

Interview with
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Conducted by
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Norman Corwin: I'd like to believe there is both poetic and political justice in the fact that the two educators closely identified with national policy and American identity in a fractious world bear the same name: Wilson. The first was president of an Ivy League university before he became President of the United States; the second, whom I have the honor of meeting in his office on the main campus of the University of Southern California, is a man so deeply integrated in the socio-political education and fabric of the country that he must be regarded as a walking encyclopedia of modern academia. For on his way to the deanship of the School of Journalism, which begins its 80th year this very day, he has served with rousing distinction in myriad capacities. Allow me to identify some of the seats of learning he has occupied after his graduation from California at Berkeley, and post-graduate work at Harvard:

The University of Maryland.

The University of Pennsylvania.

The University of Michigan.

The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He is married to [Francille] Rusan [Wilson], a doctor of philosophy, and they have two sons.

Dean Wilson, when I first heard you speak last spring, at the exercises seating former dean Cowan in the new Annenberg chair, you were brisk, and sunny, and I wanted to hear more. Have you, in the interim, begun to acclimate yourself to Southern California, after your career mostly among the middle Atlantic states?

Ernest J. Wilson III: Well that's exactly right, and first of all it's a great honor and a great privilege to be with you today. I have long admired your career and it's a real pleasure to see you again and to have this opportunity to chat today.

It is a delight to be on the left-hand coast, as we call it, and I should say a delight to be *back* on the left-hand coast because I had a previous experience, a previous incarnation, in that other end of the state in Northern California, so I lived for 3 or 4 years, a bit longer, in Berkeley, but of course we had very disdainful views of Los Angeles. So now it's a delight to come here and see the reality of Los Angeles and it's exciting. So I'm really delighted to be here.

NC: Now, have you experienced a major earthquake?

EJW: Well, I am fortunate to say I have not yet experienced that, but I suspect it will happen sometime during my tenure.

NC: May I tell you about a man who came out to California to visit me, and interview me...

EJW: Yes.

NC: ...and the interview was spread over three days, and the last question he asked was “What’s an earthquake like?” And my answer was not very scientific. But he found out that night, with the Northridge Quake [oh my goodness], and he found out, in a hotel room on Santa Monica Boulevard, what a 7.0 earthquake feels like.

EJW: Well I would be happy to postpone that privilege.

NC: Well, I hope you never have that privilege.

Now, is there a great difference in the nature of the programs of both Ambassador Annenberg chairs? That is to say, Dean Cowan’s and yours?

EJW: Well, yes, there are, of course we are all members of the USC family, the Trojan family, and the Annenberg family writ large, and so we do share the same values. I have to say that Geoff Cowan is someone whom I have admired over the years, and had the privilege to know for a decade, so I think that we share many values and past experience.

His chair is really concentrating on leadership issues, and how do we define leadership in this new age, and how do we define leadership in communication. My own chair is oriented a bit more toward public policy kinds of issues, so there’s some distinctiveness but also a bit of overlap.

NC: Dean Wilson, in an e-message that you sent last Friday to your colleagues, you mentioned an ongoing Metamorphosis project. Could you tell us a little about it?

EJW: Yes, this is a very exciting project that is being done by my colleague Sandra Ball-Rokeach, who is a senior member of our faculty and who I've just asked to join me, in fact, as the associate dean for faculty affairs in my office. The Metamorphosis project seeks to apply some of the leading modern social science methods to examine the use of technology in the communities around the University of Southern California. It's a very exciting project that's been going for a number of years, and it's really at the cutting edge both of communication as well as its social impact on society.

NC: And a well-named project.

EJW: I think so, yes, Metamorphosis.

NC: Now, you've had an astonishing career at some of the greatest education establishments in the country, if not the world, and one of them was MIT.

EJW: Yes.

NC: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

EJW: Yes.

NC: Was this by any chance during the presidency of Jerry Weisner?

EJW: It was not. I have met Jerry Weisner before, a man of great learning and a great leader, but I've been privileged to work with MIT in a number of capacities. I am the founding co-editor-in-chief of a journal called *Information Technology and International Development* that talks about the ways in which new technologies of communication are being used and distributed and the impact they're having in developing countries, and I am also the editor of a book series on information and the global condition.

NC: When do you sleep?

EJW: Well, as they say, there are only 36 hours in the day, so we have to squeeze that time in...

NC: Anyway, I ask about Weisner because he was a friend of my youth...

EJW: Is that right?

NC: ...and I lost track of him when he became science advisor to President Kennedy.

EJW: Right, that's right.

NC: And a wonderful man.

EJW: He was.

NC: I'm glad you confirm that judgment.

EJW: Yes.

NC: Now did you ever go through a period of fascination with the Boston Red Sox?

