plays in the downfall of McCoy and Larry Kramer alike. One of the most valuable items in the novel is the tenancy of Maria’s apartment, which is fought over. Similarly, McCoy’s co-op board, though technically a private institution, is actually the playing of political forces, and it, too, is not a place where merit can ever protect its own, the way it could in cities where people get to own their own homes.

Richard Vigilante—It’s absolutely wonderful that Kramer has an affair because he sees the small size of his apartment as an impugment of his virility.

Walter Olson—There is the echo, of course, of a very different novelist, Tama Janowitz, with her emphasis on how the desirability of singles in the New York romance market hinges so much on the apartments to which they have access.

Walter Wriston—On the housing side you have two groups: those who have rent-controlled apartments and those who do not. The gap is both very wide and structural. New York is the only major city in the United States that has had rent control since the 1940s. We abandon 30,000 apartments per year in New York. We’ve been doing that since I can remember, and nothing can be done about it. One reason why there is no expectation of social justice is that there’s no expectation that rent control will ever go away.

People living side by side will be charged wildly different rents.

Peter Huber—This is such a multi-textured book that we all bring to it our own experiences. That's what a great book does. From a lawyer's point of view, what hits home is that no lawyer in the book is trying to push for any abstract conception of justice and right.

Lawyers have given up on that. It has become unpopular to try and do justice in the narrow individual case. We're all trying to further some greater social policy. It has become routine to accept injustice of one sort or another in the individual case in pursuit of larger aims. We now have a "broader" conception of justice that eclipses justice in the particular.

Myron Magnet—The great legal theme of the 1970s was precisely to substitute for the rule of law a set of political agendas. The '70s was the era of affirmative action. Everyone was asking: What is law except an instrument for the reform of society according to somebody's ideology?

Walter Olson—The law in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* reflects this compartmentalization and all its problems, just as the wider social scene in New York does. I'm thinking of Wolfe's anecdote about an ambulance going from Long Island to Westchester County, committing a continuous act of malpractice which can therefore be sued in the Bronx, where such cases are very likely to be won. Sherman McCoy is in his own way a victim of the same sort of disintegration of what had once been a fairly unified and consistent system of justice. He's much more at the mercy of local prejudices.

Peter Huber—*Bonfire* also takes on the classic myth that the wealthy can always get what they want out of the legal system. This book suggests exactly the opposite. And if one accepts Wolfe's picture of the New York legal system as accurate, which I do, then it is a devastating answer to the Critical Legal Studies movement, which presents the law as an instrument of oppression of the poor by the wealthy.

Walter Wriston—If you have a legal zoning problem, you go find somebody who grew up at City Hall who knows where the bodies are buried, rather than entrusting it to the usual legal system.

Terry Teachout—Don't forget that the pols in the book are looking for a fall guy.

Myron Magnet—They need the great white victim, the great white criminal.

Peter Huber—That simplifies it too much. The larger point is that the legal system has come to operate for purposes other than doing individual justice according to norms rooted in history and longstanding practice. The legal system is now trying to do something else. In the case of *Bonfire*, it happens to be trying to soothe black-white relations. But it's the idea of a legal system being used for abstract, larger purposes that is the source of the problem here. Granted, Wolfe's particular caricature may not be all that common. But the picture he paints of the legal system co-opted for other purposes—increasing safety or redistributing income or what have you—is very accurate.

Myron Magnet—But one part of it is very traditional, as lovers of Dickens would know: the notion that the law is a tremendously effective instrument of violence. To ruin somebody's life, just sic the lawyers on him.

Charles Murray—You know, I can't figure out how Tom Wolfe, a man who's been a zillionaire for the last 25 years, can characterize Kramer's apartment and life in all these little tiny ways which make you think he's actually been a struggling lawyer.

Terry Teachout—It's all reportage. This book may well be the greatest single piece of reportage that has appeared in my lifetime. It's certainly comparable to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or anything Rebecca West ever did.

