

## Activist on the World Stage: Carroll Wilson Remembered

When the late Carroll Wilson, '32, was 14 years old, his parents sent him to a respected prep school. Finding that the boys were preoccupied with sports and other "rotten" stuff, Wilson sent two or three registered letters per day to his parents threatening to walk home to Rochester, N.Y., if they did not come to retrieve him. They did. And that may have been the last time anyone succeeded in forcing Carroll Wilson to be distracted by things he didn't want to do.

That anecdote will sound perfectly in character to the 40 or more of his former colleagues who will assemble in Cambridge on February 2 to mark the second anniversary of Wilson's death. Although single-mindedness was a quality they admired in Wilson, his spiritual heirs will be gathering primarily to preserve Wilson's legacy of action on a global stage, his concern for the major problems of humanity, and his faith in the leadership ability of the young.

Their annual gatherings are the most visible part of an effort to raise \$250,000 to support a permanent series of Carroll Wilson Awards. Constantine Simonides, '57, says the awards are expected to provide \$3,000 to \$10,000 annually to several individuals who present imaginative plans for international travel, study, and research. Howard Johnson, a friend as well as colleague of Wilson, would like to see the awards go to young people whose proposals reflect a willingness to launch themselves "from a standing start" into a totally new intellectual frame of reference - a mode of action absolutely typical of Wilson.

### **Linchpin for *The Limits to Growth*.**

Wilson, whose varied career included being the first general manager of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), joined the faculty of the Sloan School in 1959. For more than 20 years he used M.I.T. as a base while demonstrating his skills as an initiator of meetings (both national and international), a link among policy-makers, an assembler of information, and a molder of world opinion on major issues such as energy supply, global climate change, and alternatives to nuclear arms.

Never a traditional classroom teacher, Wilson involved his students and colleagues in his world, and many of them say he permanently changed their lives.

Take, for example, the book *The Limits to Growth*, published in 1972. It was based on a very early computer simulation of what would happen if world population, food production, industry, resource development, and environmental degradation continue to grow exponentially. The book put forth the then unthinkable idea that growth itself causes problems and that it must be deliberately limited.

The chain of events which led to the book began when Carroll Wilson introduced Jay Forrester, S.M. '45, head of the System Dynamics Group at M.I.T., to the Club of Rome - an independent, international forum for the "great issues." Forrester saw that the problems of growing complexity considered by the Club of Rome lent themselves to computer modeling. He produced two models and one of his collaborators produced a third on which some of Forrester's colleagues based *The Limits to Growth*.

The book triggered a storm of controversy by challenging the universal assumption that economic growth was the optimum scenario for all countries in all times.

Back at M.I.T., Wilson organized workshops, conferences, and seminars to explore the issues raised in this controversial work. One of the people who was inspired by the book to join Wilson's seminar at Sloan on "Critical Choices for the Future" was David Gray, a minister who had been studying finance at the Harvard Business School. Asked four weeks into the course to write a paper on "How would a sustainable social and economic system work when my grandchild is as old as I am now," Gray, produced a "grandchild paper" on a sustainable financial system 40 years down the road. This was at a time, he says, when "long-range" planning in the financial community meant looking 18 months into the future.

Wilson's lesson was that unless we have some concept of a truly good future, we are at risk of being overwhelmed by what are essentially transition problems. While "a grandchild paper" seemed like an almost bizarre exercise in the very early 1970s, Gray remembers, this is now a recognized technique in policy design, referred to as "normative scenario planning."

As a teacher, Wilson never forgot the audience outside the ivy walls. In 1973, when asked by a Congressional committee to testify on the range of issues raised in *The Limits to Growth*, Wilson wrote back to say he would be in Europe and unavailable, but help might be forthcoming from his seminar group in Cambridge. After some negotiation, members of the seminar agreed to provide 10 briefing papers for 10 days of testimony. "In 21 days, we wrote a book," Gray recalls.