EJW: Well, I'm afraid that I proved myself immune to that particular bout of enthusiasm with the Red Sox. I did live in Boston for four years but I'm afraid I didn't succumb to that particular –

NC: Well it's my town –

EJW: Right, I know, and if only I had known that I would –

NC: You know, the Red Sox are the only baseball team in history whose style resembles Greek tragedy.

EJW: Yes, that's right.

NC: They made a habit of winning a World Series once in a century.

EJW: Yes, that's right.

NC: And I think they are six and a half games ahead of the Yankees right now...

EJW: Is that right?

NC: ...as we're speaking, but mark my words: they will have the playoff for the pennant.

EJW: Right, it'll be a tough one.

NC: You have succeeded a highly innovative dean, whose programs and the energies lavished upon them must be challenging to follow. Do you intend to carry forward some of the so-called ‘brown bag luncheons’?

EJW: Well, I do, and I have to say that Geoff Cowan is a good friend, and my wife and Geoff and I are having dinner this evening, in fact

NC: Oh good, please give my best to them.

EJW: I will indeed. He truly has been one of the great deans in communications in the country, and he has really brought the school to a remarkable level. What I hope to do is build on his tremendous level of accomplishment and the accomplishment of our great faculty, and to maybe try some slightly new directions, and one is just the area that you pointed to. What I will do with the dean’s luncheons, the round table, is continue that tradition, but what I am planning to do, instead of having a variety of different topics, this year we’re going to use that forum to concentrate on only one topic, and that topic is *innovation*. The challenges to America, the challenges to universities, and especially the challenges to the media about how you achieve sustainable innovation in an environment that seems to be changing every day.

NC: I am stirred by that program.

EJW: I think it’s going to be very exciting.

NC: I take it that you agree with the concept of the Lear Center?

EJW: I do, entirely, I just left, before coming here, I spent about 45 minutes with Marty Kaplan...

NC: Oh, good.

EJW: ...who is the director of the Lear Center and also a schoolmate of mine from college.

NC: Oh, really?

EJW: I have relied heavily on Marty's fine strategic thinking and his sense of humor since I have become dean.

NC: Do you know Norman [Lear] very well?

EJW: He and I have sat at dinner together and lunch together, I have been very impressed with his vision and his commitment to excellence and to political engagement. It's a wonderful combination; he's a wonderful, wonderful person.

NC: Yes he is. And then, what about the program that Joe Saltzman has embarked on, the –

EJW: Image –

NC: The Image of the Journalist in Fiction and the Performing Media?

EJW: Right, it's a very important initiative, and it's very imaginative and thoughtful, and I think Joe has found a way to engage the students not only in the classroom but also through looking at posters and other media. Joe is one of my favorite colleagues, and he's deeply committed to this initiative.

NC: And he recruited me!

EJW: Is that right? Well, I have asked him to chair a very important search committee already, so I have put him into harness.

NC: How serious do you rate the comment made by H.G. Wells, years ago, that “civilization is a race between education and catastrophe”?

EJW: I think it’s even more relevant today, at least for the United States, for a scary reason: One is that the means of catastrophe have been multiplied, and secondly it seems to me that the commitment to education has been reduced. So we’re moving in wrong directions in some respects there.

NC: I am told that you have a legendary sense of humor. And I am afraid you may need that in answering a question that’s bothered me from time to time. It relates to those who denigrate education as useless and something to unlearn. I don’t mean certified goons, like Hitler, Stalin and Amin, or occasional homegrown ignoramuses who may rise to power, but instead highly stationed respectables, like Thomas Jefferson and Mark Twain. Some of their remarks are very disturbing.

Here’s Jefferson:

“State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.”

And then there’s Alexandre Dumas *films*:

“How is it that little children are so intelligent, and grown men are so stupid?
It must be education that does that.”

And then Henry Adams:

“Nothing in education is so astonishing as the amount of ignorance that
accumulates in the form of ignorant facts.”

And Mark Twain, of all people:

“Education consists, mainly, in what we have unlearned.”

And this from a source I cannot remember:

“College is a place where pebbles are polished and diamonds are dimmed.”

Now, I ask you, Dean: At what targets in education were these shafts at
education aimed? It cannot be the study of medicine, law, architecture, business. I
believe it’s at the humanities, and in this connection there was an inspiring report,
weeks ago, by Provost Max Nikias on this very subject, on USC’s so-called
‘humanities initiative’–

EJW: Yes, Visions and Voices.

NC: He reported that after one year of operation there were very
encouraging results.

EJW: Yes.

NC: And I ask a long-delayed question, which is: whether you agree with
my identification of the main target of those critical attacks?

