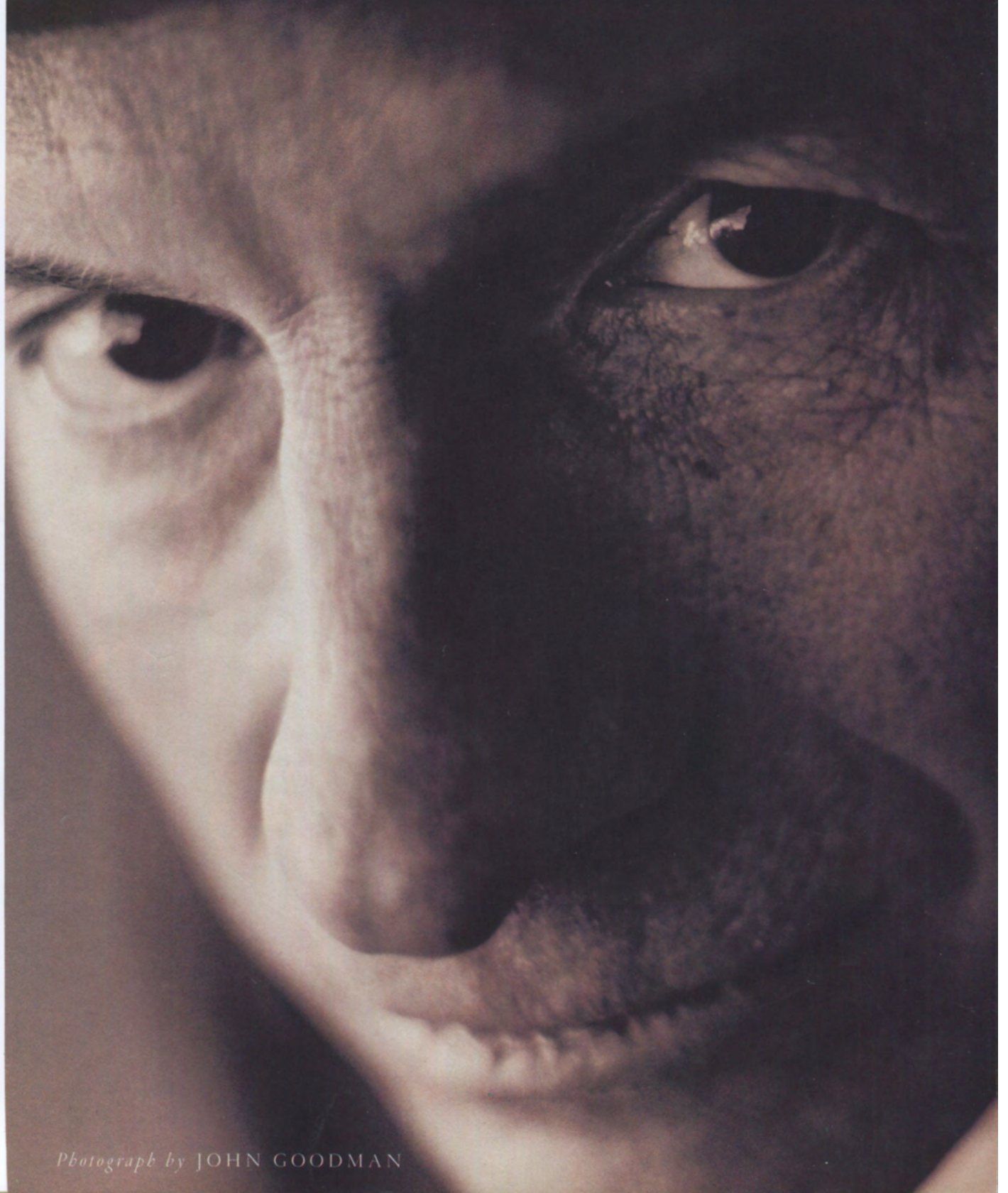


the *last* conservative



Photograph by JOHN GOODMAN

At Harvard,
Professor HARVEY
MANSFIELD
isn't just another
conservative.
He is the only
conservative.
By John Sedgwick

