WHAT WAS WILSON THINKING?
A REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE ON WILSONIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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REVIEWED WORKS


In accepting his Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, Barack Obama could not help but mention Woodrow Wilson, the only other sitting U.S. president to receive the award. After a brief nod to the champion of the League of Nations, however, Obama made an interesting rhetorical move: he dropped the subject entirely. Obama did discuss several of Wilson’s post-World War II successors; men who had sought, in John F. Kennedy’s words, a “practical, attainable peace,” to be achieved not through a “revolution in human nature,” but through the “gradual evolution of human institutions.” Obama reminded his audience of the battles to defeat totalitarianism and promote multilateralism waged under Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. He lauded Kennedy, both for recognizing that force must sometimes underwrite peace, and for rejecting “the stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless
campaign to impose our values around the world.” Even Nixon’s China diplomacy and Reagan’s rapprochement with Gorbachev were invoked to illustrate the blend of pragmatism and principle necessary to defuse conflicts, protect human rights, and advance the process of international integration and peace [1]. How did Wilson—who staked his legacy on a global system for negotiating conflicts and resisting aggression—fail to make this dubiously selective internationalist club?

The previous six years of U.S. foreign policy certainly had something to do with it. The central plank of Obama’s foreign-policy platform in the 2008 election was repudiation of the hubristic, interventionist, missionary approach of the George W. Bush administration—an approach that commentator Walter Russell Mead once described as Wilsonianism “on steroids” [2]. Mead was hardly alone in comparing, or tracing, Bush’s polices to Wilson’s in the mid-2000s, and he has been joined by others since. These analysts see Bush’s invasion of Iraq, ostensibly in order to spark democratic revolution in the Middle East, as prefigured by Wilson’s efforts to stabilize Latin-American states through military intervention, ensure victory for Europe’s least undemocratic imperialists in World War I, and establish a global collective-security regime embodying American federalist principles [3]. No wonder Obama chose to downplay his connection to a president who, like Bush, is remembered for his use of war to promote democracy and, ultimately, peace.

Obama’s publicists (whose concern is not American history but the average American’s understanding of it) might not care whether the real Woodrow Wilson was indeed a “Wilsonian” of the Bush variety, or whether “Bush-variety Wilsonianism” is an oxymoron. But historians and political scientists should care. As Erez Manela’s landmark 2007 study The Wilsonian Moment reveals, the anti-Western ideologies prompting Bush’s War on Terror have deep origins in the disillusionment of colonized peoples after World War I, whose hopes were raised by Wilson’s wartime policies and rhetoric [4]. Moreover, the questions of what, exactly, Wilson’s Wilsonianism entailed, and what its legacies have been, raise vital questions for contemporary policy. Should the U.S. treat the promotion of international democracy as a security interest and/or a humanitarian obligation? If so, what does “international democracy” mean, and what forms should its promotion take? If not, how can the U.S. disclaim responsibility for democracy abroad without undermining its citizens’ cultural commitment to democracy at home?

Since at least the 1950s, most scholars pursuing these queries with reference to the Wilson era have wound up asking the rhetorical—and condemnatory—question: What was Wilson thinking? Or in other words: How naïve, or misguided, or chauvinistic, can you get? [5] Increasingly, however, as this issue of White House Studies demonstrates, historians and political scientists are posing the question seriously, and for good reason: Whether seen as a compelling, practicable, yet unfulfilled promise of greater peace and justice among nations, or a persistent delusion responsible for much American mischief, it is important to identify the core elements of Wilson’s vision, distinguish it from perverse adaptations, and understand the historical circumstances of its partial successes and ultimate failure in Wilson’s own day. Only then can we recover the Wilsonian tradition in American politics with confidence, or discard it with good riddance.

