

# TOM WOLFE

April 19, 1996

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Mame Warren,  
interviewer

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. Today is April 19, 1996. I'm in New York City and I'm interviewing Tom Wolfe.

I did a little cheating and listened to the talk that you gave at Lee Chapel a few years ago, which was absolutely delightful. I was walking around my field, listening to it and laughing, having a delightful time. My neighbors thought I was crazy. One of the things that you said was that the only other place you applied was Princeton.

**Wolfe:** That's true.

**Warren:** And I was at Princeton on Wednesday, so I'm really intrigued that those were your two choices.

**Wolfe:** Well, first you have to understand that this was 1947. In 1947, if you had the tuition and you could make a breath fog on a mirror, you could get into any college in America. It was not a big deal. I didn't even think about where I was going to go to college until probably May, maybe it was a little earlier than that, not much, of senior year, and so I applied. I'd heard of Princeton, it didn't seem too far away, and it had a good reputation. I really knew almost nothing about Washington and Lee except people spoke highly of it.

So I just applied to these two places, I was accepted to both, I visited both with my parents, and we just found Washington and Lee a lot more attractive. It was warmer in terms of congeniality, it was convenient, and so we chose Washington and Lee. The atmosphere of choosing a college, there were no SATs. SATs existed, but you didn't

have to take them, and I never took them for either place. I think we must have had some kind of test.

I have a daughter who's now a sophomore in high school, and already thoughts turn towards the college scramble. Of course, your senior year means nothing now; it all has to be done by the end – it's just a madhouse now. Anyway, it just seemed more attractive than Princeton, so I went to Washington and Lee.

**Warren:** My first hour on Wednesday I was very impressed, and as the day wore on, I was very glad I was going to be going home to Lexington. It was overwhelming.

**Wolfe:** I've gotten to know a lot more about Princeton since then, and talk about a place that's overgrown now. The university has made that area so attractive that it's got a dreadful corridor of new businesses and it's just getting swamped. Anyway, that's off the subject.

**Warren:** So you came in 1947?

**Wolfe:** Yes.

**Warren:** So you arrived with James Leyburn.

**Wolfe:** That's right. That's right.

**Warren:** Were you aware that that was a real shift at Washington and Lee?

**Wolfe:** Yes, not because I understood such things, but he was so remarkable that you caught it immediately. For one thing, he lived right there on the campus in a house – I don't know what that house is used for now, but it was thirty-five feet from Washington Hall, I guess, and in the evenings he would play the piano. He was a wonderful piano player, and he was playing Chopin, Debussy, Bach, Brahms, and Mozart, and it lent a real atmosphere to life on the campus. Just to see him, he was a very erect, good-looking man, terrific posture, had great confidence and marvelous manner. He was one of those people who had real intellectual charisma.

**Warren:** Tell me what you mean by that.

**Wolfe:** You immediately realized this was a serious man with whom you took no liberties, and yet he was not a distant man, he wasn't remote, he wasn't at all pompous. Quite the contrary, he was a gentleman, with a great aura of learning and cultivation. I don't know why even somebody like myself, just popping in from high school, would pick this up, but you did. Everyone did, immediately.

He also had great ideas that always that I always wished Washington and Lee – well, they followed many of his ideas, but there were other suggestions of his I wish had been carried through. One was, he wanted there to be a Washington and Lee blazer, which would have a crest and that students would wear. That and academic robes. I think there was another idea he had that instead of just getting an academic robe to graduate in, have them to wear every day. And why not? What a marvelous idea. I think it's great.

One of the bad changes at Washington and Lee since I was there was getting rid of conventional dress. When I was there, I rebelled against it in a modest way. I wore the reverse of the expected tonal combinations. I found a place in Richmond called the National Shirt Shop, which was frequented by people who liked to go to the races, as far as I could tell, and they had maroon, navy, and black shirts, but conventionally cut, as in conventional dress. When you combine those with pale grey jackets, what I like, almost white, chalky gray jackets and so on, you could get some rather striking – and white necktie with a black or navy shirt, this was modest rebellion against conventional dress. But everything was conventionally cut so there was nothing anybody could really do about it.

But the longer I stayed, the more I realized that there was something very important about conventional dress. I mean this seriously. It's a constant reminder that you're something special, that you're maintaining standards that other of your contemporaries are not maintaining, and that something more is expected, and that you expect more of other people. After all, formal dress – of course, now conventional dress

looks like something very formal, and formal dress is a signal to other people that you expect to be treated in a certain way, in a certain way that maintains your superiority. I think there's nothing at all wrong with having young people feel superior, since they will work so hard to show that they don't feel it, even if they do.

Thank God Washington and Lee campus is not as bedraggled-looking as many others, but when I see the favored sons and daughters of America dressed in rags on college campuses all across the country, I think it's ridiculous and I also think it's really unwise to encourage it, and most campuses really encourage it. To most people, it sounds like a very petty thing. I don't think it is. I think it's a real mistake to let that die. It will never come back, not for a long, long time, anyway.

**Warren:** It hasn't died out completely at Washington and Lee. At Mock Convention, my husband was astonished at how many blue blazers. He said, "Do they wear uniforms here?" There are many, many, many blue blazers at Washington and Lee.

**Wolfe:** I think it is a better-looking campus, by far, than most, in terms of dress, but people don't understand how important symbolism is in upholding standards of all kinds.

