Telling the Truth:
James Q. Wilson and Political Science

Lawrence M. Mead
Professor of Politics and Public Policy
Department of Politics
New York University
19 West 4th Street, #209
New York, NY 10012-1119
Phone: 212-998-8540
Fax: 212-995-4184
E-mail: LMM1@nyu.edu

1st draft
March 2013
Introduction

What strikes one most about the work of James Q. Wilson is its revelatory quality. Each of his major books simply revealed much more about the nature of government or social problems than is usual in social science. Varieties of Police Behavior, for instance, discloses a world of differences in how local policy forces approach law enforcement that few outside that field would guess.\(^1\) Bureaucracy describes the complex world of American public administration and brings order to it.\(^2\) Even if one has read about these subjects before, Jim’s writing somehow reveals a wider and fuller world than one suspected. Each is a general statement about some important matter of such power that the reader never forgets it.

Wilson does not propose personal theories about his material so much as simply describe it. He breaks into his subject, as if into King Tut’s tomb, and relates what he finds there, as if no one had ever done it before. While he has read the relevant work of other scholars, his own observation is always primary. He makes sense of his subject mostly from the raw facts, or from descriptions in secondary literature that are akin to facts. Interpretation is secondary. Jim did advance ideas that are useful in the analysis of politics and policy—such as his four types of politics (client, interest group, entrepreneurial, majoritarian), or his three types of political motivation (material, solidary, purposive). But none of them is as important as sheer reportage—just getting the facts right about how government actually operates.

Wilson told the truth about his subjects. By this I mean that he stated conclusions about them that were plausible and general. He took on big questions, such as the causes of crime or the nature of morals, and his conclusions were on the same level. I do not mean they were above criticism. Another scholar using his methods might well arrive at different views. A truth is always debatable because it always rests on assumptions that may be questioned. But a truth is at least general. It does not exclude any important facet of the thing described. Above all, a truth is different from a finding. It conveys reality in the round, which is something larger than the output of a specific methodology.
Today, few social scientists approach Wilson’s capacity to tell the truth, and that reveals much about what is wrong with academic political science today. Most of today’s political scientists, and other social scientists, are voiceless on the sort of large question Wilson addressed. That is due chiefly to two conventions that wall them off from truth-telling—political correctness and academic scholasticism. It was largely by violating those conventions, I will argue, that Jim was able to tell the truth. Yet those same qualities also made it difficult for him to engage in policy analysis—to recommend what government should do. Thus, Jim is a guide about how to reform political science, but he did not fully conceive his discipline as the policy science it could be.

**Political Correctness**

By political correctness I mean the taboo that deters American intellectuals from candid discussion of differences among social groups. In America, some races and ethnic groups are more successful in terms of education, income, and status than others. On average, whites and Asians do much better than blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Minorities other than Asians are much more enmeshed in poverty, welfare, and crime than are whites. The reasons are sharply contested. Liberals typically blame differential opportunities—whites have better chances to get ahead than do minorities. Conservatives rather blame differences in lifestyle—heavily poor groups typically fail to work as hard or avoid unwed pregnancy or crime as well as the better-off.

**The structural orthodoxy**

Academia strongly favors the liberal view. In 1965, the Moynihan Report dared to suggest that blacks’ disadvantage might be due partly to the rise in female-headedness in the black family. The resulting controversy made it sensitive ever afterwards to attribute poverty or inequality to anything in private life. Instead, Moynihan wrote, there was “a near-obsessive concern to locate the ‘blame’ for poverty, especially Negro poverty, on forces and institutions outside the community concerned.” Most academic treatments of poverty or social problems observe that convention. They make little reference to lifestyle, attitudes, or culture, for to do that would suggest that the groups concerned
bore some responsibility for their predicament. Rather, analyses are structural, linking social problems to general social or economic conditions outside the poor, such as high unemployment, low education, lack of “human capital,” and so forth.

That approach was plausible in the 1960s when Jim Crow had just been dismantled, but it became less reasonable with time. The emergence of a sizable black middle class demonstrated that even minorities could make it in America, but at the same time poverty became entrenched among the black underclass. By the 1980s, even liberals such as William Julius Wilson accepted that a dysfunctional culture had something to do with black poverty, although they still traced that culture back to a lack of economic opportunity in the cities. Some ethnographic research linked urban poverty to fatherlessness or gangs, but blame was again laid on the closing of the factories or a lack of good schools. Right down to the present, most academic work on poverty and associated problems such as drugs or failing schools continues to be determinist and impersonal, tying adverse outcomes to background conditions.

