

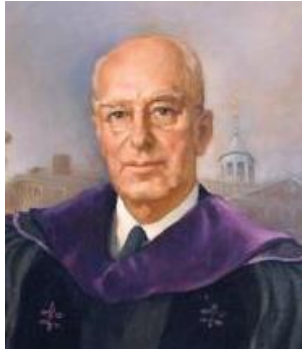


BROWN

Character in Action

by Robert Porter Lynch, Brown 1969, Naval ROTC

(Abridged Version)



Brown President, Henry Merritt Wriston served from 1937 to 1955.

He was far more than the normal professor who migrated up through the administrative ranks to become a president of a quiet New England university. Born on the 4th of July, he was a historian and international relations scholar. He was also a visionary and man of deep moral fortitude, whose father was a minister and preacher. And, probably most important, Wriston was a man of deep tradition – one of the last remaining vestiges of the great thought-leaders of the Age of the Enlightenment whose vitality birthed a nation and, not coincidentally, Brown University in 1764 (then R.I. College).

My father, Robert Barrows Lynch, a star southpaw baseball pitcher with pinpoint accuracy, a dazzling curve and baffling knuckleball, began his freshman year in 1940. Returning as a sophomore in the fall of 1941, America was rapidly spiraling toward war. As students began gathering for classes, Roosevelt had just met with Churchill in Newfoundland a month earlier to discuss strategic plans to defeat Hitler.



President Wriston foresaw the inevitable: that war was looming; he sensed Brown's place in history and his own personal role in it; and he understood that a student's brain was not just an empty bucket yearning for a prolific professorial knowledge dump. For Wriston, Brown's responsibility was to develop people who could lead civilization away from the brink of disaster. The central purpose of the University was to build core values that produced honorable citizens of the highest moral character:

“Your education is wasted if you do not develop morally; if you do not acquire the moral courage to take some position and stand on it – to call what is right and wrong and take the consequences.”

Preparing for War

In his Opening Convocation Speech in September 1941 Wriston grasped the opportunity to sound the alarm: students and faculty had better begin girding themselves for dramatic challenges ahead.

His speech was entitled ***Character in Action***, a theme quite dear to him. In the audience, my father, along with hundreds of other students, sat with intense anxiety. Wriston mounted the podium in Sayles Hall, then waited for the buzz of students in the audience to subside. When all eyes were upon him, with a resonant baritone voice directly out of Hollywood's central casting, he began with the simple statement:

“War is terrible; we wish it would end.”

At that moment, battle scarred Europe was fighting for its very existence as Hitler had gobbled up all of Europe, save Britain, and was pressing forward on the Eastern front into Russia. America's “*Day of Infamy*,” December 7th, lay a mere ten weeks into the foggy future. Yet Wriston could feel it coming; he set a challenging expectation for students on that fateful September day in the face of looming adversity:

“Many of you come to your studies under a cloud of uncertainty. You should not let that disconcert you. These are not idle words of advice; they are designed to remind you that throughout life you will be faced by uncertainties. Those you now face are only more dramatic than others. It is a manifestation of maturity of character to face with steadfastness and with courage the hazards which are part of life itself.”

Character in Action – My Father’s Convocation 1941, War Adjustments & Commencement 1944

Having been an ardent opponent to isolationism, Wriston didn’t blame the onslaught of war solely on Hitler’s shoulders, declaring:

“Candor compels us to admit that the United States helped produce this war. Having won a victory in 1918, we fled its consequences. Having helped remake the world, we refused responsibility. Having altered the balance of power, we abandoned it wholly to others. Then as the storm clouds gathered, we retreated further and further from responsibility [into isolation] by attempting to take the most powerful single nation out of the war.”