The latter course is stridently endorsed in a book published the year before Obama took office. In A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush (2008), Joan Hoff paints a clear, if dark, picture of Wilson’s policies and legacies as she sees them. In Hoff’s view, Wilson took office fully convinced of his nation’s divinely favored status and
inevitably beneficent role in the world. As revolution and war engulfed the world beyond America’s borders, Wilson adopted a policy of “independent internationalism,” intervening in Latin American states and eventually World War I in order to arrange the world to America’s convenience (7-8). According to Hoff, Wilson justified this policy to himself and the American people through the myth of American “exceptionalism,” an assumption of his nation’s moral superiority which, ironically, released it from common-sense “ethical” considerations in crafting foreign policy: A world arranged to suit America’s interests was a world arranged to promote democracy and capitalism, and thus spread prosperity and freedom for everyone (20-21, 40-43). This conflation of national self-interest with the international commonweal, Hoff argues, set the pattern for the rest of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. From Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson to Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, American presidents have pursued exploitative, imperialistic, brutal policies—made “deals with the devil”—in order “to impose American values and win foreign policy conflicts at any cost” (4). While Bush’s policy is the seemingly perpetual source of her polemical energy, Hoff is clear throughout that Wilsonian policy created the “Faustian substructure” that has facilitated a century of such semi-conscious soul-selling (45). Wilson’s war to end war raised hopes for a Pax Americana, blessed by a democratic-capitalist God, that his successors of the Cold-War and post-Cold War eras were culturally programmed to chase, whatever the costs.

Certainly, many of the actions Hoff locates in the Wilsonian tradition do recall her central trope of a Faustian bargain. Yet just as often her narrative conjures a procrustean bed, into which ungainly examples have been squeezed. The history of the Grand Alliance, for instance, is not so clearly a deal between a Faustian FDR and a Satanic Stalin. Roosevelt may have been making deals with the devil, but was he entirely oblivious to the risks, or solely motivated by narrow national interests? Or did reversing Hitler’s conquest of Europe and forestalling violent conflict with the U.S.S.R. factor into his calculations? Hoff’s treatment of Wilson himself seems similarly procrustean in light of historical scholarship, even by writers critical of Wilson’s diplomacy. Daniela Rossini’s Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy (2008) is a case in point. Rossini argues that Wilson, far from being unethical, brought a moderate, sensible peace program to Paris, based on ethical ideas to which he was truly committed. Indeed, Rossini takes pains to explain Wilson’s resistance to Italy’s claims to Adriatic coastal territories as rooted in his political-ethical repugnance for the international spoils system. Faustian acquiescence might have earned him Italian support for lower reparations and a more egalitarian League; the great virtue of Rossini’s book is its analysis of the cultural as well as political factors that made such deal-making difficult for both sides. Still, Rossini argues that Wilson’s internalization of the messiah image in which the Italian people cast him further reduced opportunities for compromise. Aware of his immense popularity with the Italian people, Wilson saw little need for genuine negotiations with their representatives; instead, when his Italian counterparts at Paris demanded control of the Adriatic port city Fiume, he appealed to the Italian people to repudiate them—an appeal that famously backfired, destroying his popular support in the country. Rossini finds this drastic miscalculation rather easy to explain: Wilson was simply convinced that his ideal of a peace without victory was humanity’s ideal, destined to triumph whatever the obstacles Old World diplomats raised in its path. The result, Rossini concludes, was Wilson’s nearly total disregard for diplomacy. For contemporary practitioners, the implications are that the meaning of “Wilsonianism” can be summed up in one word: “propaganda.” Behind Wilson’s
“imagination-capturing slogans of wartime,” Rossini writes, “there had been absolutely no organized effort to translate those slogans into practical terms” (67).

This judgment may hold true for the Italian case narrowly viewed, though it ignores concessions Wilson did make to the Italians, including (as Rossini herself mentions) accepting Italy’s strategic claims to the Brenner frontier. Still, Rossini’s assessment distorts the larger picture of Wilson’s peacemaking strategy. Wilson was certainly mistaken to think the Italian people were behind him on Fiume, but he was not so naïve as to think that they or any other people would be fully satisfied with the settlements reached at Paris. For that reason he insisted that the cornerstone of peace be a League of Nations: a flexible, broadly representative, self-correcting institution that was not “a strait jacket,” as he put it, “but a vehicle of life” [6]. Wilson had spent years pondering the structure of such a League and promoting the idea worldwide. He personally drafted several versions of the League Covenant and chaired nearly every session of the League Commission at Paris. In those sessions he fought hard and often successfully to keep the League’s more egalitarian and deliberative features, so that its own flaws and those of the larger settlement could be addressed with relative justice and ease. And he made sure that the League was the first order of business at Paris, knowing that painful compromises—and inevitable mistakes—would be made in the months ahead. To describe such preparation as “inadequate” ignores its extensive and unprecedented nature, and elides the fact that the League was ratified by Italy along with scores of other nations. The failure of America to join, and of the League itself to survive, are different questions, addressed near the end of this essay. But at the very least, Wilson’s commitment to a League that could revise the very settlement he hoped to shape is too complex to be considered messianic.