In the fall of 1993,

for the first time in memory, 150 posters went up on bulletin boards, kiosks, and elms around Harvard Yard, attacking a Harvard professor for something he'd said. Of course, in this case, that something was quite something. Testifying as a paid trial witness on the so-called antigay rights constitutional amendment in Colorado, Harvard professor of government Harvey C. Mansfield Jr had called gay sex "shameful." Mansfield also said it "undermined civilization," and he offered the opinion that a homosexual is "not generally a happy person." In follow-up remarks to the *Harvard Crimson*, Mansfield declared that homosexuality "rightly causes most regular people to feel repulsed."

Gay groups on campus were, understandably, not pleased by these characterizations. In protest, they staged an eat-in at the Harvard Union and mounted a demonstration on the steps of the Widener Library. Then they put up the posters, each one a pale pink, bearing such declarations as "Harvey Mansfield Thinks Martina Navratilova Undermines Civilization."

"That was quite unpleasant," Mansfield says now in his small office, decorated with etchings of his heroes John Locke and Niccolò Machiavelli, at the neoclassical Littauer Center just north of Harvard Yard. "I had never seen that before, and I haven't seen it since." Then he gives a mischievous look. "But I do keep the posters as souvenirs."

AT 62, MANSFIELD IS BOYISHLY handsome, a graying tint to his hair his only sign of age. He has been at Harvard virtually nonstop since he was 17, when he arrived as a fresh-faced freshman from Columbus, Ohio. Graduating summa, he stayed on for a Ph.D. in political science. After a tour of duty in the army and at Berkeley, he returned in 1962 to Harvard's government department.

Mansfield has occupied this particular second-floor office, with its inadequate heating, since 1973, possibly a Harvard record. From this perch, he has watched with mounting dismay as the campus, pushed by a social version of plate tectonics, has slid leftward, although his detractors would say that he, propelled by his own iconoclasm, has merely been moving rightward.

Either way, the effect is the same. Now that right-wing criminologist James Q. Wilson has fled to UCLA and IQ hereditarian Richard Herrnstein is dead, Harvey Mansfield stands alone as Harvard's sole conservative, or at least its most visible one, as he takes on with gusto the taboo topics of liberal orthodoxy, and regularly gets smacked for doing so.

"I try not to be a frowning conservative," Mansfield says in his soft, strangely breathy voice. If anything, he insists, his conservatism is liberating, releasing him from the shackles of political correctness that bind so many of his colleagues. "It is what Tocqueville called soft despotism," he says of reigning PC dogma, which requires that all things be viewed at precisely the same angle through the prism of race, class, gender, and sexual preference. "It makes for a suffocating atmosphere. McCarthyism was imposed from outside. PC is worse than McCarthyism because it comes from within."

A straitlaced, blue-blazer professor of the old school (although he has been known to wear cowboy boots to class), Mansfield finds the heightened sensitivity of the new sweater-wearing professors especially repulsive. "They give their classes in a certain way," he says. "They sort of lounge on the edge of the desk. They don't stand up and put some distance between themselves and their students. Their every gesture says, 'We're all in this together. We're partisans.' They don't conduct themselves in what used to be called a professional manner. That's a small point, but it conveys a lot."

Despite his old-fashioned style, or perhaps because of it, Mansfield remains an extremely popular lecturer. *The Confidential Guide*, the underground student evaluation of Harvard courses and professors, invariably gives him top marks, and, in 1993, the Undergraduate Council accorded him the Levenson Award for excellence in teaching. Mansfield himself does not take these accolades to mean that he is a right-wing Mr. Chips, however. "The award was done by just a few key people," he points out. "It was not done by popular vote."

