

James Wright

Almost everyone in this Meetinghouse tonight will recognize Jim Wright as the ex-president of Dartmouth, a post he held with great distinction from 1998-2009. It was a high visibility and high stress job, a position that Wright ascended to after an illustrious and relatively straight forward academic career: after obtaining a Ph.D. in history at the University of Wisconsin, he immediately joined the Dartmouth history Department in 1969 – and never left. He published several distinguished books on populism, American progressivism, western political history – and even one on New Hampshire’s progressive Republicans, a species now on the severely endangered and completely unprotected list. Then, beginning in 1989, Wright began a steady rise up the Dartmouth administrative ladder, moving from Associate Dean to Dean of the Faculty, to Provost, to, finally, the top job that he held for 11 years before retiring.

And if this were an academic or scholarly audience, then an extended version of the previous paragraph would no doubt have constituted the full introduction to President Wright’s reading this evening. But you’re not that audience, and that won’t be the introduction, not least because I intentionally foreshortened the preceding version by beginning Wright’s biography only when he got to college. However, there was nothing conventional about his pre-academic biography:

Wright grew up in Galena, Illinois, a blue collar and mining town. His father was a WW II vet, as were the preponderance of Galena males of eligible age. In turn, almost half of the 25 boys in Wright’s own 1957 graduating class at St. Michael’s Catholic school enlisted immediately in the military (while only four or five went directly to college). Wright himself had no firm college aspirations prior to his military service, but after spending three non-combat years, mostly in the Pacific, upon discharge he decided that college and perhaps a career as a high school history teacher was sensible. He enrolled at Wisconsin State College in nearby Platteville, the first member of his family to go to college, and covered the cost of his education by working at a local cheese factory, also as a janitor, a bartender at a bowling alley, and for the Eagle Pitcher Mining Company in their local zinc mines as a pump man, security person, and powder man, setting underground dynamite charges.

Having done well at this level, and the winner of a Danforth Fellowship just as the Vietnam War was ramping up in 1964, Wright was accepted for graduate study at the University of

Wisconsin. And at that point commenced the “standard”, but of course exceptional, academic biography that I cited at the outset.

But even that route took an unusual turn that I also didn’t mention: during Wright’s tenure as Dartmouth president, the Iraq war, soon as unpopular as the Vietnam war, had begun and had bogged down, and Wright, who had gradually turned against the war, became particularly concerned about how the Iraq veterans, very much as the veterans of the Vietnamese war, were failing to receive the highest level of medical care, counseling, and social services upon return from the battlefield. In 2004, while still Dartmouth president, without fanfare, Wright began visiting wounded veterans in Walter Reed Army Hospital in Maryland and Balboa naval hospital in San Diego, making some two dozen visits in the next four years.

As a result of these visits, Wright began working with the American Council on Education to raise funds for counseling these wounded veterans, and linked up with Senators Jim Webb, Chuck Hagel, and John Warner, all ex-Marines as Wright is, to support their GI Bill of 2008, and, in particular, the “yellow ribbon program” that permitted private colleges to share in recruiting and supporting veterans. Reflecting many such efforts, in 2008 and 2009 Wright was named honorary dinner co-chair for the Iraq-Afghanistan Veterans of America.

With his retirement from the Dartmouth presidency in 2009, Wright threw himself into lobbying and speaking for veterans rights and veterans care, and also into researching and writing on the history of US wars from the point of view of those who fought -- how they were recruited and how they were treated both in and out of the service. That led to his important 2012 book, *Those Who Have Borne the Burden: A History of America’s Wars and Those Who Fought Them*, that tracked the history of the American soldier from the American Revolution to the more recent, increasingly problematic wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

And Wright has followed up that book, with the one from which he will read tonight, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War*, a period renowned for the fierce political battles it engendered at home; for the ending of the draft and the final abandonment of the notion of a citizens army; and for the abuse and neglect of the veterans returning to the US. James Mattis, currently US Secretary of Defense, retired Marine Corps general, writes of Wright’s book:

"Broad in scope and as human a history as could be written of the "enduring" impact of our nation's Vietnam experience, this is a beautiful piece of work. ... With honesty and compassion for those who carried and still carry burdens from the war years, no book better captures the totality of that era."

Welcome, Jim Wright: Semper Fi