**Warren:** Washington and Lee has a stronger sense than most of that idea of symbolism and tradition.

**Wolfe:** Oh, yes. That's certainly true, and probably should be—I was kind of the campus liberal, I guess, when I was there, because everyone seemed so conservative. Maybe that's a contrary streak in me. Whenever it came time for election year, students, just in conversation, divide up on political, and I was always a Democrat and much more interested in things like radicalism in literature and so on. When I got to Yale and the conformity was entirely the opposite direction, Yale graduate school, not the undergraduate, and the conformity was entirely the opposite direction, I found myself suddenly the conservative. I arrived being an Adlai Stevenson adherent and left an

Eisenhower proponent. But that says a lot more about me than either institution. No, Washington and Lee has maintained a lot of its traditions.

**Warren:** Can we talk about some of those things? In particular, the Honor System. Was that strongly put forth to you when you first arrived?

**Wolfe:** It was, but I had also been to a high school, St. Christopher's in Richmond, which had an Honor System, and so I didn't think that much about it. I just thought that's the way schools were run. As you can tell, I wasn't particularly aware very much of other schools. It did really seem to work.

I didn't realize how unusual that was until I went other places, and when I went to Yale as a graduate student, I would serve sometimes as a proctor in examinations and so on. Just the idea of having a proctor in examinations I found rather startling, and the students were always separated one desk between – there was always one empty desk in between two students taking a test, the assumption being that they're going to cheat if you didn't separate them, if you didn't have somebody looking all the time.

I don't know what it's like now, but in Lexington when I was at Washington and Lee, the Honor System was so strong that all merchants gave you credit. There was no such thing as a charge account, and no such thing as paying cash unless you wanted to. You could just go in anywhere and charge anything you wanted. Certainly no questions about a check. You'd just go in and charge.

So when I went off to Yale, I had a dorm room which you had to furnish yourself in terms of if you wanted something like a rug, and so I just walked – I never will forget this. It was September of '51, after I graduated from W&L. I walked from the Yale campus down to one of the big department stores in New Haven, and I went to the rug department and I picked out a rug, and they said, "Do you have a charge account?" I assumed this meant, "Are you at Yale?" And so I gave them my name and address. In those days, there were no credit cards anyway. I gave them my name and address and

put the rug over my shoulder – it was a sizable rug, I remember – and walked back up the hill to Yale.

Then I got in the room and it was the wrong size, and so I put it over my shoulder and I walked back. When I walked back into the – this is about three hours later, four hours later. When I walked back into the rug department, three people ran up to me and, with a furious look on their faces, I think they were on the point of putting me under arrest because they had just discovered I had no charge account at this department store, you know, but I just assumed that's the way the world was.

**Warren:** That was the beginning of your Yale education, I guess.

**Wolfe:** What we call the world education.

**Warren:** So you arrived in 1947. I presume there would have been a lot of veterans on campus at that time.

**Wolfe:** Yes, and I really came to hate veterans. That war was so different from all the wars since then, all of which have been unpopular, and it's hard for anybody whose first experience of war at home was Vietnam or Korea or any of the engagements since, to realize how popular the Second World War was. It was enormously popular.

Politicians in 1945 were leaping into the service just to have it on their record that they had been in the armed services. Returning veterans were considered demi-gods. They were warriors who had fought a great, magnificent fight not only to save America, but to save civilization, and they were considered really superior, superior beings. I really got a snootful of this very quickly. I mean, you could tell at a glance there was nothing really special about them. They didn't know that.

They instituted something called Bulge Day, which every non-veteran came to hate rapidly. One of the great battles of the Second World War was the Battle of the Bulge, and there were tremendous casualties, but our troops persevered and won this great battle. You could understand why, to people who had actually fought there or been over there, this was like the Battle of Cold Harbor or the Battle of Bull Run or

Manassas. And so they would make all of the pledges in the fraternities – as you know, at Washington and Lee, practically everybody ends up, then as now, about 80 percent were in fraternities, all the pledges in the fraternities would have to line up with wooden paddles over their shoulders, executing military maneuvers while the upper classmen got drunk and sobbed uncontrollably at memories of their days on the battlefield, if any.

No, the veterans had great status, very high status. It really is very hard to realize just how terrific they seemed, particularly in light of what terrible reception the veterans got after the war in Vietnam.

**Warren:** So had things settled down by the time you arrived and people were clearly in defined classes? I've talked to a couple of people whose careers at W&L were interrupted by the war. It seems like it got very confusing about what class you were in then.

**Wolfe:** It wasn't to me, but I supposed it was to them. I remember I would say, "Yes, sir," to a lot of these people. They were older. If you grew up in Richmond, at least in the circles I was in, you "sirred" and "ma'amed" people to death. That was just kind of drummed in; that was the way you were brought up. I remember a number of them would get annoyed at being called sir. They didn't want to really feel that old and distinguished. But I don't remember any particular – as far as I was concerned, it wasn't very confusing. I knew what class I was in.

That was a problem, though. The biggest problem was knowing about classes. People really did not have class affiliations; they had fraternity affiliations.

**Warren:** Were you in a fraternity?

**Wolfe:** I was in a fraternity called Phi Kappa Sigma, and I remember Dean [Frank J.] Gilliam, about whom you have, no doubt, heard a great deal.

**Warren:** No, actually I haven't heard. He's alluded to, but I would love it if you would talk about him.

**Wolfe:** He was probably the greatest admissions magnet. He was in charge of admissions, but he was dean of the whole shooting match. He was always the number-two man under the president, but he was in charge of admissions. He was a great salesman for Washington and Lee or for anything else, because he was the consummate southern aristocrat. Had a magnificent house just up that hill. What do they call it? I don't know what they call it. You know where those – I think it's tennis courts, some kind of sports.