Welfare reform succeeded in requiring welfare mothers to work, and other directive programs for poor adults and youth have also shown impacts by enforcing good behavior. New benefits or changes in social structure were secondary. That suggests that culture and lifestyle have become independent causes of poverty, aside from any ties to larger social forces. Without allowing a greater role for culture and lifestyle, academic experts can no longer give a convincing account of poverty. They simply leave out too much. They are incapable, that is, of telling the truth.

A focus on behavior

In the late 1960s, when he first discussed social problems, Wilson joined the group of writers around The Public Interest and Commentary who became known as neo-conservatives. Many—like Jim—were former Democrats or liberals. Their hallmark was disillusionment with the sort of structural analyses of poverty I have mentioned. They came to doubt that government could do much about social problems. Conditions, after all, had sharply improved for the poor. Jim Crow was dead,
social benefits had grown, and economic conditions were the best ever. But the result had been even more crime, dependency, and unwed pregnancy than before.

Neo-conservatives refused to look past the immediate symptoms of social disorder to its supposed background causes, as other analysts did. Rather, uncivil behavior was primary, and unless and until government could reduce it, solutions to poverty were unimaginable. *Varieties of Police Behavior* is full of candid observations that black urban neighborhoods are less law-abiding than white. To the extent Wilson sought to explain crime, he emphasized psychology rather than sociology or economics. In *Crime and Human Nature*, written with Richard Herrnstein, he traces crime mainly to the early experiences of criminals in the family, not to the wider environment.\(^8\)

In the end, he concluded, no discussion of causes mattered much. This was the main theme of *Thinking About Crime*, the most policy-oriented of Jim’s books. Where other criminologists traced law-breaking back to “root causes,” Jim doubted that causes could be found. And even if they could, we could not change them. We could not reach into the past and undo the disadvantages that seen to generate disorders today. Government has no choice but to address crime itself. And since alternatives to prison such as rehabilitation programs had failed, there was no alternative to simply locking up more offenders.\(^9\) Some took that as a mandate for the vast boom in incarceration that ensued over the next 30 years.

**Theories of poverty**

Wilson never produced a general theory of poverty that he applied broadly to social problems. In this he diverged from his early mentor and coauthor, Edward Banfield, who traced urban disorders of many kinds to the presence of an underclass with a short time horizon.\(^10\) That understanding is similar to culture of poverty—the idea that heavily poor groups share orthodox values such as the work ethic and law-abidingness, yet they have more trouble living by them than the better-off. They succumb to temptations such as drugs or crime when they should show self-command. Nor can we explain these patterns by “social barriers” in the present. Rather, the heavily-poor groups, including
blacks, come out of long histories of misfortune. That makes them disbelieve that they can get ahead, even when real opportunities exist. This theory was developed by both liberal and conservative sociologists in the 1960s and has been influential ever since.\textsuperscript{11}

I find nothing comparable in Wilson’s writings. \textit{Crime and Human Nature} develops a general theory of criminal psychology, but it is technical and complex and lacks clear policy implications in areas beside crime. One explanation might be that any theory of poverty must differentiate the poor from mainstream society, and this Jim hesitated to do. Especially, he refused to treat blacks as special. His close colleague Nathan Glazer came to the view that blacks must in some way be different from other ethnic groups, or treated differently, because their integration had been so troubled.\textsuperscript{12}

In contrast, in \textit{Crime and Human Nature} Wilson and Herrnstein doubt that race is an important cause of crime, once other factors are controlled, even though black are vastly overrepresented among violent criminals.\textsuperscript{13} Wilson wrote of “character, “or its absence, as a cause of social problems, and he believed the breakdown of the family often lay in the background. But he did not differentiate these problems by race or ethnic group. He did not explain why the social disorders of the 1960s were so much greater among minorities than among whites.