EJW: Well, I think that those attacks – I just actually finished re-reading portions of *The Education of Henry Adams*, which is a wonderful work about the risks and opportunities in education, a very tongue-in-cheek, very sardonic piece of work. And I think what Twain and Jefferson and Adams really were talking about was not so much any given field but the problem of atrophy and calcification that occurs with the disciplines in the face of tremendous change taking place in the environment around them.

Now it is certainly the case that there are verities and there are commitments and ethics that are timeless. One could go back to Plato's *Republic* to see these verities, or the Bible, or other works of great literature and great belief. And they have a kind of flexibility at the core.

I think the challenge in all disciplines, whether it's sociology or political science or law or medicine, is that they sometimes enshrine what they claim to be learning but merely are rules governing the way we should know the world. And when the world changes from time to time, sometimes scholars are faced with a choice: Shall I try to shed more light on the way the world is changing, or shall I stick with my calcified discipline? And I think that too often the choice is to stick with the calcified discipline rather than to be innovative and open, and use the tools of the past to understand the present.

So I think then that what happens, Mr. Corwin, is that it's not a particular discipline, but all of our disciplines run this risk, and this is why our Provost has decided to try to find ways to mix the sciences and the humanities and history in ways that will allow us to retain the best of the past but also to be aware and sensitive to these dramatic changes that are taking place around us.

NC: Thanks to the clarity of your answer, I'm going to sleep better tonight.

EJW: I appreciate that.

NC: Last question.

EJW: Yes sir.

NC: One of the areas in which you have worked with great distinction is that of modern China.

EJW: Yes.

NC: I've heard, and I'm sure I'm not the only one to have heard it predicted that the new century, in which we are barely embarked, will be a Chinese century. How does it look to you, and if this forecast should turn out to be accurate, what would, or should, our stance be?

EJW: That's a very good question, it's a very important issue. I go to China quite frequently. One of my recent books concentrated on China and its information revolution, and I was fortunate enough to go to China and interview

those individual Chinese who sort of invented the information revolution in China. The people that I call the ‘information revolutionaries.’

China, as you know, is now the second largest economy in the world. Its economy is growing faster than any other economy, and has been for ten years. They have lifted millions of people out of poverty, and they have now built up one of the fastest growing armies in the world. And finally, of course, as everyone knows, their export machine has been able to undercut production in countries from Mexico to South Africa. So they are a formidable country.

One of my colleagues, who I have come to greatly, greatly respect, the great musician and intellectual Quincy Jones recently spoke in China. He was invited to give a speech at Tsinghua University. And in that speech, which I believe is on the Annenberg Web site, he said something to the effect that we can mutually learn from one another. That the Chinese may be able to learn a bit about our ability to sustain innovation, to be innovative in schooling and education, but at the same time we can learn from the Chinese about the commitment to hard work, the commitment to taking the long-term view, and respect for family. So I think there are wonderful complementarities which, if the world moves ahead as I hope it does, then we will each be able to take from the other and contribute through the other.

NC: Now there are other properties of prosperity I'm glad to note.

Apparently Ireland is doing very well.

EJW: Yes.

NC: That's a comfort, isn't it.

EJW: Well, it is, and I think that there are two things that are going on in China. One is that it is the case that poverty reduction in China is steady and consistent and at a high level. So there are far fewer people who are poor in China today, and the poor as a percentage of the whole population is much, much lower than it was, so that's a wonderful thing.

It is also the case that the gap between the richest and the poorest in China is also growing. This is also true in Russia, it's true in India, and, alas, even in our own country. That the gap between the poorest and the richest in the United States has gone from 25:1 in the '60s to about 249:1 at the current period. So that I think some of these same wonderful technologies that we – the computer – that we love, that we like, that help our lives also can contribute to a gap between the haves and the have nots, both in China and in the United States.

And this is perhaps where education comes in, that you spoke about. That we have got to find ways so that those who are without, those who are at the bottom of society, can have access to the same kind and quality of education that those who are at the top of the society can have.

NC: I would very much be in favor of your succeeding Woodrow Wilson in that office.

EJW: I'm flattered that you would say so. If I can do a good job in this office, right now, which seems enormously complicated –

NC: That's –

EJW: That would be quite a feeling of satisfaction.

NC: Dean, I can't thank you enough for your hospitality and making yourself available for this interview, on what I'm sure is an extraordinarily busy day for you.

EJW: It's entirely my pleasure.

NC: And I hope that you and your family will prosper in an ambience as friendly as it is productive.

EJW: Thank you so much, and I look forward to continuing our conversations in the future.

NC: Well, wonderful.

EJW: Thank you sir.

NC: And I thank you, and you have righted a tipped vessel in my worry about the condemnation of education from high quarters.

EJW: Right, "otherwise reputable sources."

NC: Yes, right.

EJW: Good, well, thank you so much.

NC: Well, I thank you.

Transcribed by Alex Boekelheide, publications director