**Warren:** Behind Wilson Field, up that way?

**Wolfe:** Yes, up that way, up on that hill. He had a magnificent home, stone home, called Bell something.

**Warren:** Stono, wasn't it?

**Wolfe:** No, I think it was just on the market recently. I don't know who owns it now.

**Warren:** That's why I'm aware of it now.

**Wolfe:** Bell something. Seems to me it was Bell something.

**Warren:** Oh, yes, you're right. Has great gardens.

**Wolfe:** No doubt it does. Quite a few homes up there, all very nice, but this was really something.

He was also a great speaker. He was a remarkable figure, a singular figure the way Dean Leyburn was. He would give a talk each fall in Lee Chapel to the incoming freshmen, and he would say – Rush Week was the first week of school, which I consider to be a dreadful custom, but anyway, I won't get off on that, a custom you can't kill with a stick for some reason. But anyway, Rush Week is the first week of school, and here you are coming in to this new place and immediately you're made to feel that if you don't get into a fraternity that week, your life at Washington and Lee is over, you're part of a doomed species. And he would give this talk saying, "Don't think of it that way." He'd say, "Two years after you've left college, you'll realize it doesn't matter

whether you were in one of these fraternities or not. It won't make the slightest difference. Just don't get carried away by it."

Well, of course, no one could believe that he meant it or that he was right. This was absolutely right. And to this day, I don't know why Washington and Lee or any other college would put up with national fraternities. It's the silliest anachronism on the face of the earth. Nobody from your fraternity that you're going to run into outside of the campus that you're on cares but two seconds that you are a member of their fraternity, Phi Kappa Sigma in another place, and God forbid if you actually turn up at a fraternity house, expecting some hospitality. They really wish you would crawl up and drop through a crack in the sidewalk. But nevertheless, the fraternity system was very strong.

Once I was in a fraternity, I must confess I enjoyed it. You had a home, you had a constant source of camaraderie, and I suppose in a way it's the way life is, too. People are split up into fraternities, even if they aren't called that. So I suppose it's in some way a microcosm of what's going to happen to you when you leave. I didn't know one fraternity from another, but there were a lot of Richmond people in this fraternity I joined and I knew them and they knew me, and it seemed so important to get into something.

**Warren:** Is that how it broke down? You went with people who were like you? Is that how people made the decision?

**Wolfe:** I'll tell you, at the time it seemed so important that I just went with people who knew me. I knew them, they knew me, and as far as I knew, nobody else was going to choose me anyway. I mean, why should they? They didn't know me. So here was this life buoy floating on the water, so I grabbed it.

**Warren:** So once you joined the fraternity, did you then take your meals there?

**Wolfe:** Yes. Of course, that was where most of the dining facilities were, practically all. There was no university dining hall at that time. That's a wonderful thing that's

happened since then, is that there is a university dining hall. You don't have to depend on fraternities as eating clubs. Students, as I recall, anyway, at that time, really didn't have the kind of pocket money that they seem to have now, and to eat a meal out was a big thing. At least it was on my budget and, I think, on most people's.

It was unusual to have an automobile. Some did, and they were considered extremely wealthy. Now I gather they're all over the place, but not then, which I think is probably a good thing not to have the cars.

But I do remember that suddenly you had this fraternity fever as soon as you arrived. But as I say, I enjoyed the – I lived in a fraternity house for three years, which is very unlike me. I don't like a lot of noise and turmoil. I hate drinking, to this day. I was a teetotaler.

**Warren:** Now, that's a hard thing to do at Washington and Lee.

**Wolfe:** Absolutely, at Washington and Lee. I was considered a very strange person, but there were several reasons I was considered a very strange person. One was, I wore a hat. That would be strange today, it was strange then, an old fedora, and I often carried an umbrella, even on sunny days, which I didn't consider so – it was nice to have something to hold, and I always thought hats looked great, and I wear them now. I like to watch the old "Untouchables" movies, because every man, when he leaves a building, has a hat on on the "Untouchables" movies. That was very typical of the thirties.

But I think I was considered strangest of all for the fact that I did not drink, and I just think drink is appalling, anything beyond a glass of wine. Nothing wrong with a glass of wine.

**Warren:** Obviously I wasn't there at that time period, but the consumption of alcohol seems to be an important thing in the whole experience of Washington and Lee.

**Wolfe:** Well, I think it was an important thing throughout southern universities. It wasn't just Washington and Lee. The University of Virginia made people at Washington and Lee look like white-ribbon wearers. My sister has just done research for a

documentary on the University of North Carolina, which has appeared, I think, on some of the PBS channels, and she discovered, going back into the nineteenth century – I think it was on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the University of North Carolina – she discovered that the drinking was worse back in the middle of the nineteenth century than now. It's an old, old tradition, one of the ways that you show you're now a grown-up independent young man, because all these places were all male, was to drink and to drink a lot. All it really shows is you've got the instincts of a seven-year-old. But that's just me talking, you know.

**Warren:** I think I'm more in agreement with you than I am with them. I've always been kind of appalled by it, myself.

**Wolfe:** And I tell you, it's a terrible problem at universities everywhere in this country right now, and a lot of these children – and they are children, you know – childhood ends about age twenty-nine now. That's the truth. I have never seen – there's probably never been a period in all of history in which adolescence has been so extended, and it's because of so much money. You can't extend adolescence if there isn't a lot of fat in an economy.

Why did I even get into that?