Nevertheless, other recent authors have taken Wilson’s alleged belief in America’s divine mission, and his own, further than Rossini. Malcolm D. Magee’s What the World Should Be (2008) reveals its interpretive slant clearly in the subtitle: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith-Based Foreign Policy. Magee warns against drawing the explicit parallels to Bush-era foreign policy that his own subtitle suggests. He concludes, however, that Wilson, like Bush, was a president whose foreign policy was shaped almost exclusively by the theological and ethical “template” of the faith in which he was raised (116). What many see as contradictions in Wilson’s foreign policy can be explained, if not excused, when he is viewed as he viewed himself: “a Presbyterian in politics, a twentieth-century John Knox, and a Christian statesman whose overriding motivation was his determination to do God’s work in a fallen world.” Steeped in Calvinist theology, Wilson crafted his foreign policy in light of “the theological principle of antinomy: that two principles could both be right even when others, looking at them in the light of logic rather than faith, found them mutually contradictory” (4-5). For Magee, this non-rational or extra-rational approach explains the “vague” nature of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, and the passion with which he defended a Treaty that many thought contravened them (98). Competing understandings of, say, self-determination, or the obligation to defend League members against external attack, would be reconciled as the divinely sanctioned covenant of nations evolved, according to transcendent principles of righteousness, toward perfection. Rather than dismiss Wilson for embracing such a faith-based foreign policy, Magee insists that scholars take such attitudes seriously; not just as persistent shaping forces in American foreign policy, à là Hoff, but as sources of “faith, hope, and love” that have often kept Americans from “falling into the existential hell of crude fatalism” (117-118).
Magee’s argument is strongly echoed in Mark Benbow’s recent analysis of Wilson’s early Mexican policy, Leading Them to the Promised Land (2010). Adopting an analytic from political scientist Alexander George, Benbow describes Wilson’s “operational code”—the assumptions and ideology behind his most basic diplomatic inclinations—as “founded predominantly on Presbyterian covenant theology. Covenant principles,” he continues, “permeated [Wilson’s] political decisions, his tactics, and his long-term diplomatic objectives” (xi). According to Benbow, covenantal Wilsonianism was characterized by its emphasis on written constitutions that established the respective prerogatives and reciprocal obligations of individuals, groups, and government. The United States was the finest example of such constitutions, and the nearest political approximation of the covenant: that which God established with all humanity and caused to be recorded in the Scriptures. As such, Wilson considered his nation a “divine instrument,” whose citizens must help bring those who did not enjoy its blessings—the Mexicans, for example—a little closer to the promised land of political democracy (125). Although the ultimate goal for all God’s people was to live in a polity free from external intervention, along the way a little intervention might be justified, so long as it was intended to advance the policy toward peaceful self-government. A bit of political and theological sophistry, perhaps; but one that, in Benbow’s view, neatly explains Wilson’s 1914 attempt to undermine Mexican dictator Victoriano Huerta by invading to seize a German arms shipment to Veracruz.

Of these two works, Magee’s is least compelling. The first quarter of Magee’s text treats Wilson’s formative years, portraying the future professor, university president, and chief executive of the United States as a strict Calvinist whose public successes convinced him that he was not merely among the elect, but among those through whom God worked most directly. In light of other works based on a much wider range of sources from Wilson’s early life, this portrait is overdrawn; none of Wilson’s three major biographers, Ray Stannard Baker, Arthur S. Link, or John Milton Cooper (to be discussed), would recognize it. Much of Magee’s remaining text reads major foreign-policy documents such as the Fourteen Points and the League of Nations Covenant tendentiously, through the lens of an essay, “Christ’s Army,” that Wilson wrote at age twenty. Magee cautions that Wilson’s tendency to see his diplomatic judgment as a reflection of God’s will was merely “one thread in the tapestry” of Wilsonian foreign policy, and admits that a true Calvinist would find the “equation of personal opinion with divine decree” to be “blasphemous” (6, 21). What the other threads were, however, and how Wilson reconciled high-God, low-humanity Calvinism with his confidence in his own divine inspiration, are questions Magee’s short book leaves scant room to explore.