One reason must be Jim’s skepticism, his refusal to speculate beyond clear facts.\textsuperscript{14} A deeper explanation is suggested by his remarkable essay on crime and American culture. Here he describes how crime rose in America in the nineteenth century as industrialism and immigration swelled the cities. But the disorders were tamed largely by non-governmental means. Private organizations such as churches and the YMCA took it upon themselves to socialize the rootless young men who committed crimes. And crime fell steadily through the early and mid twentieth century. If crime has rebounded in our time, the reason is that this “Victorian culture” has weakened. Elites no longer seek to shape individual behavior. They now understand social problems in impersonal, economic terms.
The earlier ethos must be reconstituted, Jim suggests, and no public anticrime policy can substitute for this.\textsuperscript{15}

Wilson strongly resisted the determinism of p.c., its tendency to deny out groups any blame for their condition. The neo-conservatives were more sophisticated and less anti-government than some other conservatives. Their objections to ambitious social programs were more practical than ideological. But they agreed with the traditional right on a demanding view of personal responsibility. Jim especially worried that accountability to the criminal law was being weakened by academic theories that offenders were not responsible for their actions. It might seem severe, he admitted, to punish very disadvantaged offenders for their crimes, but to do this is essential to social order.\textsuperscript{16}

In social policy, Wilson looked backward, not ahead. To cure poverty and its ills was to return to an earlier society where self-discipline was assumed and disorders were more superficial than they appear to be today. Jim never feared to confront p.c., but he did shy away from any social vision different from the settled world he had known growing up in pre-1960s southern California. He clung to that ideal even though, after the great crises of the 1960s, America could never return to it. Social order now was no longer spontaneous and must, to some degree, be created by government.

**Scholasticism**

Although p.c. remains strong in the universities, the more constraining academic orthodoxy today is scholasticism. Contemporary university scholars typically address far smaller questions and do so more rigorously than they did a generation or two ago. Academic disciplines have splintered into narrow fields. Scholars take their questions mostly from the “literature” in those specialties. Their research methods have become far more self-conscious, typically using advanced statistics or game theory. Getting academic jobs, and even more gaining tenure, depends on publishing in peer-reviewed journals, which accept only the most rarified analyses, even if few read them other than other specialists. These trends are seen in political science as in much of the rest of academe.\textsuperscript{17}
Among the causes appear to be the exhaustion of research on larger topics—subjects must be narrower today to yield anything new to say—the stress on research over teaching in university preferment, the narrowing of peer review to focus mostly on methodology, and the general prestige of the university, which has freed faculty to pursue their own interests and ignore social needs.\textsuperscript{18} These trends hit political science hard after 1970. Narrow, quantitative research took over the journals and some departments, and scholars who were good at it came to dominate the discipline. Traditionalists who favored broader, more qualitative research resisted, producing something close to a civil war.\textsuperscript{19} Scholastic trends have slowed somewhat, but the proponents of rigor still dominate.

\textit{The scholastic challenge}

Jim should have felt threatened. The new orthodoxy opposed precisely his traditional style of political science. He took on big questions, far more ambitious than most of today’s scholastics would attempt, and he pursued them with little system. He used diverse and largely qualitative methods—reviewing earlier research, studying public documents, talking to politicians and public officials, and observing their behavior out in the world. He did no quantitative research of his own.\textsuperscript{20} He could seldom have given a precise account of his procedure, such as the journals demand today. In much of his work, he operated like a journalist, striving to “get the story” on government through direct contact with it. He differed from the Third Estate mostly in the far greater insight he applied to the facts afterwards. That generally is the edge academics have over journalists. Such intuitive methods were anathema to the rising scholastic establishment.

Much of Wilson’s work, also, was synthetic. \textit{Crime and Human Nature} as well as \textit{Political Organizations, Bureaucracy} and \textit{The Politics of Regulation}, were built mostly on the research of others, including Jim’s own students. The research consisted of empirical studies from which Jim drew conclusions about his subjects. It was a kind of reportage at second hand. Again, the contrast from scholasticism was stark. Today’s more self-conscious scholars stress analyses from original data, and the use of secondary research is quite secondary. Researchers and graduate students
typically read and cite earlier work poorly, because their training is all in data analysis, not in how to appraise the arguments of others. Papers will include “literature reviews,” but this is to define the field and its issues—not to glean evidence on the more wide-ranging subjects Jim addressed.