**Warren:** Let's go back into the classroom. Tell me about teachers who made a difference for you.

**Wolfe:** Well, the great thing about Washington and Lee, and it's one of the things that will make Washington and Lee increasingly attractive, I predict, over the next twenty-five years, if not longer, is that you are, and always have been, at least since I was there, in very close touch with the teachers. There were no teaching assistants, there were no graduate students teaching, you didn't have a lecture hall where four hundred students took a course and broke up into seminars run by graduate students who were two weeks ahead of you in a syllabus, if that. And that was a wonderful experience to have. You could always ask questions in the middle of a lecture. I don't ever remember there

being a lecture that you couldn't interrupt and have a real give and take with somebody like Dean Leyburn.

**Warren:** Did you take courses with him?

**Wolfe:** I did. This is the way I resisted conventional dress. I resisted anthropology and sociology, but he finally broke through my defenses and it became, and remains, the greatest interest that I have in all academic subjects, is now sociology, which I think should be – it isn't yet, maybe never will be, but it should be the queen of the sciences. All of the sciences, including the physical sciences, should be branches of sociology, if it were structured the way I think it should be.

**Warren:** He'd probably be delighted to hear you say that.

**Wolfe:** And, of course, he was a brilliant sociologist. I'll never forget – you mentioned veterans. I'll never forget, in the spring of this class, the title of the class I can't remember, it was in sociology, he gave a lecture on the sociology of love, including sexual love, the idea being that we're all boys, I mean, at that time. What you find alluring in a woman is socially determined to an extraordinary extent. The young swain thinks it's just this magical thing called love, and he's saying, no, it's this magical thing called society.

There were a lot of veterans in all the classes, many of them older. Some had been away during the war for four years, let's say, and they were married, newly married in many cases, and they didn't like what they were hearing, that their choice of this wonderful woman had been socially determined, it wasn't something magical, unique, something that only they could feel. So he had this wonderful Socratic dialogue in which he would say, "All right. Let's find out what you would not find acceptable as a choice in a woman to marry." And he would say, "You know, physically there are certain animals (he was now talking about sexual physiology) that are really not that different from a human female. Any of those?" And, of course, horrors. That was ruled out. Then he'd go through all the possible choices. You could go to Asia, you could go

to other continents, all around the world, there are women all over the world, all different sorts. So he'd go through all the ethnic groups and ask for volunteers, "Who would like to marry?" And these are all white, mostly southerners at that time. Fortunately it's changed a lot in that respect.

Then he'd get down to body types. He says, "You know, there are lots of women in their late teens, early twenties, who weigh in excess of 280 pounds." So it was a wonderful performance, and by the end of the class, just as it was very hard to argue with Socrates after he'd led you down the path of questions, it was very hard to argue with his contention that an extraordinary amount of one's choices in love were socially determined.

Anyway, by the time I got to graduate school in American Studies, which is a lot closer to sociology than what I had majored in at W&L, which is English, I really found this a great subject to get into.

The other was probably the teacher that had the greatest affect on my future was Marshall Fishwick. Are you familiar with Marshall?

**Warren:** I know the book he did on Michael Miley, the photographer.

**Wolfe:** I don't know that book. He's written so many, you know.

**Warren:** He did a book on Michael Miley, who took photographs during Lee's time and up to—he died in 1918.

**Wolfe:** Marshall is, incidentally, still teaching at Virginia Tech in the Department of Communications, had just come from Yale in American Studies, and he created a course, a year-long course which I think I took in my junior year, I think. It was certainly no sooner than that, because it was an elective course. It was essentially American Studies condensed into a year-long course, and a lot of it was intellectual history. We had just a couple of weeks in each of these sectors; for example, American historiography, which for the first time I learned that there were different theories of history, that historians brought different theories to the study of history, and this

determined to a very large extent how these histories came out. For example, the Turner thesis of the settlement of the American West or Charles and Mary Beard's economic interpretation of American history, Charles Wortenbaker's [phonetic] kind of sociological interpretation of the founding fathers of Virginia. Then he had, as I remember, a week or two weeks about American psychology, William James and other American psychologists.

In the course of this, he would always compare this to what had gone in on Europe, so you would learn about Freudianism, Adlerianism, Jung's approach and Kraft Ebbing [phonetic] and Karensen, contemporaries, psychological, psychoanalytical thought. There was a couple of weeks about American art and architecture, in which you didn't just study buildings, but you studied influences of the international style, neoclassicism, which Washington and Lee campus abounds in, and you learned that contrary to what you might think today, when that looks so traditional, that was very avant garde. Those columns, the Greek revival, that was modern at the time Washington and Lee campus was developed.

I'm trying to think of some of the other areas that we studied. Anthropology – Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead. As I say, a great part of this was intellectual history, which I think is the most neglected part of the history of this country, and it's so important, in my humble opinion.

This course so impressed me, he was such a magnetic teacher, I've never had a more magnetic teacher anywhere – anywhere – that I decided in my senior year that I would try to follow in his footsteps and get into the Yale American Studies program, but I wonder really if there's ever been a greater teacher anywhere than Marshall Fishwick. I've seen him in action fairly recently at Virginia Tech. He's not only brilliant and not only does he have this just extraordinary storehouse of just knowledge, he's one of these historical minds that just retains everything, but he has enthusiasm of a sort that you cannot resist. He has a blithering eye like the ancient mariner, but he's not

wailing, and you just have those eyes look at you, and that enthusiasm, and I've never seen anything like it.

Anyway, I decided, on the strength of that course, that that's what I wanted to do. I always wanted to write, but I figured this would be a good background for that, and I could also go into teaching the way he had.