Benbow’s analysis of Wilson’s early Mexican policy is more nuanced. To be fair, he tackles a narrower subject in a slightly larger space. Still, his Wilson is more dynamic, frequently changing course in response to “events and political pressure” (xii). The result is a more finely rendered picture of Wilson’s thinking, but not a significantly more accurate one. Benbow successfully avoids caricaturing Wilson as either a cynical imperialist or a naively chauvinistic idealist. But despite the massive “pressure” changes that one might expect to pull, twist, and squeeze Wilson during his first three years in office, he still seems flattened across time. Rather than an initially uncritical imperialist, brought up short by his failure to remake Mexico, and ultimately forced to rethink his fundamental assumptions about political development and international relations, Wilson comes across as a deeply committed, easily self-deluded, covenantal anti-interventionist before, during, and after his Veracruz adventure.
Like Magee, Benbow presents Wilson’s foreign-policy decisions as embodying a fundamentally religious politics that precluded major changes of opinion or significant alteration of diplomatic goals.

As mentioned, several historians have concluded otherwise, and the record seems to bear them out. Wilson did not deny God’s ultimate direction of human events. But as young Wilson wrote his fiancée, Ellen, in 1884, any faith that meant “letting things drift, in the assurance that they would drift to a happy result,” contravened his view of “how all things work together for good—through the careful performance of our duty” [7]. For Wilson, humans’ constant exploration of their changing world, and search for their proper roles in it, was the solemnest of obligations. As such, the most direct effect of Wilson’s faith on his political thought (though of course not invariably on his actual policies and their outcomes) seems to be an emphasis on empiricism and cooperative experimentation. Wilson saw the debacle at Veracruz as evidence that more than a change of tactics was needed in his approach to Mexico. There were “no conceivable circumstances,” he concluded, that could justify American meddling in “a revolution as profound as that which occurred in France” [8]. Instead, he began to pursue a Pan-American Pact, which he felt could respond to the regional dangers of unstable states with the greater wisdom and legitimacy that multilateralism conferred. Over time he developed a belief in the interdependence of international society as a whole, and the importance of cooperative action in all spheres of international life. Five years later, on a grueling speaking tour to defend the League of Nations Covenant against critics who complained that it hamstrung the United States, Wilson articulated the mature internationalist vision that stemmed from his Mexican awakening: “I want to point out to you that only those who are ignorant of the world can believe that any nation, even so great a nation as the United States, can stand alone and play a single part in the history of mankind” [9].

More than Hoff, Rossini, Magee, or Benbow, Ross Kennedy understands that to explain such a multilateralist approach to world politics as “missionary” is to obscure its complexities and consign it to irrelevance for many contemporary readers. In The Will to Believe (2008), Kennedy correctly identifies Wilson’s ideal of collective security as the central feature of his internationalist vision, insisting that previous authors have exaggerated the relative importance of exporting democracy (and its frequent economic corollary, promoting free trade) to his foreign- policy. Kennedy replaces Thomas J. Knock’s influential binary of “progressive” and “conservative” internationalist movements of the war years [10] with a tripartite taxonomy: “pacifists,” who rejected the use of force as an instrument of peace; “Atlanticists,” who sought closer cooperation or formal alliance with Great Britain and, to a lesser degree, France; and “liberal internationalists,” who supported Wilson’s project of an international organization empowered to resist aggression through collective force. Examining an impressive array of speeches, books, and periodical literature through a realist-inflected lens, Kennedy finds none of the alternatives to Wilson’s vision compelling, at least as they were articulated at the time. Pacifists refused to recognize the anarchical state of international relations and the dangers it posed to national security. And while most Atlanticists recognized the repugnance of an old-fashioned power-political alliance to most Americans, their proposals for limited collective security agreements and gradual disarmament clashed with their assertions that nations could not be trusted to intervene in distant disputes, and that the United States must be prepared to act alone in defense of its interests. Wilson, Kennedy argues, attracted so many followers because he recognized that
power politics was the name of the current game, while simultaneously hoping to change the
game’s rules. Thus he pursued a pro-Allied neutrality policy, and embraced an anti-German
peace policy, to make way for a postwar body folding national security into collective
security; a strategy, as Kennedy puts it, “of practicing power politics in order to end power
politics” (xiii-xiv).

