Twenty-Five Years

It takes audacity to launch any new magazine, but it took a special sort of spirit to launch a magazine like the *Wilson Quarterly* in 1976. Beneath the glow of that year's bicentennial celebrations, the nation bore a sickly pallor, and it was not merely coincidental that for the serious general-interest magazine it was a time of unusual peril. Many of the great names in the field—*Harper's*, the *New Yorker*—were bound for hard times, and at least one, *Saturday Review*, would not survive.

The plight of these magazines wasn't only a result of changing business conditions; it was a symptom of a certain kind of cultural exhaustion. After Vietnam, Watergate, and the other traumas of the era, there was a feeling in the air that perhaps we Americans could no longer speak to one another about important public questions in civil and dispassionate terms. There was a feeling, too, that in an age marked by the headlong specialization of knowledge, a larger view of the intellectual landscape was increasingly beyond the grasp of even many educated people. The old ideal of an informed citizenry—a bedrock democratic principle—was much in doubt.

Twenty-five years later, one is struck by the confidence of founding editor Peter Braestrup (1929–97) and James Billington, then director of the Wilson Center, in the importance and vitality of the principles that to others seemed so uncertain. Their goal was to create a magazine that would reach into every precinct of the world of ideas, striving to make the most important work of scholars and thinkers intelligible to others. In a time that questioned whether real debate—indeed, truth itself—was possible, the magazine was to be nonpartisan and disinterested. Most of all, against the growing pessimism that the ideal of an enlightened public could any longer exist, the *WQ* was to serve a general audience.

Many of the doubts of that time are still with us, and the world (as well as the *WQ*) has changed in many ways since then, yet this fundamental confidence remains a hallmark of the magazine. The *WQ*'s 25th anniversary is in that sense a testament to the continuing vitality of those original principles.

One reason for the *WQ*'s steady course is the unusual dedication and continuity of its editorial staff. Braestrup's immediate successor, Jay Tolson (editor from 1989 to 1999), and I both worked under the founding editor, as did managing editor James Carman and senior editor Robert Landers. All of the magazine's editors over the years have shared the founding ethos, keeping the magazine true to its core commitments.

"Think of the Reader!" Braestrup often growled at his young editors. The injunction applied to the largest intellectual questions and the most excruciatingly minute details. It made us cringe to insert information we thought an educated audience ought already to know—that NATO is the acronym for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, that T. S. Eliot was a poet—but we came to understand that such details went to the heart of the magazine's mission. The *WQ* was to help readers know what they ought to know ("What do I need to know?" was another Braestrupian refrain). The last thing its editors could allow in the magazine's pages was a tone suggesting that the world of ideas was closed to those who did not possess a certain kind of intellectual pedigree. The *WQ* was to be inclusive, democratic, public spirited. While other intellectual periodicals served an academic discipline or an ideological cause, the *WQ* was to serve the Reader—which meant, in essence, the American public.

The son of an émigré Danish scientist who worked on the Manhattan Project, Braestrup had a profound appreciation of the openness and freedom of American society, as well as an acute awareness of the delicate mechanisms that keep it going. A product of the U.S.

Marine Corps (he was wounded in the Korean War) and a veteran of the *New York Times* and other top news organizations, he was a fellow at the Wilson Center when Billington, then the Center's director, invited him to start a magazine that would find a broad public. They were a complementary pair, the gruff, rumpled former newsman and the scholar (now Librarian of Congress) whose own historical studies had demonstrated that the very best scholarship could also be supremely inviting to the general reader.

The WQ debuted in the fall of 1976, 160 pages pressed between plain, ivory-colored covers with modest red-and-black lettering. It was an immediate success. (And there were many who had helped make it so, notably, our friends at *Smithsonian*.) "Our aim is to provide an authoritative overview of current ideas and research on matters of public policy and general intellectual interest," Braestrup wrote in his Editor's Comment. He continued:

Founding editor Peter Braestrup

> As a group, of course, scholars have no monopoly on wisdom or even rational analysis. But the better scholars have something special to say to all of us. They refresh our thinking, surprise us with new data, occasionally remind us of old truths and new paradoxes lost in the daily hubbub of the press and television. Their more powerful ideas eventually help shape our perceptions, our politics, and our lives.