Walter Olson—It is very Balzacian. Balzac hung out in the French bankruptcy courts for awhile to research a novel. Wolfe went around in this way, and I am told by those more intimately involved in the New York City criminal justice system than I ever hope to be that, if anything, Wolfe has understated the awful reality.

Charles Murray—My wife and I have been working on a book about the Apollo space program and have talked to a lot of people about *The Right Stuff*. We frequently hear that while Wolfe has dramatized and thus to some extent distorted the events he writes

about, he's invariably right on the overall picture, on the feel of things. I've had flight controllers say to me, "It took me years to figure out what made these astronauts tick, and here this guy comes in and he has got it right down the line. It's exactly what they're like."

Terry Teachout—Wolfe is willing to listen, which is an increasingly lost art among young reporters. Far too many reporters—and Tom Wolfe himself, interestingly enough, is part of the reason this is true—go out and try to fit what's in front of them into the predetermined schemata that they bring along with them. Wolfe doesn't do that in his own work. He seems to start as a pure listener, as a sensitized plate.

Walter Olson—Which brings us back to Peter Fallow, the journalist in *Bonfire*. Possibly there is symbolic significance in the fact that the one character who had the responsibility of blowing the whistle at each stage of injustice in the novel was the one whose mind had been quite thoroughly, and by self-infliction, befogged.

Fallow is a good candidate for watchdog in some ways. He's not partial to either side. He probably started out intelligent. He's certainly well-placed. But he is often called the worst character in the book. This suggests the greatest guilt belongs to the people who should be calling attention to the nature of the system.

Richard Vigilante—I think that's right. The press accepts New York's desperate condition with remarkable equanimity. I'm not sure why. It seems as if ideological bias plays a role, but I'm so tired of the bias explanation.

Walter Olson—Wolfe made nothing of that.

Terry Teachout—As a conservative, I'm predisposed to find ideological bias in the news media, but I haven't encountered all that much of it in the course of my own career as a mainstream journalist. It exists, but I don't think it's a major factor—it's certainly not presented as one in *Bonfire*—and most of the people who point it out as a major factor don't really understand the inner workings of the news media.

The real problem with the media is that we expect something that is particularly hard for them to provide: a sustained view of events in their larger context. The real failure of the media to tell the truths contained in

Bonfire has more to do with the fact that daily papers have short attention spans than with questions of systematic ideological bias. We tell our stories one day at a time and we don't easily think in terms of the larger, longer stories that can't be explained outside of the compass of a long, detailed book like *Bonfire*.

Myron Magnet—I don't agree. If not an intentional, premeditated slanting of stories, there is at least a kind of careless, habitual outlook on the world. On the whole, those who say that the media are infected by liberal pieties are right. Most journalists do have a kind of sloppy, optimistic, liberal view of the world.

Papers like *The New York Times* are suffused throughout with utterly unexamined liberal assumptions in their coverage of poverty. Year after year after year, you get a dose of it every day: "Look at these poor victims. What are we in the heartless city doing to help?" That's why the case of Joyce Brown is so important. It is very difficult not to see that Joyce Brown is a nut, and such a realization forces us to re-examine some of our assumptions about people like her.

Richard Vigilante—Going beyond the dailies, there are powerful media in New York that have both the time and the resources to do a better job and, to some extent, a more honest job ideologically: *The New Yorker*; *New York*; the *Village Voice*; *Manhattan, inc.* None of these institutions is willing to be even remotely honest about what's going on in the city. The *Voice* does the annual feature "New York's Ten Worst Landlords," which is a good story in a way, but no one is willing to take up the far more interesting question of why being a landlord in this city is rapidly becoming a criminal profession. That may be the most important New York story there is.

Myron Magnet—If you were going to write that story, though, you would have to say, "The story is that a lot of the liberal bromides of the last 20 years simply have been disproved by events. Let us look at what the actual social situation is here. Let us look at what kinds of governmental programs have and have not worked. Let's do a Charles Murray kind of investigation of what the unexpected results of well-intended efforts have been."