Wilson was most prominent as a public figure in the same period—the 1980s and 1990s—when the scholastics largely took over political science. His own visibility gave an impression that tradition still reigned in the discipline, but the academic ground was shifting beneath him. Scholars with his broad perspective were fading away. His accomplishments were undeniable, and the American Political Science Association honored him richly, even making him president in 1991-2. Nonetheless, few younger political scientists followed him other than his own students. They could not afford to. The methodological trends were entirely against him.21

Despite this challenge, Jim virtually ignored the methods wars. He seldom published in academic journals, so he avoided scholastic criticism. He once remarked to me that political science was digging itself into a deep hole from which it might not emerge. But he never, to my knowledge, defended himself publicly against the scholastics. Indeed, he downplayed differences of all kinds with other scholars. A rare case late in his life arose over the question of why American politics was becoming polarized. Republicans and Democrats had come to differ more sharply in Washington than they had for generations. Was the division only among the leaders, or was there also estrangement between Republican and Democratic voters? Morris Fiorina and his followers asserted the former, Jim the latter.22 Even this, however, was a difference about the conclusions of research and not about methods per se.

Questions first

Wilson’s blithe response might be due simply to the fact that he gained tenure at Harvard in 1960s well before the scholastics took over. Even many of his students obtained their academic posts before the methods wars intensified in the 1990s. Thus, he had little personal skin in the game. A deeper reason, however, was his strong commitment to own questions. Scholastics tend to orient
their inquiries to issues in “the literature,” often disputes that hinge on methodological differences. The stakes are seldom visible to anyone outside the caste. To Jim, this sort of issue simply was not important. He chose questions that he thought were important, chiefly because they mattered in the real world, outside academe. He did make use of prior research, but his goal was always to discover, and to relate, some large truth that did not depend on academic methods.

Political Organizations, for example, began as a response to academic claims. Mancur Olson wrote in 1971 that lobby groups in American politics were not simply expressions of self-interest, as many assumed. For even if firms, say, might wish to influence government in their own interest, they had no motive to make the effort as long as other firms in the same industry might do the job for them. Better to free-ride—benefit from the efforts of others without contributing. For the same reason, workers might wish to have a union represent them against management, but why should they pay union dues if others are willing to do so without them? In short, political action—however self-interested—was a public good that posed free-rider problems. These incentives against “organizational maintenance” might well deter political activity entirely.23

The logic here is economic. Allegedly, people seek only to maximize their own utilities, even if, as here, action is defeated. And utility largely means economic advantage. In Political Organizations, however, Wilson argued that Olson had oversimplified the psychology. Material motives were only one spur to political involvement. Others were personal ties to other people or commitment to a cause. These “solidary” and “purposive” motivations often cause people to contribute time or money to a political cause even when they had no strict material interest to do so. The potential for political organization was thus far greater than Olson imagined.

This might seem an esoteric quarrel, but Wilson states his case in broad terms, going well beyond the academic issue that prompted it. And—more important—the argument he made was prescient about the outside world. To Olson, lobby groups largely meant economic interests—companies and unions—but by the 1970s they had been overtaken by large numbers of “public
interest groups,” such as environmental or antipoverty organizations. These claimed to lobby on behalf of some broad public interest, not their personal advantage, and they drew support from many people who believed in their cause, even without any personal stake. So the group system expanded enormously, despite the adverse incentives that Olson specified.

Traditionally in research, questions are supposed to come before method. One poses some issue, advances an hypothesis about it, and then verifies that contention from the evidence available. Methodology enters only at the last stage—organizing the data to bear on the question asked. One might pose an issue because it was important, even if the data on it was limited. That was true for several of Jim’s inquiries, especially those about political and governmental organizations, where data is hard to come by. Scholastics, in contrast, tend to choose their method first and then search for questions to which it can apply. Today that typically means subjects where data bases have already been gathered by others. That has left many subjects in American government lightly researched, simply because no data is readily available. To pursue an issue simply because it is important in the real world, as Jim did, has become very unusual.

**Information second**

Next only to pursing his own questions, Wilson valued generating new information about them. In this, too, he broke with much of contemporary political science. Typically, scholastics seek to systematize data we already have. They will model the relationships among variables in some improved way, or they will use game theory to suggest the motives behind the actors in politics. The results, however, often add little to what we already knew from less systematic research, or the newspapers, or just common knowledge. The contribution of this technical research is usually only in the method—if that—and not in the substance.