Wriston regarded American isolation and materialism as different sides of the same coin, warning:

“The menace to American security [was caused] because disillusionment after the last war drove many to materialism. Even in high quarters, democracy came to be interpreted as nourishment, clothing; and housing for the underprivileged ... with very little accent upon the intangibles, such as freedom. Indeed it was boldly said in official circles that freedom could have no meaning to a hungry man, thus making unconscious mockery of Valley Forge, thus denying the soul force of Gandhi, thus blinding itself to the heroism of the Chinese, who had rather be hungry and free ... than fed and submissive to Japan.”

While the battle for primacy between the spirit of freedom and heroic materialism had been a stand-off prior to the war, the glory of righteousness now prevailed over its arch-nemesis:

“The decision is inexorably being made; however slowly, however haltingly. Its achievement is much more than a mark of intelligence; it is a triumph of character.

“It means that-sacrifice is to take the place of plenty; hardship is chosen over comfort; the things of the spirit are preferred over the pleasures of the moment. It demonstrates that not the short run alone, but the long run, have meaning for the American people. They have not lost their sensitiveness to concepts of right and justice and human dignity. I had rather wait for the assertion of those great qualities of character than see some impulsive and facile but deceptive unity sweep us into action from which we would later retreat;”

He viewed the war in Europe as an archetypal allegory pitting the Führer’s dictatorial menacing military power against the “moral tenacity of his opponents.”



Armistice Day, November 11, 1943

As prophet, Wriston foresaw Brown becoming a training ground for spiritual leaders and intellectual warriors:

“Some of you will not be called to military service; others will take training and never fight, and be tempted to feel that you indulged in a futile gesture. For still others the moment of conflict may come. But though the nature of the service required of you may vary, the tradition of Brown demands that you vindicate its accent upon [moral] values. You can do so here and now.”

This “accent on values” was the pinnacle of human development in Wriston’s view, the central organizing principle for a great university. He knew the elevation of demagogues like Hitler was the consequence of the desecration of the primacy of higher order values epitomized by moral character.

“The greatest gift of this University is ... its accent upon values. Standards of value can range from the lowest to the highest. At the bottom is that complete negation of significance epitomized in the well-known phrases, "Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die;" [or] "By mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been; .because the breath' in our nostrils is smoke, and while our heart beateth, reason is a spark, which being extinguished, the body shall be turned into ashes, and the spirit shall be dispersed as thin air."

“The postulate upon which this University stands is at the opposite extreme. The college would never have been founded, it would never have survived, it would never have grown and prospered, without the sense of value epitomized in the motto upon our seal: "In 'Deo Speramus." [In God We Trust]. It is a measure of value which puts all the intangibles at the head of the list -- *human dignity*...



“From that central postulate flows the demand for freedom, for justice, for truth. If that scale of values is valid, then other things may have to be sacrificed to maintain them. The physical standard of living, the ease and comfort, the pleasures may have to be sacrificed for a time in order that things of more exalted value may be preserved.

“Your predecessors [from the American Revolution] had no wish ...to give up their studies, their comforts, such fortunes as they had... in the War for Independence. But their studies would have been useless if they had not led them to express their mature characters in action which vindicated the values educated men have always held most precious.... Then students of Brown turned from books to guns with the same reluctance as you do today, and only when it seemed necessary to vindicate in action the fundamental values for which the University itself stood....

“It is not an intellectual game. It is not even a cold calculation of national self-interest upon a material plane. What we now witness is the essential character of the American people manifesting itself in a determination to vindicate those values which are most precious.”

*Wriston clearly understood the University should have a "soul" which aimed at **Lifting the Dignity of the Human Spirit** for the purpose of building a stronger foundation for civilization itself.*

Wriston’s visionary spirit looked way into the future, beyond the war, with a clarity about what was needed to sustain a peaceful world after victory was achieved:

“We must win not only a war but a peace. If unity and energy are necessary to win victory, patience and steadfastness, conviction and moral power are necessary to win the peace.”

This great vision, moral conviction, steadfast leadership, and presence of what was needed at this moment in history brought Brown University marching proudly into World War II.