Peter Huber—Exactly what unforgivable sin does

journalist Peter Fallow commit? He's a repulsive character, of course. But what, after all, did he actually do? He starts by saying that Henry Lamb has been killed in a hit-and-run accident, and that nobody's much interested in it because he's a poor black kid. I don't know that that necessarily reflects an exclusively liberal bias.

Terry Teachout—He also falsifies the background of the kid, saying he's an honor student, to make it a better story.

Richard Vigilante—Al Sharpton now always refers to Tawana Brawley as an honor student.

Peter Huber—That's a pretty small-time falsification, though. The kid has never been arrested, which makes him an "honor student" in the rough terms of the New York ghetto.

Walter Olson—Fallow's major fault is simply allowing himself to be spoon-fed a story that benefited its source. His problem is laziness, not bias. He is insufficiently critical, unwilling to step back and ask, "What interest is being served by planting this story with me and what are the potential harms it may do if printed?"

Peter Huber—What he does wrong seems to me much the same as what everyone else in the book does wrong. He is not interested in taking his job and simply doing it as well as he possibly can. He's on the make, just like everybody else in *Bonfire*. He views reporting not as a goal in itself, not as something that has its own internal dignity, but something that provides him with his Aegean cruise and his Pulitzer Prize.

This is McCoy's failing, too. He's a patrician, but with no sense of the responsibility that goes with it. Every lawyer in the book—and this is what hits me so hard—is exactly the same. They are not interested in law or the profession in and of itself as something valuable and worth doing. They are all prisoners of their vanities and their hidden, personal objectives.

Richard Vigilante—Is it possible to change that?

Peter Huber—The book obviously doesn't leave much room for hope.

Terry Teachout—I think the message of the book is that individual salvation is the only kind of salvation possible.

Myron Magnet—Yes, and there's not much of it in *Bonfire*, either. If you have so shrunken a conception of the self as this novel puts forward, it is very difficult to think about individual regeneration.

Terry Teachout—It depends on whether you're convinced by McCoy's conversion at the end.

Myron Magnet—Has anyone noticed that in *Bonfire* people don't have inner lives? They have appetites, but the most cartoonlike feature of the book is that nobody has an inside. I think it's a failure in the book, but I don't know what to make of it.

Terry Teachout—Is it a failing in the book or is it merely a part of the message that Wolfe is trying to convey?

Richard Vigilante—It's a very contemporary error: the whole myth surrounding the yuppies, the myth of people without an inner life. Everyone has an inner life.

Walter Olson—Because of the rapid, telegraphic way in which Wolfe wraps up the book, what might have been more easily perceivable as the continuing education of Sherman McCoy is harder to see.

Still, I think Wolfe intends for us to see McCoy as having finally figured out exactly where he went wrong and to have come to understand the full gravity of society's situation. Of course, it's too late for him to do anything about it except go on struggling. But in a way the book is a cautionary tale. It says to the reader, "Consider the fate of Sherman McCoy. Possibly you can learn better without having to go through it yourself."

Myron Magnet—But McCoy becomes a crank in sneakers in the end, a man obsessed. His eyes may have been opened to some degree, but all he's gotten out of his experience is his injustice.

Terry Teachout—Perhaps Wolfe is trying to say that in the closed world of New York, this kind of suffering is the only path to goodness.

Myron Magnet—I don't think so. I don't think McCoy turns out good.

Terry Teachout—Have you noticed, by the way, that nobody sees himself in this book? Everybody sees other people.

Peter Huber—I see a lot of my profession.

Terry Teachout—But there's no character about whom you say, "That guy's like me." I think that's one of the reasons for *Bonfire's* popularity. None of Wolfe's characters is really deep enough to have a kind of tragic triumph.