Jim, however, focused on discovering new facts. He delighted in unearthing new realities about government that were never the subject of a data base. In some cases, we thought we knew something, but Jim showed that reality was quite different. The idea that altruistic motivation might
outweigh crass self-interest in generating interest groups was one such discovery. Another was that few government agencies were “captured” by the regulated interests in the way some scholars suppose. Rather, Congress largely determined whether bureaus deferred to the interests or not. Still another conclusion was that most agencies, far from escaping accountability as many imagined, were more tightly controlled than was good for them. Better to deregulate them so they could get on with their jobs as best they could.

Although Wilson’s work was widely read and honored, the methods behind it were messy and imprecise. Jim commented to me that no theorist of bureaucracy—even Max Weber—did enough actual research on their subject, as against theorizing about it. He and his students put in the time on the concrete study of public agencies that others avoided. Much in contrast, recent economic “principal-agent” theory is theoretically elegant but has little hard evidence behind it. Economists reason that the public or its elected leaders must have difficulty controlling bureaucrats because they can never know as much about what officials are doing as the officials themselves. It is thus difficult to prevent agencies from padding their budgets or simply “shirking”—getting little work done. That conclusion appears unavoidable if one believes, like economists, that all politicians and officials are out for themselves. The reality—already stated—is that bureaus are if anything over-controlled by outside pressures, especially the will of the legislature.

March and Olsen in 1984 proclaimed a “new institutionalism,” which would grant institutions some influence of their own, not reducible to the maneuvering of individual utility-maximizers. In this they were Wilson’s allies. Such an analysis would be more realistic than rational choice images of politics. But the problem, they admitted, was that this approach could never be as elegant mathematically as modeling based on egoistic assumptions. It thus might never be attractive to today’s scholastics, who above all seek to show how smart they are. Olsen’s wars against the scholastics took him away from his own empirical research on government. Jim never let that
happen. He let his reputation take care of itself. He kept doing his own work in his own way, thus contributing mightily to knowledge in all the fields he addressed.

*The nature of knowledge.*

The ultimate issue between Wilson and the scholastics was the nature of truth. Jim took the old-fashioned view, typical of journalism, that there was a reality “out there” in the political world waiting to be discovered, whether we search for it or not. The researcher’s job was to venture out into that world and describe what was going on. Scholars were to “get the story,” bring it back, and write it up for those interested, whether those be other scholars or the general public. Methodological research, on the other hand, assumes that the truth does not naturally exist. It has to be created by some deliberate procedure—gathering data, typically quantitative, and then analyzing it to show the relationships among variables. In the one view, the truth is discovered, in the other constructed.

The conviction that a truth exists explains some of the casualness of Wilson’s qualitative research methods. Armored with this belief, one is unconcerned with precisely how the truth emerges. One can pursue diverse research methods in the faith that they will all finally tell the same story. In principle, mysteries must yield to evidence. But if one thinks the truth is constructed, then precisely how to model it becomes critical. Different methods will yield different findings, and no larger, surer truth will emerge to settle the differences.

The strength of Jim’s position was that the direct observation of politics conveys far richer information than any data base. Analyses built on quantitative data can capture only a thin slice of reality, while direct observation or interviewing captures much more. A data base is like a laser while field research is like the sun shining at full strength. The first is powerful but narrow, confined to a specific purpose, while the second is broad and illuminates everything around. In quantitative research, one calmly manipulates variables that one has chosen on a computer, while in field research one grapples with all the details of government’s actual operations. In quantitative research, the correlations must be fleshed out with interpretations to get anywhere close to the sensed reality of
government. In field research, to the contrary, the researcher is overwhelmed by complexity, and the evidence must be simplified to tell any coherent story about it.

Scholastic research verifies academic hypotheses about government, but the findings can be remote from operational realities. Lack of direct contact with government is the basic problem. A paucity of field research on welfare and work programs was a principal reason why most academic experts on poverty opposed welfare reform in the 1990s, which required most welfare mothers to work. Experts’ models of the labor market suggested that few welfare mothers could hold jobs without hardship, so they rejected the idea of enforcing work, only to be surprised by its success. Meanwhile, out in the field, officials running these programs treated getting the mothers to work as an administrative problem. Clients would work if they were expected to, they said, and the opportunity structure was secondary. So events proved. There was no way for scholars to foresee this without having talked to these staffs, and very few did so.

