

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



election...or somebody else has . . . and then you can make a decision. . . . But in the meantime let's see if we can't find enough things to do . . . to keep them [Hanoi] off base . . . and upset them a little bit without getting another Korean [war] started."

Then, as later, Johnson tried to deal with Vietnam at the minimum political cost. McMaster, a young Army soldier-scholar and Gulf War combat veteran, draws on newly available documents and interviews to show how, from the start, this approach doomed both the U.S. effort in Vietnam and traditional military-civilian relations. Obscured in most of the literature on Vietnam, it is a chilling tale.

Because Johnson did not want to be accused of "losing" Vietnam, he rejected all talk of a U.S. withdrawal. Yet in 1964 he also did not want to jeopardize his election as a "man of peace" running against the hawkish Barry Goldwater. Nor, in 1965, did he want to mobilize the country for fear of forfeiting his Great Society programs. Johnson's civilian advisers, notably Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, tailored their proposals accordingly. They figured that "graduated pressure" would help LBJ politically while at the same time persuading Hanoi to back off its goal of "liberating" the South. Each seemingly small military step—covert operations, retaliatory air strikes, an incremental bombing campaign, the first U.S. troop deployment—was seen as an extension of diplomacy, sending a new "signal" to the North Vietnamese.

Was "graduated pressure" working? Johnson often worried less about that question than about a revolt by the Joint Chiefs. Like Kennedy, he scorned and distrusted the Joint Chiefs as old-fashioned and unimaginative. Their traditional role was to offer professional military advice untainted by poli-

tics. But LBJ wanted complaisance and agreement. And McNamara, eager to please LBJ and convinced that he and his civilian aides alone should shape U.S. strategy, kept the Joint Chiefs out of the loop.

For their part, the Joint Chiefs complained but, riven by interservice rivalries and parochialism, could not come up with a unified strategic plan. The Air Force's Curtis LeMay and his successor John P. McConnell, saw an intensive bombing campaign as the answer to Hanoi's support for the Vietcong guerrillas in the South. The Marines' Wallace Greene urged a coastal "enclave" strategy. Meanwhile, the Navy's David L. McDonald vacillated, and the Army's Harold K. Johnson, who had grave doubts about bombing, lacked the self-confidence to confront either his colleagues or the White House.

Soothed, divided, and isolated by the artful McNamara, the Joint Chiefs grew privately bitter but never challenged the evasive, temporizing, and finally deceptive assertions made by the White House. As the Vietcong guerrillas made steady gains and LBJ achieved his 1964–65 goal of avoiding a political showdown on Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs became known among junior officers in the Pentagon as "the five silent men." The price of their silence—and of Johnson's policy—was the eventual involvement of a force of more than 500,000 U.S. troops, and 58,000 American dead. McMaster concludes: "The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field nor was it lost on the front page of the *New York Times*." It was lost in Washington almost before the country knew it had begun.

—Peter Braestrup

RUSSIA: *People and Empire.*

By Geoffrey Hosking. Harvard University Press. 548 pp. \$29.95

Who needs another history of Russia under the tsars? The short answer is that we all do, for the fall of the Soviet Union casts fresh light on the whole of Russian history. Was Communist rule simply an interlude, and if so, between what and what? Does democracy stand a chance? Is the new Russia fated to be, like its tsarist predecessor, a conqueror and ruler of its neighbors?

A professor of Russian history at the University of London, Hosking was among the few Western scholars to take seriously the