Charles Murray—In most of the other things that Tom Wolfe has written, one of the chief characteristics is the deep affection he clearly feels for the people he writes about. This is the first book of his where you don't get that sense of affection.

Walter Olson—I think there's a fair amount of affection, actually. But hasn't Wolfe said in one of his magazine interviews that he eventually got to like nearly all of the characters? They're not the figures of sheer mockery and fright that you make them out to be.

Myron Magnet—Speaking of mockery, I'm struck by the passage where McCoy can't explain to his daughter exactly what he does for a living. Wolfe seems to be implying what is often said about the Reagan boom: that it's mere paper-shuffling, creating nothing tangible or valuable, and that therefore this activity is part of the general nullity of a decadent society—that these well-educated men from the greatest educational institutions of our land are out there buying for money on the bond market. This is one way in which Wolfe falls into a kind of easy criticism of the ethos of our age, and I would take exception to his judgment.

Walter Olson—I would like to believe that Wolfe did not actually go along with that critique, that he knows that there is an answer McCoy could give but doesn't know, and so makes this central partly because it's McCoy's own tragedy. If he had known better what sort of person he was and why he was a legitimate member of society, he might have dealt with his other problems.

Myron Magnet—What in the novel would lead you to think that Wolfe disassociates himself from this implication?

Richard Vigilante—The fact that he attributes it to the wife, in such a nasty way.

Walter Wriston—The flip side is that Wolfe does write about the gladiators who lose all touch with any reality but the game. And it's nice to stand back and say that it's good for America, but if you are 38 years old with a wife and three kids and payments on two mortgages and eureka, your division's being sold in the morning, that's a whole different kettle of fish. To a certain extent, the deal that McCoy puts together is a typical gladiator deal in which the playing of the game is an end in itself. I've seen the lawyers and the investment bankers and the M&A guys and the traders and it's an invisible hand all right, because they don't know what is going on with the people involved down in the organization.

Terry Teachout—Still, I think McCoy's motives are clear: He wants to make a lot of money. We're told in endless and fascinating ways why he needs to make all that money. We know how much his mortgage payments are and how much his shoes cost. We're fully informed about his need for a lot of money in order to lead the kind of life he wants to lead.

Richard Vigilante—I'm not normally disposed to share this criticism of Reagan-era acquisitiveness, but in the particular context of New York there is a way in which it might behoove us to take it seriously. Part of the problem can be seen in the difference between McCoy and his father.

One of the great tragedies in New York is the absence of good guys, of a force of individuals who are trying to deal with the city's problems at a level of more than coping. I don't mean the fact that the city went bankrupt, or the fact that it's going to go bankrupt again as soon as it has to build some bridges, but the lack of a moral center, the lack of a system of justice, the lack of a rule of law. There is no articulate voice or group of voices in New York for an ethos of community service and community values, a shared moral system.

Now, the difference between Sherman McCoy's profession and his father's, however pompous and in-

effectual his father may seem, is that his father's profession was integrated into the community. His father's commercial role was simultaneously a social role. I wouldn't blame Sherman McCoy or the other people up at his office for being solely concerned with their private affairs. The environment in New York is not such as to encourage them to find other satisfactions in life. Sherman McCoy is never encouraged to explore the satisfaction of being a force for virtue in the community, and it is one of New York's tragedies that there isn't such encouragement and there aren't such forces.

I'm dissatisfied with the idea that personal salvation in this context is sufficient. I think this book should be a rallying cry. New York is the apple of my eye. I rearranged my career to come back here. I love New York more than any other place on earth, but I'm continually distressed by the lack of a force for virtue in the community.

Walter Wriston—There's a growing force, but it's invisible, perhaps because virtue doesn't sell.

Terry Teachout—There are a lot of people in this town that aren't here because they love it. Maybe most New Yorkers are here for reasons other than love.

Walter Wriston—There are a lot who do love it, though, I'll tell you.