Wilson’s findings about law enforcement or bureaucracy had this same truth-telling character. He reported largely what those actually in government said about it. He assumed that public professionals knew more about their world than outside observers could ever know. Much might remain unclear, but the insiders were where to start. Jim’s works were revelations to other scholars or common citizens, but not to those closer to the institutions. Scholastics construct findings of which other people are unaware. Jim’s more qualitative style sought to capture truths already known inside government—to make them known to a wider audience outside.

Policy Analysis

In one sense, Wilson transitioned easily from conventional political science to policy argument. He early concluded that he had to study the issues active in government if he was truly to understand politics. He became an expert on crime, the most urgent issue in urban politics, and he wrote about this and other social problems with unusual facility. He became influential on crime, helping to justify community policing and higher incarceration. Those policies have probably helped
reduce crime in the last two decades, although how and how far remains debated. Few political scientists have ever been so visible as policy experts.

*A reluctance to recommend*

Yet Jim was uneasy in the policy arena. He hesitated to make recommendations to government, let alone advocate a distinctive line of policy, even one he found congenial. *Thinking About Crime* was his only book that focused squarely on a policy question, and it criticized the arguments of others more than making his own. His article on “Broken Windows,” written with George Kelling, was widely celebrated as a kind of manifesto for community policing. It blamed rising crime to a general breakdown of public authority, rather than just on problems in law enforcement. But Jim never developed it into a thorough-going policy approach. He never immersed himself in how to implement such policies, as successful advocates must do. He left the development of community policing largely to other scholars, such as David Kennedy, and police managers like Bill Bratton. Kennedy developed the “ceasefire” strategy where the police and other agencies act proactively to deter gang violence, while Bratton pioneered the data-driven CompStat approach to police management.

I recruited Jim to contribute to my edited volume, *The New Paternalism*, which surveyed antipoverty programs based on the close supervision of clients. Published in 1997, the book applied the idea of enforcing good behavior, which had developed in welfare work programs, to other contexts as well, such as programs aimed at teen pregnancy, homelessness, or underperforming schools. After some persuasion, Jim wrote that such programs might contribute something to the restoration of order in cities, but he still doubted whether government could actually do this.

Jim’s enormous fluency seemed to belie his diffidence. He wrote so easily and well about many problems in government that readers easily assumed that he must be proposing answers. But caution always held him back from wholehearted advocacy. In this respect, scholastic political scientists are just the opposite—much less fluent but also more confident in their conclusions. Jim
sometimes suggested policies, even some that were controversial—such as putting teenage mothers in orphanages[^33]—but always with a quality of reserve. His concern was always more to set out the nature of our government and its limitations than to fix it.

**The roots of reluctance**

This reluctance probably had many roots. One of them was Jim’s skepticism as a neo-conservative about government’s capacity to run any successful social programs. Another was the backward-looking character of his social vision, which always suggested that taking away recent antipoverty policies might do more good than adding to them. Still another was the repugnance, felt by many political scientists, at the very idea of recommending policy to American government. To do that might seem to second-guess the democratic process. To this sensibility, any policy decided by an elected body was ipso facto sensible, and criticism by outside policy analysts was presumptuous. Further, to get involved in advocacy would compromise policy science’s claim to be a science at all. Such attitudes are one strong reason why political scientists rarely become influential policy experts. Economists have largely displaced them as policy advisors because they lack this inhibition, even though they know much less about government.[^34]

A deeper reason might have been Wilson’s very practical, journalistic research style—using various sources to “get the facts” about government. Such a method makes it hard to imagine radical change. What one knows is what policy *is*, not what it might be. It is perhaps easier to advocate policy if one has a general model of the problem in question, the very thing that Jim lacked. By changing the inputs one can then imagine different outcomes. A different world might come into being, at least analytically. Wilson refused to think of government in this abstract way.

His doubts about government’s capacities were well-justified during the formative years of his career—the 1960s and 1970s. That was when Great Society programs often seemed to make poverty and dependency worse rather than better. But the success of welfare reform in the 1980s and 1990s brought a new age of optimism. Then the idea of promoting work among the poor appeared as a
secret sauce, something that could ameliorate many social problems. Similar “paternalist” programs have since appeared in many areas, and they generally evaluate well. Jim and other neo-conservatives scrambled to get on this train. They clearly had underestimated what government could achieve.