**Warren:** I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Wolfe:** He also lived right there on the campus in a house that he owned until recently. He sold it to Washington and Lee since I was on the board, so seven or eight years ago, maybe, or less.

**Warren:** It seems that many of the faculty were right there. Was there socializing with the faculty?

**Wolfe:** Oh, sure. Not in the sense of—I don't remember faculty members who invited students just on a purely social basis, but often, many times you were invited to faculty homes in the company of other students, and that was terrific. You really would get to know some of these people, and Marshall was like that.

There was another teacher, George Foster, also lived right there on the campus. He taught creative—

**Warren:** I don't know that name. Who was he?

**Wolfe:** He was in the English department. I forget what his scholarly areas were, but he had the one creative writing course, and he was also a very warm teacher who enjoyed being around students. There are a lot of teachers who do not enjoy being around students, but that's not true generally at Washington and Lee, which makes a huge difference.

I don't know whether this is the talk of mine that you heard on tape or not, but if it is, I don't want to repeat myself. In my junior year, I took his creative writing course and we met at the Dutch Inn, which is still there, I believe, and we had a little room in

the Dutch Inn. There were about ten of us, as I recall, in that class. Another student in that class was William Hoffman. Does that name ring any bells?

**Warren:** No.

**Wolfe:** He was a veteran who had graduated from Hampden-Sydney, and he had another year on his G.I. Bill. He had been through about five years of combat in the Second World War, so he had everything you could get in terms of the G.I. Bill. He had another year, and he decided to come to Washington and Lee to spend a year there, and he was a writer, an aspiring writer, so he was also in this. We had to write continually, which is really the best part of a creative writing course, anyway, as a vehicle to force you to write. We would read our stories aloud. You didn't have Xerox machines in those days, and we would read our stories aloud, and they would be criticized by the other students and by George Foster. Those were wonderful sessions.

Bill Hoffman was by far the best writer in the class. He wrote some short stories about the Second World War that I can remember to this day, which he developed into a book that was quite successful, called *The Trumpet Unblown*, a novel that was highly praised in the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, everybody. I really think the atmosphere could not have existed any place other than someplace like Washington and Lee, where instead of having God knows how many people in a creative writing course, as would be true at a large university, you had a small group. You constantly heard each other's work and you had somebody like George Foster, with whom you could talk not only during that class, but you'd see him on campus and you might be at his house.

I think there's a lot of reaction now against the big university, where there are big names who are little more than that to the students. There are academic stars who give a big lecture and that's the last you see of them. Washington and Lee's teacher-student ratio is very low. They stand eleven to one now, and it was probably about like that at that time also, which is a tremendous advantage. Also you did a lot of writing, not just in something like a creative writing course, but there were just constant papers. I think

teachers can put up with a lot of writing if there's not so many students. Anyway, that was all very valuable for anybody who wants to write.

I'm trying to think. There was one other person in that course. I just blanked out on him, who also became a published writer, a novelist, and that's three out of ten, that's batting three hundred. It's a very high average as far as creative writing courses. Extraordinary, actually.

**Warren:** Pretty amazing, really.

**Wolfe:** That small community and the closeness to the faculty, small classes, is really the ideal setup, I think.

**Warren:** Were there other people in the English department who were important for you?

**Wolfe:** Not like Foster, Fishwick, and Dean Leyburn.

**Warren:** I understand that there were just certain people who were giants, and people practically genuflect when they say their names. I just think it's a wonderful legacy for a school to have.

**Wolfe:** Well, there probably are, but if you're talking about academic giants, I particularly remember Leyburn. I'm sure there were many others. Just as a great teacher and then budding academic star, who went on to write, he'd already written several books, I think, Marshall Fishwick. He's written many, many books.

**Warren:** How about on the social scene? There wouldn't have been a mock convention when you went there, right?

**Wolfe:** There was one. Yeah, in '48.

**Warren:** It was '44 there wasn't one during the war, of course.

**Wolfe:** Yeah, because I remember going to it.

**Warren:** Did you get involved?

**Wolfe:** No, not at all. Politics bored me then and politics bores me now. It has always bored me as a writer, and that's because this country is so stable.

**Warren:** It needs a good revolution. [Laughter]

**Wolfe:** This country is so stable. You know, we think we get a left-wing president, we think we get a right-wing president, and all it is is a railroad train going down the track with shouting on either side of the tracks, and trying to push the train, and they can't even rock it. If you think about Roosevelt on the one hand, you can't imagine how left-wing he was perceived as being, and Ronald Reagan on the right. You know this term that's used now, there's no such thing as "right" anymore, there's only the "far right" and the "extreme right." The "right" disappeared; there's only the "far right." Well, Reagan was considered one step from Hitler to all of my friends in New York, believe me, in the journalistic and literary world. They thought he had a black mustache under his nose. And look back on it and think of how middle of the road his actual regime, what he actually did, was, and, for that matter, what did Roosevelt do? He didn't lead us under some red banner, shrieking down the streets. Given the crisis that he faced, it was, for the most part, pretty sensible Band-aid stuff. I'd get a big argument on that.

But this country is like a 108-inch sofa, and you just can't move it. You kind of want to move it, you know, it's in the wrong place, but it's just too much of an effort. It's so boring to write about it. I mean, how can anybody get excited about this election coming up in '96? Plenty of people do, but I cannot get excited about it, particularly since now we're the only super power in the world. It doesn't matter who you put in the White House, it really doesn't.

Oh, well, don't let get off on that.

**Warren:** I'd love to, but we are supposed to talk about Washington and Lee. How about things like Fancy Dress? Did you go to Fancy Dress?