Richard Vigilante—I applaud the problem-solvers. It's wonderful that they're still around. But what New York needs more than anything else—Peter Huber is absolutely right about this—is a community-wide sense of justice and fairness and honest dealing. The moral atmosphere of New York has to change, and it can only change when people are willing to admit that we are suffering fundamentally from a moral deficit.

That's why this is such an important book. That is the rallying cry; the personal salvation which Wolfe holds out at the end of *Bonfire* is not sufficient. It should be a fable of collective salvation, community salvation.

Terry Teachout—One of the problems with effecting that change is that everybody is compromised. In a system where some of the basic structures of governance are compromised—as is the case with, say, rent control or affirmative action—you end up with a

Kafkaesque situation: If you want a fearful society, make the laws so outrageous that everybody is forced to break them as a matter of daily survival.

Richard Vigilante—When there's no predictable law, of course everyone involved in any kind of significant activity in New York will fairly soon degenerate into being criminal.

Walter Wriston—It runs right through the society.

Peter Huber—Personal salvation, personal rededication, is obviously not enough. The problem with all the characters in *Bonfire* is that they see their professional work not as an end in itself, but as an instrument to some other end. That, of course, is the core problem of today's legal system. The ideal of law and the system of law have lost the Kantian notion about justice and morality. But in law, you either operate openly, for the stated ends at hand, or else you have nothing left at all.

Walter Olson—I don't think Wolfe sees the causality in the world of *Bonfire* as running from bad characters who somehow all wind up in New York to the awful system they make. It's that people who start out reasonably idealistic, no worse than people in any other system—Larry Kramer, the prosecutor, may be the best example of this—get turned into scamsters because the system has no general moral code for prosecutors that would seem any more attractive than trying to seduce some juror. In a way, the system that prevails in the city has corrupted all the characters, and I suppose the largest single slice of that system is the law.

Myron Magnet—But look at the central case of Sherman McCoy. How is that true for him? Sherman McCoy does his bond deals and they're fun. You can't say there's anything immoral about that. They may be only marginally useful from an economic point of view, but here's a guy whose real ethical failing in the book is that he's involved in a careless extramarital affair. What does that have to do with any kind of system? It's more general than that.

Richard Vigilante—His agonizings about whether to pursue the affair, in relation to his dissatisfactions with his wife, may not have a systemic ring, but they

certainly have a contemporary ring.

Terry Teachout—Why not consider McCoy's dilemma in the terms that Charles used in *Losing Ground*? What are the incentives for Sherman McCoy to be good?

Charles Murray—Wolfe is almost like Carlyle in a way—his code of ethics consists of an injunction to put your hand to something and do it right and do it well. Nobody does that in this book, and the indictment is particularly relevant to the Sherman McCoy's because they represent the Ivy League schools. I recently went through my Harvard alumni twenty-year book, the one they send out to tell you how everybody's doing. Being a man of statistics, I made a little list. It turns out that if you go to Harvard, you join one of the most disadvantaged subpopulations in the country, because you have very few options of profession. You either become an attorney or a professor or a physician or an investment banker. You will not produce or sell a widget. You won't become an engineer.

The people that Wolfe has written about in his other books can become engineers. But like Harvard graduates, the characters in *Bonfire* end up shuffling paper, brokering relationships, and all the rest. As a result, the only incentive McCoy has is money—and that's a terribly dispiriting incentive.

Terry Teachout—McCoy moves in a post-moral world.

Myron Magnet—But in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, the one thing people care about other than money is reputation. These are people who wish to be admired, and while it's surely not as powerful a motive as it would have been with Lord Chesterfield, these characters do want to parade themselves in front of the "social X-rays" and be given the authentication of having arrived by sitting at Susan Gutfreund's dinner table.

Charles Murray—But in what sense are you distinguishing this from the money incentive? It's a socially useful force if you want your neighbor to think well of you and if this drives you to behave in a social, civilized, and useful way. That's different from a desire for things.

Peter Huber—The problem with all these folks is that they think that money or power is sufficient, in fact the entire object of existence.