FOR MANSFIELD, THE ORIGINS of the sins and excesses of the current PC era lie in the Pandora's box of the sixties, when PC-ness

ran under the heading of Relevance. In demanding that classes be relevant, students were actually requiring that they conform to a rather narrow political agenda, one that was mostly antiwar and pro-civil rights. And by politicizing the university in this way, Mansfield believes, students were removing it from the objective, rational stance that had been its enduring strength since the Middle Ages. They were also, in Mansfield's view, making "a general attack on Western civilization insofar as it was based on reason and the cultivation of reason."

And while all of that might appear in retrospect to have been an intellectual fad that accompanied the bell-bottoms and black lights of the era, Mansfield understands it to have powerful philosophical backing in writings of such influential thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida. Seen in this perspective, PC becomes the political front of the rootless, mindless postmodernism that shapes our age. "There is this tremendous intellectual background that suggests that PC and relevance are not fads that will quickly and easily go away," Mansfield says.

It is hard to determine how successful Mansfield has been in reclaiming the university from the clutches of political correctness. For all the sharpness of his views, Mansfield doesn't seem all that concerned with getting people to agree with him nor with forming the coalitions necessary to create change. Asked if he is part of a conservative network at Harvard, he has to think for a moment, then says that he occasionally sees students who think they are being persecuted because of their conservative views. He is a trustee of an organization called the Madison Center, which subsidizes conservative student newspapers. "And



sometimes faculty members pass on things for me to take to the dean," he adds. But beyond that, nothing.

There are times, certainly, when it gets lonely out there on the political frontier, and in Mansfield's case that sense of isolation may have been intensified by the tragic deaths five years ago of his daughter, son-in-law, Eric, and ex-wife, Margaret, all of whom were killed in an automobile accident. The daughter was 29-year-old Mary, who had just finished her Ph.D. in French medieval history at the University of California at Berkeley. "She took after me the most," he says. "It shows you how vulnerable you are."

It is clear that Mansfield doesn't wish to discuss this further. Nor does he care to discuss the breakup of his first marriage, except to say that "it didn't change my view that divorce is wrong."

Mansfield has an old-fashioned style of politesse, and it keeps his own character in reserve. Pleasant, affable, amusing—he is all of these things, but he is also largely unknowable. And, in his case, this unknowability is compounded by ferocious political opinions that seem, often, to have been sharpened with a pumice stone to ensure deep cuts. Listening to him go after gays or women or blacks or any of the other sacred cows of the PC culture, one can't help but marvel at his audacity. But one also has to wonder what he is trying to accomplish. It was his colleague at Harvard Law

School, Roger Fisher, who co-wrote the negotiator's handbook *Getting to Yes*. Mansfield's specialty, it seems, is Getting to No. That is not to say there isn't any truth to what he says. There is. But there is something else that is a little less pleasant—an astringent coating that makes his pills all the harder to swallow.

At the core of Mansfield's opposition to homosexuality is his belief that gays have no shame. "I don't think it's possible to think of sex without considering the importance of shame in controlling sex," he says. "With everyone, there have to be certain shameful things that limit what we do. I don't see how there can be any shame if what the gays do isn't shameful. Shame involves, perhaps, a necessary hypocrisy. We have to think of ourselves as better than we are in order to be better than we would be. It is just

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because one is tempted by all sexual possibilities that there needs to be a standard of shame."

Homosexuality is also, in his view, somewhat impractical. "I think that men and women were made to live together," says Mansfield, who is now remarried. "We have strengths and weaknesses that need to be complemented. If you spend all your time with the same sex, and that is your deepest love and friendship, you are missing a kind of correction. It is especially true of men who need to be civilized, to be tamed, by women."