That first issue boasted the bylines of some of the leading thinkers and writers of the day—from Dennis L. Meadows and Walt W. Rostow to Robert Nisbet and Merrill D. Peterson—on subjects ranging from "the limits to growth" to the American Revolution. The "cluster" of articles on a single subject quickly became a signature feature of the magazine. There also appeared in the first issue the patented (and much imitated) feature we now call the Periodical Observer, with its roundup of significant articles from learned journals and other specialized publications.

The magazine's second editor, Jay Tolson, raised the WQ to a new level of intellectual excellence. Long before they became the stuff of newsmagazine cover stories, public issues such as fatherhood, the New Urbanism, and civility were the subjects of thoughtful WQ essays. Tolson, who is also the biographer of Walker Percy, led the magazine in new directions, creating a feature devoted to the rediscovery of poetry and publishing essays on subjects as various as Confucius, Central Asia, and the decline of America's passenger railroads. He recruited leading scholars to examine some of the deeper forces shaping world events, from Islam and Hinduism to nationalism. In 1998, Harvard University's E. O. Wilson, the father of sociobiology, chose the WQ as the place to preview his ideas about the "consilience" of all fields of human inquiry.

Upon taking the editor's chair in 1989, Tolson saluted his predecessor as "an editor of vision and a committed citizen." Those words apply with equal justice to Tolson himself. He remains a valued friend and contributor (see his essay on the state of academic prose on p. 60).

In this issue, we return to one of the WQ's founding concerns, with seven essays on "The Making of the Public Mind." Our contributors find much to criticize in the way Americans consider public questions—but much more, I think, to justify the profound sense of hope and confidence that inspired the magazine's founding a quarter-century ago.

Steven Lagerfeld
Editor

Few things have given me more satisfaction than launching the *Wilson Quarterly* and watching its continuing achievements.

When I became director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1973, I saw our priority tasks as both intensifying the scholarly work at the Center and sharing key findings of scholarship with a much broader audience. I was bothered by the decreasing ability, and even inclination, of many scholars to communicate with the public. What seemed needed was a digest or review of recent important scholarship written by journalists who could describe that scholarship authentically for the general public. There had earlier been a magazine called *Intellectual Digest*, and I spoke to foundation representatives, without much success, about starting a journal that would once again serve its function. They pointed to a long list of intellectual quarterlies that they had launched, only to see them collapse within a very short time. When I studied those examples, I noted that in almost every instance they were simply outlets for scholarly or literary esoterica, written for a limited audience.

The critical factors that led to the establishment of the *Wilson Quarterly* were two fortunate discoveries I made in Washington. The first discovery was that many members of Congress sought an impartial mediation of the scholarly, public-policy, and advocacy publications that were flooding their offices. I remember sitting with one of the congressional leaders, who pointed to a three-foot-high pile on his desk and said, "Those are the reports from just the past two weeks that my staff feels I should read. There's no way I can check out even their tables of contents. If somebody could tell me what's really important in them, I'd be tremendously grateful." Representative Ralph Regula (R.-Ohio), a member at that time of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversaw the Wilson Center, and in recent years that subcommittee's chairman, suggested that if we were to begin a journal, he would want us to be able "to justify it to the worker in my district who carries a lunch pail to work each day." His comment strengthened our commitment to readily understandable prose—and inspired us to make the *WQ* a size that would, in fact, fit into a lunch pail.

The second, and more decisive, factor in launching the journal was my discovery of a great editor, Peter Braestrup. As a marine, Peter had been wounded in Korea. As a reporter, he had covered the Algerian War for the *New York Times* and the Vietnam War for the *Times* and, subsequently, the *Washington Post*. As a Wilson Center fellow, he had written *Big Story* (1977), a searching study of news media coverage of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. His willingness to serve as editor of the *WQ* made the journal possible.

Peter believed that the broad questions underlying the political and public-policy issues of the day could be packed into a journal concise and readable enough to attract an abiding audience and become a viable enterprise. He proposed a format that would feature clusters of articles on a given subject, thereby allowing Wilson Center fellows and members of the academic community to present ideas in greater depth and variety than they could in publications that were focused increasingly on personalities and bite-sized pieces. Peter tested the *WQ*'s format for a year, raised money for the journal, and launched it as a successful mix of original scholarly articles and digests of other scholarly work—with every page subjected to rigorous editing for the sake of clarity.