Myron Magnet—Why does some guy give \$20 million to the museum? Vanity!

Walter Wriston—Or the impulse of charity. But let me ask you fellows this: Assuming all the things in this book are true, why do you live in this town? And what impact do you think a novel like this is having on our country's perception of New York City?

Charles Murray—It confirms the prejudices of non-New Yorkers.

Terry Teachout—It does much more than that. My mother, for example, doesn't know a lot about New York. She may have prejudices, but they're not particularly deep ones because they're not rooted in firsthand experience or knowledge. Well, this book gives her that knowledge. It creates, in large part, her vision of New York. Yes, it also forces all of us to answer the question which she asked me: Why *do* we live here?

Charles Murray—I'm sure many people who read this book will see the events in it as something very much like tribal rites. As a result you're going to see a much keener sense of moral outrage over Wolfe's portrayal of New York. It's like having Sodom and Gomorrah over there on the East Coast while they're engaged in virtuous behavior out in the Midwest.

Terry Teachout—Who would defend the world of this book?

Charles Murray—Yes, it is so unlike the world that a *whole lot* of other people live in.

Richard Vigilante—I like Terry's question of who defends this *world that does exist*. *How many people* do we really know who are like the characters in this book? And whether you blame the system or the people, how many people do we really know who are as thoroughly caught up in scamming as they are in this book? The answer, I suspect, is not that many. Why, then, don't the non-scamsters form a more powerful force in this city?

Peter Huber—A lot of the people I deal with are scamsters. I'm a lawyer. Many of the people I see are amazed that anything else happens in life other than deals and scams.

Walter Olson—We know each other around this table. But I'm not sure how much a typical 40-year-old prosecutor in New York City is like Kramer because I don't know any of them. The few people I know who might have been prosecutors would have done it as a way station for a year or two and moved off to pursue their careers.

Walter Wriston—I think Terry can make a very rational argument to his mother for living in New York.

Terry Teachout—Oh, sure. To begin with, I live here because the *Daily News* is not in Kansas City. But I also live here because the New York City Ballet is not in Kansas City. Because the Museum of Modern Art is not in Kansas City. Because Carnegie Hall—and the Carnegie Deli—are not in Kansas City. Because the people around this table, and all the people like them that I know, don't live in Kansas City. That seems pretty rational to me.

Walter Wriston—Exactly. I came from a town of 30,000 people and I'm going to live in New York for the rest of my life. Why? Because New York is a cafeteria and you can put anything on your tray that exists in the world if you have the time and money. Where are you going to meet, where is your mother going to meet, some of the folks you could meet here? With all the warts, this is still the greatest city in the world.

Terry Teachout—But when do its undeniable advantages cease to be cost-effective?

Charles Murray—It would seem to have gone beyond that point in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Walter Wriston—Remember *Naked City*? The old TV show where the announcer started off by saying, "There are 8 million stories in the naked city"? Well, this book is about a few of them. The other 7 million-odd are a lot more pleasant.

Charles Murray—If you folks aren't going to say

New York is as bad as Tom Wolfe paints it, I would say that Washington probably is. If you go listen to a bunch of Capitol Hill staffers, talking about their jobs and what they are doing, it is the complete unadulterated scam. I just don't hear them saying things like "Here is the polity that we want to build."

Terry Teachout—Washington doesn't even have the compensating romance, however false, of New York.

Richard Vigilante—There are some things that Wolfe clearly misses. There's one sense, for instance, in which the book is five to seven years behind the times. What about, say, Bedford-Stuyvesant? Bed-Stuy was a land of myth when I was a teenager. When my cousin first joined the New York City police force and found out that he'd have to make out a report every time he pulled his gun from his holster, he decided to patrol Bed-Stuy, where he was stationed, with his gun in his hand. But now Bed-Stuy is a real estate frontier. It's being resettled, with houses selling for \$195,000.