**Wolfe:** I never went to Fancy Dress. I get requests from the students who are involved in it, for reminiscences. I never went to one. I avoided as much as possible Fancy Dress, football rallies. I hated football rallies.

**Warren:** And they were big then, right? That was the time of big-time football.

**Wolfe:** Yes, and here's the part of the wisdom of James G. Leyburn. Washington and Lee embarked upon subsidized football, not just football, also subsidized wrestling team, and that was rather more interesting, but subsidized football, even if you have the money to do it, is a dreadful mistake at a place like Washington and Lee, because you end up, wherever you have subsidized football, with a mercenary army on your campus, people who have come to your campus not because they have any interest in anything that your school might stand for or because they might be part of any social heritage. Why was I at Washington and Lee? Because I was a Virginian and more or less in the social swim of Washington and Lee. But there are just mercenaries. At a place the size of Washington and Lee, they stand out, too.

**Warren:** Tell me what you mean by that.

**Wolfe:** Well, they tend to go around in clumps together, and why shouldn't they? I mean, that's their fraternity, really, is sports, and it's true at every place you have subsidized athletics. I don't know exactly where they were quartered at Washington and Lee, but often such students room together, they eat together, they socialize together, and it's very natural. There's no reason why they shouldn't. But they are so often like a mercenary army in that they're looking to play professional football or whatever the sport may be. That's why they're there.

And it is a very bad thing for a place like Washington and Lee, and I think Dean Leyburn recognized this. It's something he inherited. There wasn't much he could – but as soon as the first opportunity arose – now, you'd have to check this out with somebody else, because I wasn't that close to the administration at that point – he was the one who said, "Enough," and it was the best thing Washington and Lee ever did. Subsidized sports, even in the biggest university, are a dreadful mistake, just an awful mistake, and we're playing that game out now.

There was still something known as amateur sports when I was at Washington and Lee, and there's a very sound theory behind amateurism. Sports are a charade for

war. They've always been that, and the idea is to put young men – and it has nothing to do with the women, I'm sorry, it's just the truth – is to put young men through a simulation of the combat of war in a harmless, or relatively harmless, way, and to simulate combat and perhaps learn something about the teamwork of war. The greatest fighter is always going to be the amateur, the one who fights for honor, the home, hearth, blood, and honor, and that's why there was such a premium put on amateurism, that and a little bit of social snobbery about that, too, that you're an aristocrat above being paid, but mainly it's the idea that the amateur fighter is the great fighter, because the amateur will fight even if the game is lost, as was proved in many, many wars.

It's interesting that every adulteration of that with professionalism leads to the instincts of the mercenary. What is the mercenary? The mercenary is in it for money, and he expects pillage and rape as his reward, and that's one of the natural results of professionalization of the charade of combat in sports. That's my opinion. I'm really so happy that Washington and Lee – still, there are always pressures to get back into the professionalization of college sports.

**Warren:** That shift happened out of professional big league football in 1954. Were you aware of that as it was happening? Once you left Washington and Lee, I know you have in recent years maintained an interest. Did you maintain an interest? Did you come to alumni reunions all through the years?

**Wolfe:** No, I really didn't. I would somehow follow what was going on, but I really didn't. I went off to Yale, then I went off to Springfield, Massachusetts, to work on a newspaper, and although even when I was in Washington, working for the *Washington Post*, I was not involved in – somehow I kept in touch.

**Warren:** When were you on the board?

**Wolfe:** '84. I think my first meeting was the fall of 1984.

**Warren:** So you were involved in the coeducation decision.

**Wolfe:** Well, I was not there for the vote. The vote was in the spring, as I recall, something like that.

**Warren:** There was a special meeting in June.

**Wolfe:** And I came on the board, I was sworn in in the fall meeting, so —

**Warren:** I'm really sorry. I'd love to have your perspective on that.

**Wolfe:** I never considered single-sex education as a tradition at Washington and Lee. It was a given. When I was in college, the exception was the coed. People would talk about a coed, a woman who was in college with males. That was something somewhat unusual. Even the University of Virginia at that time was split into two campuses. They weren't even close to each other. The female part of the University of Virginia was Mary Washington College all the way across the state. For that matter, all the Ivy League colleges were all male. It was just true everywhere. It all began to change in the late sixties and during the seventies. There were other places that were coed, obviously, but I didn't think of it as a tradition; it's just the way things were. So as far as I could see, that wasn't much of an issue. I considered getting rid of conventional dress a bigger and more drastic change than bringing in women.

**Warren:** Were you aware of that as it happened?

**Wolfe:** Yes. I remember seeing some pictures, photographs of the campus. What has happened to the place? By this time, I really was indulging my own tastes in dress, even while working on newspapers. I had no other minor vices, so I was getting clothes made and all this sort of thing. I really hated to see Washington and Lee lose that classy look that it had always had. There used to be fabulous tweeds at Washington and Lee, some of the greatest tweed jackets you'll ever see in your life, many of which would have looked better if the students had also worn chocolate brown Barcelino hats, but that was too much to ask for.

**Warren:** What do you think now when you go back and see all the women there? It's fine with you? Is having women on campus an acceptable thing?

**Wolfe:** It seems to me it's turned out marvelous, and I was on the board as coeducation began and progressed. Clearly, Washington and Lee has attracted a superior – what's the word – cohort of – that's not the right word – superior group of women. And what's amazing is how little disruption of the atmosphere of Washington and Lee has occurred as a result. It certainly seems to have done wonders academically in that not only were there women who were very bright and who score very highly on the SATs and all those tests, but it also seemed to attract a better male student in terms of academic qualification.