Peter's successors have admirably sustained that original format. In fact, both subsequent editors of the *WQ* worked at one time for Peter, and they have carried on his driving work ethic and the quiet patriotism that underlies the journal's basic desire to improve as well as to inform the nation. Moral seriousness without moralizing pomposity has been characteristic of the *WQ* from the start.

For a quarter of a century, Wilson Center Boards of Trustees, Wilson Council members, Center fellows, contributors, and subscribers have made the *WQ* a hallmark for high-quality journalism. The *Wilson Quarterly* opens to the American people a rich store of our nation's ranging intellectual activity. I am happy to salute all those responsible for its enduring success.

James H. Billington
Librarian of Congress

The 25th anniversary of the *Wilson Quarterly* is an occasion to celebrate a unique magazine. The *WQ* is the only prominent scholarly publication of ideas and public affairs that is directed to a broad, nonacademic audience. Some 60,000 subscribers (and many additional readers) are devoted to the magazine because it puts in their hands, in an accessible and imaginative format, the best research and writing on issues of contemporary concern.

In many ways, the *WQ* wonderfully reflects the mission of the Wilson Center itself, which opened its door just a few years before the first issue of the magazine appeared. The Center, the nation's living memorial to Woodrow Wilson, bridges the world of ideas and the world of policy by bringing together on its premises thinkers and doers, in the confident hope that from their conversation will emerge clearer understanding and wiser policy.

The individuals who participate in the work of the Wilson Center and those who contribute to the *WQ* are not narrow specialists or ideologues but scholars, policymakers, and journalists with expansive interests, who let the facts guide their reflections and conclusions. These remarkable individuals share intellectual curiosity, a passion for creative thought, and an ability to convey clearly what they know. Their work has lifted the quality of scholarship in many fields and affected the direction of public discourse.

The uniqueness of the Wilson Center and the *WQ* derives from the special character of Woodrow Wilson, who was president of Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, president of the United States, and a leading scholar of government. He remains the only American president to have earned a Ph.D. Wilson believed passionately that the scholar and the policymaker are engaged in a common enterprise, and that each should draw upon the knowledge and experience of the other.

America today is awash in TV programs, magazines, Web sites, and other media outlets that generate an endless stream of information and much sound and fury. And today's Washington is overpopulated with think tanks and special-interest groups pushing their views and advocating their policies on every conceivable matter, from aircraft to zygotes. The Wilson Center and the *WQ*, I like to think, stand apart from that agitated crowd. Subject to no political pressures and in thrall to no intellectual fads, they strive to separate the important from the inconsequential, to stretch our imaginations, to broaden our sympathies, and to foster new insights into fundamental critical issues that should claim the attention of the nation and the world.

To make representative democracy work in a country as vast and diverse as the United States is an immensely difficult task. The *WQ* and the Wilson Center offer a model of how public discourse should proceed in a democracy. They promote the free trade and competition of ideas through civil, serious, and informed discussion, out of a conviction that the exploration of different points of view enriches our lives and strengthens the nation. The burning issues of tomorrow will almost certainly be different from those that heat the debate today. Yet I am confident that, in those new circumstances too, the Wilson Center and the *WQ*, by providing a precious intellectual stability, will continue to help the nation find its way safely across difficult terrain.

I am grateful to the many people who have helped to make the Wilson Center and the *WQ* successful and vibrant over the years: the distinguished members of the Center's Board of Trustees, including chairmen Hubert H. Humphrey, William J. Baroody, Sr., Max M. Kampelman, William J. Baroody, Jr., Joseph H. Flom, and Joseph A. Cari, Jr.; former Wilson Center directors Benjamin H. Read, James H. Billington, and Charles Blitzer; *WQ* editors Peter Braestrup, Jay Tolson, and Steven Lagerfeld; the excellent staff of the *WQ* and the Center; and the corporations, foundations, individuals, and members of Congress whose critical support is essential to our work.

Lee H. Hamilton
Director, Wilson Center