Shifting the University Paradigm in an Embattled World

Universities are designed as places of learning; they are architected for peace not war. Wriston's mission when he was elected President in 1937 was to awaken the institution and bring it to a position of prominence; he saw war not as an obstacle but an opportunity.

Brown, by 1944, had been transformed in multiple dimensions. A special paper, the *Brunonian*, published especially for those students whose education had been curtailed by the war, documented the many radical adjustments needed to train spiritual warriors in an Ivy League setting.

Placement Aid Extended to Service Men

With the large number of students being rushed to the battle-front before they graduated, local business alumni formed a placement fund to help find jobs for vets when they returned.

Medical Science Department Created

As a result of the experience during the war, the University came to realize the importance of medicine as part of the scientific pursuit embraced in a liberal arts school. This will be of particular importance to those students whose medical studies had been interrupted by serving in the armed forces.

Service Men Given Credit for Studies

For the hundreds of Brown men whose studies were interrupted by the war, the University wanted to find a way to grant academic credit for courses taken while in military service which could later be used toward attaining a degree. Courses taken Armed Forces Institute, Officer Candidate Schools, or specialized training schools at the college level would be considered on an individual basis.

Training Army Meteorologists

Brown embraced the opportunity to accept a detachment of 400 students from the Army Air Corps Tactical Training Command. Some of the unit was on campus for a year, others for only six months. But they were embraced as part of the Brown family, playing sports and participating in undergraduate life.

Sports Continuing on a Reduced Scale

Freshman sports had to be eliminated, and it was hard to muster many teams. War rationing prevented extensive travel, so many of the sports were played within a shorter range. The miniaturized Brown teams often played against the local military units. Most of Brown's sports coaches exchanged athletic attire for military uniforms, leaving only Rip Engle to handle the all the duties of football, track, and basketball coach.

Connecting with Alumni During Wartime

The Alumni Office was overwhelmed trying to keep current, all data manually kept on cards with ever-changing information about the 13,000 alumni set off into far-flung places. A record was broken in Alumni Fund-raising: Nearly 4,500 alumni contributed a grand total of \$66,000 – a lot in those days.

Admit Freshmen Three Times a Year

The Admissions Office, had to make radical adjustments. The academic year was now three semesters, starting July 1st, November 1st, and March 1st. One new set of Freshman was recruited each new semester, with each class practically trodding on the heels of the prior. The average age of admission dropped from 18 ½ years to 17 ½ years, with some being accepted as young as 15. Most entrants stayed a semester, maybe two or three, getting in as much college as possible before being called onto active duty. These circumstances caused the Admissions Office to encourage students to enter the University, even if they could attend college for only a few weeks. By 1944 the Veterans Administration GI Bill set the stage for Brown's Veterans College (see: <https://250.brown.edu/story/traditions-old-new/salute-to-brown.html>).

Brown Graduates March Off To Two World Wars



Winter Commencement, 1944

For my father, his normal graduation was accelerated from the traditional late May activities to accommodate the incoming freshmen and the start of classes on March 1st. On Sunday, the 27th of February, the cold winter wind prevented any outdoor ceremonies for Commencement services. They began not with a march down College Hill, but in the basement of the old Baptist Meeting House followed by a march into the “*calm white severity*” of the main room upstairs, a local writer noted, adding “*the elms outside were black lace against a gray sky, their buds still tight in the February chill.*” The singing of “*Mother, Dear Brunonia*” brought a bittersweet message:

“Where starry-eyed ambition
wove her bright and golden dream;
And fellowship, with heart and lip,
set all the world agleam!”

Inspiring the Spiritual Warrior

As disconcerting and bleak as the circumstances were, like a war general, Henry Merritt Wriston managed to dig deep into his soul and ministerial roots to send his troops into battle with a distinctly Christian crusader’s message reflecting the makeup of the student body of that time. According to an article in the *Providence Journal* written the day after:

He told them that the manner in which Christ identified His own life with that of God “constituted His truest divinity.” “That pathway to divinity is open to each and all of us.” Quoting from St. Paul, he added “We are the children of God; and if children, then heirs, heirs to God and joint heirs with Christ.”