In Kennedy’s view, this “paradox” was the fatal flaw at the heart of Wilson’s liberal
internationalism. Ultimately, however, the evidence Kennedy brings to bear cannot sustain
the burden of this argument, which rests ultimately on the rhetorical strategy of the “paradox”
label itself. For example, Kennedy suggests that contradictions in Wilson’s neutrality policy
ultimately led to war with Germany—that his desire to remain neutral, yet tip the balance of
power in the war toward the more democratic Allies, was an early instance of his doomed
anti-power-political power politics. Wilson’s effective support for the British (with whom the
United States continued trading, while Germany languished behind a North Sea blockade)
was, in Kennedy’s view, destined to discourage the Germans from exploring a mediated
peace. This, combined with Wilson’s desire to influence the postwar settlement, made U.S.
military intervention on the side of the Allies almost inevitable. In Kennedy’s opinion,
Wilson should either have engaged in “effective balancing,” by intervening early in the war to
defeat Germany; “buck-passing,” by maintaining strict neutrality; or more effective
“mediation,” which would also have demanded strict neutrality (102). This interpretation,
however, downplays the disinterest of the belligerents in negotiating peace and the
provocations of German submarine warfare. It also displays little appreciation of either the
anti-interventionist tenor of American opinion from 1914-16, or the nearly impossible politics
and logistics of strict neutrality for a government whose citizens insisted on trading with and
traveling to belligerent countries. Finally, Kennedy’s assessment ignores the most salient
aspect of the neutrality period, which was not the persistent hypocrisy of Wilson’s policy, but
the early and consistent reinforcement of his awareness that no nation, in war or peace, could
arrange its international affairs in a vacuum.

It is also far from clear that Wilson’s peace program was as punitive or ill-conceived as
Kennedy suggests. Kennedy astutely recognizes the difficulty of Wilson’s major wartime and
postwar challenge—to defeat Germany and discredit militarist, imperialist politics, yet also to
include the former enemy in a reformed international system. Kennedy’s analysis of Wilson’s
response to this challenge, however, is less sharp. The major fact of the war was Germany’s
conquest of French and Belgian territory, yet it was clear that Germany’s military leaders had
no intention of accepting a mediated peace, and for much of the war those leaders were
politically ascendant. The Allies, for their part, were determined to recoup their losses at
Germany’s expense. Thus Wilson set out to convince world public opinion that—whatever
the resistance, from either side—both a defeated Germany and a victorious Allied and
Associated coalition must accept a settlement laying the groundwork for the “community of
nations” he had envisioned in his January 1917 “Peace without Victory” address. This was a
bold, extraordinarily difficult, but remarkably successful approach: Eventually, at the
Armistice, both sides agreed to such a settlement, as elaborated in Wilson’s Fourteen Points
of January 1918.

Certainly, the actual terms of the peace made at Paris in 1919 disappointed the Germans
as well as many Americans, including Wilson. But Kennedy’s own evidence cautions against
portraying Wilson as somehow complicit in the sacking of Germany, given the “conciliatory
provisions” he championed and achieved (197). Regarding reparations, for example, Wilson
fought for a reasonable schedule of payments and a commission empowered to revise the figure periodically, according to Germany’s assessed ability to pay. While Wilson was sick with influenza, his adviser Colonel House bargained away these terms, an act of betrayal, in the president’s eyes, that could not be forgiven—and never was. Regarding Germany’s place in the reformed international order, moreover, Wilson took strong stands against the dismemberment of a pariah nation by its war-weary, vengeance-thirsty enemies. He resisted the French delegation’s bid to annex both the German Rhineland and the Saarland, and negotiated a time-limit to what France insisted should be an indefinite military occupation of the former region. It is true that to earn these concessions Wilson promised American assistance to France in the event of a German attack. But since he managed to make this security pact contingent upon League approval, and since the League itself was designed to facilitate collective responses to external aggression, it seems extreme to interpret these moves as a sign of the League scheme’s inherent weakness. Rather, it was a clever means of conciliating a French government that, as Kennedy himself notes, “obviously felt extremely vulnerable to a German attack” (188). Finally, despite successive French governments’ unrelenting hostility to Germany’s restored participation in world affairs, Germany joined the League of Nations in 1926—the same League Wilson had designed to subordinate such bitter national rivalries to common international interests, both through cooperative mechanisms and by serving as a powerful symbol of a new global norm. This is important: Whereas Kennedy correctly asserts that Wilson feared the persistence of “unregenerate German militarism” after the war, there is little evidence for the suggestion that the world’s premier liberal internationalist intended to perpetuate Germany’s second-class international status “indefinitely” (183, 222). Rather, there is a mountain of evidence, much of it in Kennedy’s chapter on the Versailles Treaty, that Wilson intended the settlement to facilitate its own revision as events and experience dictated.