It's a typical Mansfield argument. For all of his learning, Mansfield's views have a vaguely midwestern, fifties-style homespun quality; and they seem calculated to provide maximum political offense. Indeed, as he speaks, one can almost feel the indignation of gays and women mounting. Still, his views aren't necessarily easy to rebut. Asked about Mansfield's comments, Harvard junior Royce Lin, the chairman of the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Student Association, is left in the awkward position of defending licentiousness. "If there are gays who sleep with many, many people, that should be their prerogative," says Lin. "I don't think it's fair for one person to impose his quote-unquote morality on an entire

group of people. Such behavior may be unacceptable to Professor Mansfield, but for a large group of people promiscuity is liberating and positive."

While Mansfield's views may have won few converts at Harvard, they have earned him new respect outside of it. Camille Paglia, the outspoken author of, most recently, *Vamps & Tramps*, has been a huge fan ever since he invited her to speak on the topic of "What's Wrong with Harvard" almost three years ago and he introduced her as "an enemy of the namby-pamby, the hoity-toity, and the artsy-fartsy." With evident delight, Mansfield plays a telephone message that has just come in from "my friend Camille," telling him that she has credited him in her book and calling his attention to her appearance on the cover of *The Gay Advocate*, in a story billed as "The Attack of the Fifty-Foot Lesbian."

"How about that?" Paglia chirps into Mansfield's answering machine in her distinctive, high-speed fashion. "With one leap, I am stomping on all those queer-fearists. Gay studies, eat my dust!" Mansfield beams. He loves verbal combat.

ASKED ABOUT MANSFIELD, Paglia salutes him as a "fellow general" in the culture wars, and insists that it is not at all awkward for her, as a practicing bisexual, to consort with a known gay-basher. "I respect him as a thinker," she says. "I despise 80 percent of the people on my side. Harvard, Princeton, Yale, you name it. So many of them are slothful, ignorant, sanctimonious. They're reactionary! Harvey Mansfield and I have engaged in true intellectual alliance. On homosexuality, I utterly respect the positions he has taken. The universities have surrendered. They are on their knees to gay activists. We need rational (Continued on page 114)



THE TIES THAT BIND: *Harvey Mansfield and family at the Harvard commencement ceremony in 1953.*

MANSFIELD

(Continued from page 83)

people to stand up and condemn homosexuality from a position of traditional morality, so we can get a dialogue on this."

In his office, Mansfield points to signed certificates of appointment from presidents Reagan and Bush, which he bashfully terms "second-class honors," and then shows off another document that attests to his wider influence in what the *Harvard Crimson* likes to call "the Real World." It is a memo faxed to him by his former student Bill Kristol, who went on to be Dan Quayle's chief of staff and then to head up the Project for a Republican Future. It is headlined "Keep On Obstructin'!"

"That was Mansfieldian in spirit, don't you think?" Kristol tells me on the phone. "There was a little bit of shock value, a little bit of willingness to take what enemies say about you—in this case that we're obstructionists—and say, 'You're right we are, and here's why it's a good thing.' Harvey is intellectually bold and morally courageous. That combination puts him at odds with the conventional academically correct atmosphere at Harvard and most other universities today. He's not conservative in the sense that he tries to lead the national debate. He's a thinker who tries to think his way through to what's right."

Mansfield has not concentrated his fire exclusively on homosexuality. Appearances to the contrary, he says he doesn't have strong opinions on gays. What he does care passionately about, however, is the fate of the university. Mansfield fears that it is being transformed from a temple of dispassionate scholarship into a pit of right-thinking stupidity. To fight back, he has become an implacable foe of women's studies, which he has likened to a "ladies' sewing circle" for the way that it serves only to reinforce existing political alliances, to the detriment of any greater scholarly inquiry.

In 1986, Mansfield opposed the creation of the women's studies concentration, an act Camille Paglia believes should qualify him for sainthood. Like Mansfield, Paglia scorns women's studies as a "ghetto of mediocrity," and she believes that Mansfield should "go down in history as the one courageous voice on the Harvard faculty that stood against the atrocity of women's studies."