Walter Wriston—It's been done by some very committed people.

Richard Vigilante—It's also been done by some other forces that you can't necessarily explain in personal terms. Wolfe writes of the New York of five to seven years ago, when Manhattan was a fortress surrounded by hostile properties. But New York today, in a way different from all previous eras, is breaking the bounds of Manhattan, and the outer boroughs are growing and becoming more important.

Walter Olson—You invite us to consider the honesty of Queens, then?

Richard Vigilante—Don't forget that Queens is for the most part not rent-controlled, because the houses are too small. In Queens you have good old-fashioned political crooks who steal money.

Terry Teachout—What happens when the liberals get too tired to hold the orthodoxy up? Nothing! Institutions like rent control will hold it up for them. When you fix the game like that, you're fixing it for decades. Sure, the liberal orthodoxy can go to hell, but there's still going to be rent control, because it's rooted in human nature and the power of greed.

Charles Murray—Except that people, perhaps from reading *Bonfire*, might finally feel liberated to say things that they had been denying they were thinking. That might lead to some changes.

Myron Magnet—It used to be that property was politics, but in certain ways it has ceased to be so. I live on the gentrified and gentrifying West Side. I am surrounded by people like me, people with families, and I keep wondering why the politics of the neighborhood does not in the least reflect the social and economic realities which now obtain there.

Walter Wriston—Do you vote?

Myron Magnet—Sure I vote, and what I have to vote among is various varieties of irrelevance, as far as I'm concerned.

Walter Olson—Aside from rent control, what are some of the other reasons why no matter how fast the old orthodoxy falls away, things are not going to improve soon?

Richard Vigilante—Tom Wolfe once did a great piece about the day when the special lanes came to Los Angeles freeways where you could only drive if you had four people in the car. This marked a crucial change in the goals of urban planners, the moment when their goal first became to frustrate human happiness so that physical systems would not be overused. This change has certainly come about in New York. All the plans for transportation in New York, for controlling traffic, for moving people, have to do with making people sufficiently unhappy so that they won't come into Manhattan and overuse the city.

Walter Olson—In *Bonfire*, Tom Wolfe often seems to be striking resonances with the earlier ways in which America has handled ethnic and immigrant frictions—namely, the rise of the Irish and various other groups to positions where they ran city government which had previously been limited to the WASPs. These people, of course, became pretty good at governing. Does Wolfe see the current situation in New York as fundamentally different?

Terry Teachout—The big difference is that there's never been an underclass in this country before. What

happens when you empower an underclass, as will surely happen in this city, given changing demographics? Does it cease to be an underclass when given power?

Myron Magnet—The other difference is the one referred to earlier—the fact that there is no establishment and thus no way to assimilate the newly empowered underclass into an ethical and political system.

Richard Vigilante—Clearly, New York's black politicians think that after Ed Koch there is going to be a black mayor. That seems very unlikely to me.

Walter Wriston—I would think there will be. But not an underclass representative—he'll be a Mayor Harold Washington, not a Mayor Bacon.

Terry Teachout—Yes, but if the establishment no longer exists to socialize the Reverend Bacons of New York, just as their predecessors were socialized, some very unscrupulous people will be able to get their hands on the levers of power at last. Surely there's no question about that.

Charles Murray—I take it as given that the powers-that-be in New York City, with the financial clout and the rest of it, are not going to let that happen. To use Wolfe's phrase, they simply won't let the future come over the bridge. That will be prevented—probably by some fairly nasty means if necessary.

Peter Huber—The theme of this book is that the future has already come over the bridge. This process of power politics—which is perfectly normal and acceptable in some areas of government—has in fact corrupted our legal system. Rather than a traditional seizure of power in the legislative and executive branches, which is an integral part of democracy, it has taken the form of a dilapidation—and, in fact, a dismantling—of the legal system.

Walter Wriston—Is it unique to New York?

Peter Huber—I don't think it's just New York. I think *Bonfire* is a national book.