Wilson might reply that the evidence that government can overcome poverty is still limited, and that is true. But standards of proof in policy argument are always lower than they are in science. In seeking to understand anything, scientists always draw on data from the past, about things that have already happened. Almost all of Jim’s work is science in this broad sense. Policy analysis, however, is about the future. The issue is what policymakers should do about their problems. They must act, even though they lack complete information. Indeed, if they knew more, they would already know what to do, and the very possibility of choice would evaporate. Despite uncertainty, the policymaker must choose and hope to shape the future. By hesitating to do that, Jim failed in the end to be a policy analyst.

**The Reform of Political Science**

James Q. Wilson’s achievements dramatize what political science requires today. It needs to reject p.c. and scholasticism and dare, once more, to tell the truth. That means to refuse self-censorship, to speak candidly about the sensitive issues in politics, including race, poverty, and inequality. Taking on such issues in the round is more important than whatever view one takes of them.

Political science must also reject scholasticism, the methodological straightjacket that has confined political inquiry for too long. The discipline desperately needs more of the plain observation of politics and government at which Jim excelled. Research must use multiple methods, some of them qualitative. Quantitative analyses can also contribute, but as part of a larger enterprise. The goal should be to tell the truth about important questions, not just to generate precise findings about much smaller ones.
We need more research on how government functions out in the real world, as against how it appears in computer models. In “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy is transported from Kansas to Oz—and the screen turns from black and white to color. That is the same experience researchers have when they leave their offices and venture out into the real world of government. Out there, public institutions—invisible in the data bases—suddenly appear as giants bestriding the earth. Our task as scholars is largely to grasp what they do, and how they might do it better.

The potential for political science as a policy science is also great. The major challenges in government today are institutional. Not only do the best social programs require complex structures, but many other challenges in domestic policy involve the reform and rearrangement of agencies. Policy is not made apart from the institutions, as economists imagine, but in and through them. To choose actions is also to choose regimes. Facing those tasks, it is anomalous that economists ever gained the influence they have. Their simple assumptions of utility maximization always applied much better to the marketplace than to government. In the public arena, motivations and actions are much more complicated, as Wilson showed.

Political scientists need only get over their inhibition about policy argument to become the policy scientists they could always have been. Their proper place is at the elbow of statesmen, helping them to reconcile what they want to do “on the merits” with what the political system will let them do. How to square policy analysis with political analysis? That always has been the essence of statecraft. By understanding that struggle more deeply, political science could reclaim its ancient heritage as the master science.35

To realize that potential admittedly, would require different formation. Political scientists today tend to go to graduate school straight out of college, and then immediately enter teaching and research positions in academe. Few have any serious contact with government. That is one reason their work orients to academic issues rather than to the real world. Ideally, junior scholars should work in and around government early in their careers, either before or after graduate studies. They
should derive their research questions from that experience, rather than from the “literature.” They would then have much more to say that others besides specialists would want to hear, and their work would be more use to policymakers. They would be assembling realistic knowledge about government and its programs, which is exactly what better government requires.36

Because of his own sorties into government, Jim Wilson lived a career surprisingly like this. He wrote initially about politics, then increasingly about policy and related issues. He did not link policy and political argument as closely as they might be. Alongside his many other achievements, he did not quite conceive political science as the master science. But more than any other scholar in his time, he showed the way.
Endnotes


Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited: A Revision of the Unheavenly City* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). One might argue that Wilson’s writings on “character” and his book on *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993) constitute such theories, but these were general statements not specifically about poverty or social problems.


He did, however, coauthor quantitative studies of the effect of the police on crime with Barbara Boland, who presumably ran the numbers. See James Q. Wilson and Barbara Boland, “Crime,” in

A theme of his career, in public policy and politics as well as academia, is that he was honored far more than he was followed. See Lawrence M. Mead, “James Q. Wilson: Another View,” Society 49, no. 5 (September-October 2012): 451-6.


25 Wilson, Bureaucracy, chap. 20.


35 For a conception of public policy research and teaching along these lines, see Lawrence M. Mead, “Teaching Public Policy in the Universities,” *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, forthcoming.