"Working with Carroll Wilson was a life-shaping experience," Gray says. He and his wife, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, run the Bolton Institute for a Sustainable Future - publishing books, doing environmental projects for government and industry,

and fulfilling a public education role. One of Gray's colleagues on the briefings to Congress, William Martin, '74, is now the third-ranking officer of the National Security Council in Washington. Other colleagues include John Strongman, S.M. '77, now with the World Bank, and David Korten, now with the Ford Foundation and the Agency for International Development (AID) in Indonesia.

### **Working for the Ugandans or the U.S.?**

Following his departure from the AEC, Wilson had a continuing leadership role with the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations, a high-level, private institution which seeks to understand issues and influence policy. Thus he was invited on a tour of the newly-emerging countries of Africa in 1959. The tour coincided with his acceptance of a bid from Mr. Johnson, who was then dean, to join the faculty of the Sloan School and the timing proved to be momentous for many of his students at M.I.T.

Wilson had seen in wartime the remarkable things accomplished by very young people thrust into positions of great responsibility. He saw in Africa a "talent vacuum" developing in the operational, middle management ranks of countries making the transition from colonialism to independence. And then at M.I.T., he was pressed by his students for some means for independent involvement in an international setting. Wilson synthesized all that into the African Fellows Program.

In typical Wilson fashion, he had the idea, located the funding, and did the leg work – traveling around Africa lining up jobs for the Fellows. The Fellows were apprenticed to African leaders on the condition that they be given real responsibility. As a result, they drafted law codes, negotiated national agreements with the World Bank, set up national airlines, and generally advised heads of state, often on issues with which they had no previous experience. Wilson is said to have considered it the highest compliment to the program when the U.S. ambassador to Uganda complained that the African Fellow in Kampala was acting as if he were working for the Ugandans. "He is," Wilson agreed.

Among former African fellows, Richard Pigossi, S.M.'65, is vice-president of the Private Investment Co. for Asia, Jakarta; Michael Roemer, Ph.D. '68, is head of the Harvard Institute for International Development (now on a two-year assignment in Kenya); and Carroll Brewster (centerpiece of an eloquently detailed tribute to the program by John McPhee in *The New Yorker*) is president of Hobart and William Smith College. Constantine Simonides, enlisted by Wilson to help manage the program, is now vice-president of M.I.T.

The fellows program was discontinued in the mid-1960s, when the political climate in Africa became less hospitable to American advisors. But the 80 fellows (and their wives, whose talents also made them invaluable to African countries in need of every kind of skill) were welded by shared experience and elaborately

orchestrated annual gatherings with Wilson into an enduring network which is the back-bone of the Wilson memorial activities.

### **Assessments of Global Problems.**

Wilson then turned to larger issues, pioneering a new format for studying and publicizing major scientific problems in world development. In 1970, for the first study, he assembled a multi-disciplinary group that produced, in one month, *Man's Impact on the Global Environment*. The study was an important catalyst of debate within the U.S. on the greenhouse effect and other major environmental consequences of technology, including the SST. The following year Wilson brought together 35 atmospheric scientists from 15 countries in Stockholm to produce *Inadvertent Climate Modification: Report of the Study of Man's Impact on Climate*.

Wilson next conceived of a process for engaging industrial and government leaders (in contrast to scientists) from many countries in making global assessments. He demonstrated the process in action during three years of leading a *Workshop on Alternative Energy Strategies (WAES)*. His format involved enlisting the very top people in the countries with the most at stake in energy development (the president of Atlantic Richfield, for example), getting their commitment to meeting seven or eight times over the course of the study, requiring them to take on young "leadership apprentices," and getting the conference report, in book form, into bookstores in 15 countries within three months of the study's end. Issued in 1977, the WAES study outlined strategies to counter what it foresaw as an inevitable oil shortage.

Organization of the World Coal Study began in 1978, and that Wilson-led effort produced a report in 1980 entitled "*Coal: Bridge to the Future*." The essence of that study's conclusion was that precious oil could be saved by using coal in ways that were environmentally sound. When Wilson died of leukemia in 1982, he was ostensibly retired, but in fact he was fully engaged in another of his classic studies, this time on conventional weapons as an alternative to the nuclear threat in NATO countries.