Incidentally, has anyone – I'm sure they have, but I'll just ask anyway – brought up the fact of how many business leaders are Washington and Lee graduates?

**Warren:** Please talk about it.

**Wolfe:** I was going to ask you if you could know exactly how that has come about. It was quite striking. I think Washington and Lee ranks, as I remember, just below Yale and ahead of Harvard in the percentage of graduates who become CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

**Warren:** I hadn't heard that. Is that true?

**Wolfe:** It is. This was published in *Forbes* not long ago. I really don't know exactly why it's true either. Of course, there is a business school at Washington and Lee. I don't know whether that has to do with it or not. I really do not – I'm more curious than anything else. It is quite striking.

**Warren:** Were you aware of that when you were in school? Were there a lot of people who were aimed toward business?

**Wolfe:** Oh, there were. A lot of them were people whose parents were very highly placed – I'm sure that's still true – and who would recognize at a very early age their son's business acumen and make them vice presidents at the age of twenty-four or twenty-five. [Laughter] But it's really quite something.

I gave a party here, at Washington and Lee's request, for some people in New York who were very highly placed in business. I don't have — I could find the list somewhere of all those people, and it was quite amazing. Then I read this piece in *Forbes*.

**Warren:** I'll have to track that down.

**Wolfe:** It's worth looking at.

**Warren:** I feel like we've gotten some wonderful material here. Is there any way you'd like to sum things up or any topics that we haven't talked about?

**Wolfe:** Another thing, in terms of athletics, which interests me a lot, it was a place where it was very easy for somebody to be a walk-on athlete as long as the sport was not subsidized. My passion was baseball, and I was on the Washington and Lee baseball team, had a very undistinguished career, but it was something I loved, very undistinguished, but I was on the team. I just walked out there and tried out. I'm not sure I would have even attempted that anywhere else, and this was pretty big-time baseball. Washington and Lee was in the Southern Conference at that time, and that was a very fast league. Washington and Lee was in Southern Conference in all sports.

**Warren:** I haven't heard anyone talk about baseball. Tell me more about it.

**Wolfe:** That was big-time college sports. That's another of the great advantages of a place. It's not just that it's small, but there is a real sense of community, and I don't know where else you'd ever find it. It must be somewhere else. You would know the name of practically everybody on the campus. You may not really know them personally, but you know their names. The greeting custom — what was that?

**Warren:** The speaking tradition.

**Wolfe:** Speaking tradition came very naturally. You'd try to describe it to somebody outside of Washington and Lee and it sounds artificial and forced.

**Warren:** I've been trying it here in New York over the last twenty-four hours, and it works.

**Wolfe:** People like it. You're right. They like it in New York. People like it anywhere, but it really works. And you were expected to speak to people, even if you just spoke to them ten minutes before, and it's great. It really does increase the sense of community. So this went into everything. There was this feeling of community in the classes you took, as I was trying to describe the way you'd feel close to these teachers that you had, the daily social life on the campus, and even something like sports. You were not an alien if you just decided to walk in from out of the sky onto the —

**Warren:** What position did you play?

**Wolfe:** I was a pitcher. I now wish I had tried out for the infield, because I think I was probably a better hitter than a pitcher, but I was a pitcher. At that time I had the American male disease, which is the abnormal and inflamed desire to become a sports star, and if I could have become one, I don't think I'd ever have written a word. If I could have played Major League baseball, who cares about writing?

My class prophesy in the *Southern Collegian*, which was — does that still exist? I don't think so.

**Warren:** No, no, the *Southern Collegian* died. It died a sorry death.

**Wolfe:** One has to call the so-called humor magazine. My class prediction was that I would be a great left-hander for the New York Yankees after graduation. The humor there was that I was right-handed. [Laughter] That was a pretty humorous class prediction, I thought.

**Warren:** [Laughter] That's great. I like that. That's great.

**Wolfe:** But when all is said and done, I think it is the sense of community, and for all of my misgivings about fraternities and all of that, it's all part of it. It's so unusual, because it isn't just community of students having their own social life, but it also has to do with faculty, it has to do with sports. It really has to do with everything on the campus.

**Warren:** I did go to Fancy Dress this year, and I was so struck by that sense of community of the students and the faculty and the administration, all having a grand time partying together. I don't think that happens many places.

**Wolfe:** I think it's one reason that a lot of outstanding faculty who are wooed by larger institutions will stay there. For example, right now Washington and Lee has one of the great neuroscience centers in the country, and that's the hottest area of academic life in America right now. There's nothing approaching it, and that's the future intellectual battlefield of America, is the neurosciences. The American – what do they call it – Society of Neurosciences is one of the fastest growing professional associations of any sort in the whole country, and Washington and Lee, with this tiny psychology department, is at the forefront of that.

You know, young philosophers are, in droves, getting into neuroscience. It's partly the lure of nihilism. The neuroscience, underneath, has a very depressing message – I love this subject – which is that the fix is in. We're all wired a certain way. The great figure in it right now is Edward O. Wilson, at Harvard, who says that every human being is born an exposed negative, like the negative in a camera, and you can develop it well, he says, or you can develop it poorly, but no matter how you develop it, you're only going to get what's on the negative. And so many parents now think this is true, and that's why people pay attention to rather nonsensical concepts such as attention deficit disorder. The same child who supposedly has this disorder and can't learn in school will watch Nintendo for four and five hours at a stretch. This is not attention deficit. It's a deficit, but most such children need a camp counselor to kick them in the slats.