“If you enter upon that inheritance I hope you will feel moment of triumph and exaltation. But I am certain those moments will be balanced by hours in dark Gethsemane, and if, sometime, you do not pray ‘may this cup pass from me’ your experience will be unique in mankind’s history.

“The best we can leave with you as you leave us is that you will be able to say with Him in all truth, “I have overcome the world.””

Wriston labelled it a fallacy to think that religion was either an “opiate of the people” or an “escape mechanism,” looking toward Christ as one who harbored neither of those possibilities.

Taking a decidedly stoic perspective reflecting Henley’s 1876 poem *Invictus*, Wriston observed,

“Christ did not dodge the questions of pain, sorrow and suffering... nor did He dodge the agony of fear or loneliness. ... Before they came with swords and staves, He had won his battle. The principle of love, which had appeared to fail Him, overcame the principle of fear. His triumph was in achieving master of His own life and spirit. He would not escape the tribulations, but He escaped from the fear of them.”

Had Christ gone from Gethsemane into the wilderness to save His own life, the principle “would have been lost for all time for mankind and we should not gather to rejoice in His triumph and to seek victory in our own lives.



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“The method of achieving triumph still must be the same. What still is needed is an appeal to God for spiritual resources to meet the demand of the hour, for reinforcement of the mind and heart and for refreshment of the reservoirs of courage and faith and love.”

Wriston shifted to the larger issue of the future of democracy, then instructed the graduates to make a powerful commitment to their fundamental beliefs, never letting self-doubt be an excuse or escape to avoid being responsible for making a stand for what is right, regardless of arbitrary winds.

“We now have some sense that victory is not far away, but we also have grave doubts that it will bring blessings. The closer victory comes, the more some dread its coming, fearing that triumph over the enemy will be the prelude to quarrels among the Allies.”

“Some are saying that peace is gone forever and democracy will suffer a similar fate.” Wriston cited examples by cynics who claimed there is no hope for democracy in a free Germany, nor in Argentina. “Among ourselves there is doubt that if democracy cannot provide ‘full employment’ or ‘social stability,’ we are doomed.”

The individual may doubt his ability to stand against the world, with the tides of opinion and action running against him, “but each person has his own responsibility to the world; and to question his own abilities is to seek an escape from that responsibility.”

Singing the *Star Spangled Banner* was the ceremonial finale. My father’s Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) then marched across campus to the Officer Commissioning Ceremony in the naval science quarters.

My father was soon hustled off to his first duty assignments before being reporting to the commissioning crew of the *U.S.S. Harry F. Bauer* (DM26) at the Boston Naval Shipyard later that year. He married his high school sweetheart before heading out to the South Pacific war zone. There was no honeymoon.

The following spring, during the Battle of Okinawa, his ship suffered thirteen kamikaze attacks, a torpedo through the bow, and a bomb in the main fuel tanks. Miraculously he and the ship survived. (see [But for the Turn of a Screw](#) for that story)

Wriston’s Legacy

With Wriston’s energy and skills, Brown built a generation of leaders with moral character, keeping the flame of the Age of the Enlightenment burning brightly into the twentieth century.



Wriston saw the struggle of humanity as a clash between heroic materialism and higher moral character. He understood the gravitas of profound wisdom over ever-abundant, yet superficial, intellectual debates. He buttressed the fundamental commitment to the “intangibles” in education – truth, ideas, beauty, and especially the “accent on values,” which were essential as the source of spiritual fortitude. He believed that ideals and moral character must pace the rhythmic heartbeat of every graduate if one is to find true meaning in education and purpose in life. For Wriston, it was this idealism, more than the mere pursuit of knowledge that represented the soul of an institution of higher learning – the commitment to *elevate the Dignity of the Human Spirit* to support the foundations and evolutions of our precious civilization.