Unfortunately, Mansfield is sometimes better at airing his opinions than in persuading others of his wisdom. "Harvey Mansfield is a point of view," says his friend

James Q. Wilson. "He is not a movement."

Sure enough, going into the critical faculty meeting to discuss establishing a women's studies concentration at the school, Mansfield estimated that he had about 20 votes with him. After he spoke, that number fell to zero. "He made a statement in typically Mansfield prose about the inequities of women's studies and the unfairness of dividing the world by gender," recalls Robert Putnam, director of the Center for International Affairs. "It was very strong and very critical, and I think that he lost votes for his side by it. People were really offended by what he said."

"It was," Mansfield now admits, "a rhetorical triumph in reverse."

And why, exactly, is Mansfield opposed to women's studies? Because the genre is mislabeled. "It should be feminist studies," he says, because it considers only the most PC points of view and has little room for the more traditional perspective of Edith Wharton or Jane Austen. Mansfield regards such myopia as the opening wedge in an attack on scholarship, an attack that has reduced much of the humanities to what he terms a "mush" of trendy nonsense.

"Feminists have advanced their cause through raising consciousness," he says, "together with confrontation. They don't exercise direct censorship, but encourage, or more than encourage, self-censorship. Gender neutrality in speech is an example. It is a small thing, but not an innocent thing. It shows what side you're on."

Truth be told, Mansfield is leery of women in academe. He notes that when women were deliberately excluded from university professorships, there were few enclaves of women in scholarly pursuits straining to get into a university.

"I'd have expected something like the Negro Baseball League with talented players," he says. "Anyone with eyes to see one of those games would see that they had been kept out of the big leagues out of prejudice only."

Harvey Mansfield believes that female professors are not as talented as their male counterparts. He thinks that universities have hired them to satisfy an informal quota system for hiring minorities and women. "Many, many universities find they can't hire a qualified black," he says. "Because there aren't any. None. And therefore you hire a woman to show your good faith."

Even at Harvard, he says, which can pick

the best of the best, there are "very few outstanding women professors, and the rest—I couldn't pronounce on each one—are not of outstanding quality."

As evidence of the toll that political correctness is taking at the university, Mansfield cites the rampant grade inflation, which is now so advanced that 70 percent of Harvard students graduate with honors, and a B is considered virtually a failing grade. Mansfield has tried to uphold the old traditions. The joke on campus is that his middle initial stands for C-minus, and it is said that when a teaching fellow in his class wishes to give an A, Mansfield himself reviews the student's coursework.

Mansfield has a pet theory that grades started to rise in the sixties with the increase in the number of blacks admitted. "There were a lot of white professors who wouldn't give blacks a C," he claims. "They didn't give them to whites either, and the C began to disappear." (The *Crimson* investigated this theory, but could find no evidence to support it.)

Grades also softened because of the war, Mansfield says, when an F might be a death sentence for a male student if it cost him his college deferment and caused him to be shipped out to Vietnam. As Mansfield points out, however, lenient grading doesn't necessarily help anyone in the long run. It simply means that graduate schools, when evaluating candidates, have to rely more on standardized tests and less on coursework. It also, perversely, makes students more grade-conscious. "The least blemish on a transcript leaps to the eye," he says.

Still, for all of Mansfield's dedication to his political beliefs, it appears that he is even more devoted to his beloved Harvard. He was once wooed by the University of Chicago to succeed the late cantankerous conservative Allan Bloom at the university's Committee on Social Thought. Politically, Chicago would have been far more congenial than Cambridge. After considerable soul-searching, Mansfield turned the offer down, largely because he couldn't imagine leaving Harvard. His affection for the university runs deep. He regularly attends Harvard's football and hockey games, knows all the players and the fight songs. "Anytime I look in the sports page and see that Harvard has won any kind of sports event, that gives me pleasure," he says. "If it's a loss, I don't like it." In Harvard sports—or in Harvard ideological politics. **B**