Richard Vigilante—The institutions by which successful ethnic groups in the past have had their turn

have largely washed away. We have replaced patronage, which was a relatively rational system that involved some work on the part of the recipients, with welfare and affirmative action.

That not only means we have cut off paths for integration into the establishment, but since welfare and affirmative action are systems without a lot of internal logic and without a clear rationale of reward and punishment, we've also depressed the underclass's organizing abilities. The patronage system made it possible to build parties or institutions or alliances that could eventually take over the city. But underclass politics in New York is extremely disorganized—in part because blacks lack the patronage system to encourage them to organize.

Myron Magnet—Underclass politics in the past has generally been the politics of the mob. I don't know that the underclass can be organized as a political force in any traditional sense, but they can certainly be fomented to riot. When Tom Wolfe talks about the future coming over the bridge, I think that's what he means—the urban rioters are coming with their pikes and so on. Isn't that the specter?

Walter Olson—There are a couple of vignettes along these lines. One of them is when the demonstrators assemble outside of McCoy's own apartment building and, of course, there is no one to say them nay. There is the doorman, of course, but there is no one who still feels outrage at the tactic of picketing a home.

What you get in the novel, I think, is the breakdown of the social sanctions that would once have caused collective horror at demonstrators gathering at someone's front door. But in the real world, what you also get are organized and successful efforts to shut down the city's subways to make ideological points, as happened last December with no particular reaction from the custodians of civic virtue in the press.

Terry Teachout—Perhaps the most significant development in the modern history of black America is that for the first time, the black community is no longer thinking of itself as a single community. An underclass and a middle class have emerged more or less simultaneously. What will that mean? The black community, as Jesse Jackson has demonstrated lately, continues to vote as an opinion monolith. But the monolith is starting to split. When the *Daily News*

polled New Yorkers about the Tawana Brawley case, some 80 percent of the black respondents said she should cooperate with the authorities. That doesn't fit the solidarity model which traditional black politicians have relied on for decades. What happens when the black middle class realizes that its true allegiance is not to the underclass but to its own economic and social interests?

Walter Wriston—That has already happened.

Terry Teachout—Not quite. But when it does—and the increasing geographic separation of the black middle class from the underclass will speed the process—you'll start to see the emergence of a new bloc of black voters who begin to feel for the first time that there's not a black ticket for them to vote, that there's not a single set of black interests. When that happens, all political bets are off.

Charles Murray—Assuming Wolfe is as accurate a commentator in *Bonfire* as he has been in the past, one thing the book suggests to me is that the next decade is going to be a fascinating time to live in for observers of social and political change.

Terry Teachout—But does the prospect please you, Charles, or does it make you want to run for the nearest fallout shelter?

Charles Murray—I'm pretty pessimistic about it. On the other hand, out of chaos can come a new paradigm.

Walter Wriston—Hasn't the American experiment time and again reached points similar to this one in history where we have overcome the difficulties of the day? One of the problems with Americans is that they don't read their own history—or anybody else's. If you look at what this city was like when Canal Street was a canal, and Wall Street had a wall, when they were hanging people down there and throwing them in the canal, when disease spread across the city and there was no political structure, it may increase your confidence in the abilities of Americans to change things for the better.

New York today is certainly better than it was ten years ago. The transportation system is better. We've finally decided that we need a good public school

system—which is a great step forward. We've created an enormous number of jobs here. I wouldn't be pessimistic about this country or this city.

Myron Magnet—Twenty years ago the specter of the urban riot was widespread. Now it isn't. Why?

Walter Wriston—I don't know why. But I do know that when we were working on the city crisis, the common belief really was that they're coming over the bridge. I had people come in all the time and say, "You know, they'll be marching down Park Avenue, carrying torches and burning out the city." You don't hear anybody saying that now. And I know that if we're in real trouble, there will be people who will come forward and work with the problem. But you have to reach a point of crisis first before you can galvanize the city. □

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