**Warren:** Yes, I agree with you on that.

**Wolfe:** You mentioned the *Southern Collegian*. Were you involved with publications?

**Wolfe:** Oh, yes, I should mention that. This is another great thing about being – maybe I would have been involved wherever I was, but I wonder. My passion was sports, as

you can see, so I was the sports editor of the *Southern Collegian*. I was the sports editor of the *Ring-tum Phi*. I think that's a great name for a newspaper.

**Warren:** Do you know what the heritage of it is?

**Wolfe:** No. I'm sure it was a joke on the fraternities. There was another thing, it was in a song talking about college life, "Somebody's a member of Delta Handa Polka." So there are a lot of these plays on words, and I think *Ring-tum Phi* is the same kind of thing, probably.

Then the people on the English faculty, plus Marshall Fishwick, decided to start a literary magazine called *Shenandoah*. What they really had in mind was a *Kenyon Review*. The *Kenyon Review* had tremendous literary status at that time, because this was the era of the new criticism. You didn't need a huge research facility to come up with a major literary magazine. It was the era of reading of the text and so on. So the English faculty started it, but they realized quite accurately that it had a better chance of being launched if students were involved, so they created a troika editorship, and I was one of the three. I can somehow dredge up the other two names if I work on it. I don't know why I can't remember.

I published two of my own stories in *Shenandoah*. The first one was about sports, and then another one which was about a boy and a girl who are sitting on a bus from Richmond to Lexington. I used to go back and forth to Richmond on the bus, a Greyhound bus. And they become interested in each other. And that was great fun.

Later it became gradually less and less of a student publication. Bill Hoffman, incidentally, if you ever look—I don't know how much farther you want to go into all these things, but if you look back at *Shenandoah*, there are some outstanding stories by William Hoffman in *Shenandoah*. Fairly soon it became like *Kenyon Review* in that it was no longer a student publication, it was a national literary journal.

**Warren:** Was that okay with you?

**Wolfe:** I think it was a mistake, personally, but I'm prejudiced because I enjoyed my student involvement, but there are other literary magazines must have come and gone. There's one, I don't know if it's still going or not, it was founded fairly recently, *Ariel*.

**Warren:** It's still going.

**Wolfe:** I think Joey Dies [phonetic] started that.

**Warren:** I don't know. I see it on campus.

**Wolfe:** But *Shenandoah* became quite a highly respected magazine, outlasted the *Kenyon Review* by a lot, and the *Antioch Review* and all those things.

**Warren:** So *Shenandoah* was going at the same time as the *Southern Collegian*?

**Wolfe:** Yes.

**Warren:** By that time, *Southern Collegian* was just a humor magazine. And I shouldn't say "just" a humor magazine.

**Wolfe:** No, it was just a humor magazine. [Laughter] There were other things in it, but that was its purpose. That's an old college tradition.

**Warren:** The *Southern Collegian* changed a lot through the years. I've been looking at a lot of the early issues, and through the years it changes. It's quite a different publication.

**Wolfe:** I didn't follow it, so I don't know what happened with that. Of course, now there's the *Spectator* and there's another magazine of opinion, isn't there, a liberal magazine? I should know. I think there is.

**Warren:** There's *Spectator*, there's the *Trident*.

**Wolfe:** No, the *Trident* is like a newspaper.

**Warren:** It's the second newspaper.

**Wolfe:** Which I think is great. The more competition in journalism, the better. I think there's also a liberal magazine, if I'm not mistaken. That's a good development. That sort of thing wouldn't have happened anywhere when I was in college. Almost nothing took place outside of the official orbit at any university I'm aware of. I figure the more, the merrier.

**Warren:** So do you feel that that experience you had working on the *Ring-tum Phi* helped lead you into the career you went into journalism for?

**Wolfe:** Oh, sure. It gave you a taste of it, meeting deadlines and writing [unclear].

**Warren:** You just loved those deadlines, huh?

**Wolfe:** But it was really pretty easy to get into those things if you wanted to do it, which is another good thing about Washington and Lee. I sense among parents that I know here in New York that there's more and more a reaction against the big universities and that increasingly people are looking for the sort of thing that Washington and Lee offers, and Washington and Lee's conservatism has been a great blessing in a lot of areas. For example, the look of the campus, it remains a stunning campus that has resisted the fads. Harvard is almost comical now. The campus looks like you have one of each of this year's style of the century.

**Warren:** Same way at Princeton.

**Wolfe:** There also is a lot of that at Yale, not as much as at Harvard. There remains, I think, much more a sense of civility at Washington and Lee than at most places.

**Warren:** Would you encourage your daughter to go?

**Wolfe:** I would certainly encourage her. She's, as I say, I may have mentioned, a sophomore in high school, and she hasn't expressed any inclination in terms of specific—I would love, if she would like to, I would love for her to.

**Warren:** Has she been there? Has she seen the campus?

**Wolfe:** She has been there. She loves horses, loves riding horses, and I've taken her —

**Warren:** Good area for that.

**Wolfe:** I've taken her over to the Horse Center and we've seen some shows over there. I have a feeling she would like that scale of college life.

**Warren:** Well, it's a big tradition of generation after generation going to Washington and Lee.

**Wolfe:** That's true, and now in those pictures they take each spring, the fathers and the daughters, as well as the sons.

**Warren:** I think those pictures are so charming. I'm sure they'll get old with me after a while, but I think they're very charming.

We're at the end of the tape, and I just really want to thank you.

**Wolfe:** You're certainly welcome.

**Warren:** It's been delightful. I'm glad we got into the *Shenandoah*. That was good.

[End of interview]