

on data obtained from respondents who keep time budgets of activities as they unfold. This data collection method, they maintain, avoids the errors inherent in recalled information.

So far, so good. Yet the authors show a troubling carelessness when it comes to handling even the most straightforward information. For example, they challenge the “questionable belief” held by other researchers that Americans are spending less time reading. Yet their own data reveal that time spent reading dropped by 48 minutes per week—a change considered significant in studies of this kind. Similarly, the authors argue that there has not been a trend away from organized religious activities. Yet their data for matched samples of respondents show a 10 percent decline in time spent in such activities. If these conclusions can be checked against the authors’ own published data, one wonders about the accuracy of those conclusions that cannot.

—Lee Burns

MORAL JUDGMENT:
Does the Abuse Excuse Threaten Our Legal System?

By James Q. Wilson. Basic Books.
134 pp. \$18

To the question posed in its subtitle, this book offers a resounding “yes.” In these 1996 Godkin Lectures delivered originally at Harvard University, Wilson, a professor of management and public policy at the University of California at Los Angeles, presents a scathing indictment of recent trends in criminal law. His special target is the elaboration of excuses, especially those based on alleged histories of abuse, as in the sensational trials of Erik and Lyle Menendez, who murdered their parents. Wilson also objects to expert testimony involving dubious social-scientific findings, such as the percentage of

battered women who (in Wilson’s words) “become so utterly dependent on the abuser that they really believe there is no escape short of his death.” Wilson finds these tendencies offensive because they undercut responsibility. Accused individuals are encouraged to avoid accountability; judges and lawyers evade responsibility for the integrity of legal judgment.

The linchpin of Wilson’s argument is the opposition between judgment and explanation. Judgment is stern and rule-bound, unblemished by passion or sentiment. Explanation, by contrast, evokes sympathy on the basis of the presumed causes of irresponsible or criminal behavior. This opposition makes sense, up to a point. In defining burglary, homicide, and other crimes, the law looks for reasonably clear-cut and objective criteria of guilt or responsibility, while trying to avoid issues of motivation, character, and circumstance.

But these devilments soon reappear: the insanity defense presumes that a person’s actions are explained by mental disease or defect; a plea of duress appeals to the ways in which a person’s will may be constrained; self-defense invokes an accepted motivation. The problem is not, as Wilson claims, that we confuse responsibility and causation. Rather, it is that legal sophistication *requires* us to discern and evaluate causes. Some causes mitigate culpability, as in the “abuse excuse” cited by Wilson. Others, such as drunk driving, aggravate it. Paradoxically, the search for greater precision in assessing degrees of blameworthiness can open the door to untested and imprecise theories. This has happened in the past, and it will continue to happen. Wilson tells us much about the bad results, but I wonder if he fully appreciates the virtues that produce the defects he decries.

—Philip Selznick

History

DERELICTION OF DUTY:
Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam.

By H. R. McMaster. Harper Collins.
446 pp. \$27.50

In early 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson, heir to John F. Kennedy’s commit-

ment to defend South Vietnam, was less concerned about the conflict in Southeast Asia than about the upcoming November election. Summoning the Joint Chiefs to the White House, he listened to their argument that there were only two options in Vietnam, “win or get out.” He did not like what he heard. He told them, “I’ve got to win the