Indeed, though Kennedy recognizes the importance of collective security to Wilson, he does not convey Wilson’s expansive understanding of that ideal, or his radically internationalist program for achieving it under a League of Nations. Kennedy would perhaps reply that Wilson did not convey it either, and in one sense he would be right: Wilson failed miserably to articulate his plan for the League of Nations to the American public from the spring of 1918 onward. As the mass of editorials and magazine articles Kennedy examines reveals, Americans had all sorts of ideas about what the League would look like, whom it would include, what developments it would promote, and what its organizing principles would be. Many would have been surprised to hear that their president never intended the Paris settlement or the League of Nations to organize the world—even the European world—into states defined by the ethno-nationalist principle of self-determination. That idea, popularized by Lenin and Lloyd George, appealed to everyone as long as no one inquired too deeply about the criteria for nationhood; perhaps that was why Wilson foolishly let others link him to a phrase he almost never used, and a principle he did not hold. Even in the most important of the (very few) speeches in which he did discuss “self-determination” directly—describing it in February 1918 as “an imperative principle of action”—it was not the “national self-determination” of ethnic groups with which he was most concerned. Rather, he was making the point that in an interdependent world, “individual understandings between powerful states” must be replaced by international agreements “submitted to the common judgment” [11]. His general failure to clarify this distinction contributed to the widespread disappointment the settlement engendered in America. Yet as Kennedy admits in his chapter
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What would such membership have meant? Wilson might not have educated the public on that score, but he certainly left plenty of evidence for the historian—evidence strongly challenging Kennedy’s characterization of Wilson’s national-security strategy as power-political. True, as Kennedy reiterates throughout his book, Wilson’s wartime diplomacy was aimed at containing German power, and his League was designed to underwrite peace with force. But how, exactly, do those aims add up to “power politics”? Is any sanction on an aggressor nation, or any use or threat of force to preserve order, an act of power politics? What if those sanctions are agreed or condoned by the international community, and what if the force is deployed not only in response to clear and violent transgressions of international law, but after deliberation by an internationally recognized and representative body? Finally, how does the commitment—whether legal or, under the Republican reservations, moral—to subordinate narrow national interests to wider global concerns for peace, justice, and order constitute a power-political strategy for national security? Wilson’s alleged violations of the principle of self-determination stemmed from his overarching belief, as he put it in his first Paris draft of the League Covenant, “that the peace of the world is superior in importance to every question of political jurisdiction or boundary” [12]. The only way to reach “impartial determinations in this world,” he asserted on his Western tour in September 1919, was “by consenting to do something you do not want to do,” and if ever the United States should “lose in court” under the League of Nations, it too must “take [its] medicine” [13]. This is hardly conventional power politics. Indeed, Wilson’s postwar security strategy was an audaciously radical yet remarkably humble one for the leader of the world’s lone unspent power to embrace: a strategy of collectivizing strategy.

Though frequently hinting at the complexity of this approach, and despite his criticism of previous writers, Kennedy ultimately reduces Wilson to the naïve crusader, confident in America’s providential role. True, Wilson was hyper-conscious of America’s unique opportunity to promote a strategy of collective decision-making among its necessary adherents. But it is a simplification to present “America’s power and moral exceptionalism” as the primary driver of the reformed international system he envisioned (182). Only through such simplification can Kennedy argue, from the perspective of Bush’s second term in office, that “Wilsonianism dominates America’s discourse about national security affairs at the dawn of the twenty-first century just as it did nearly one hundred years ago” (227).

Of all the recent books on Wilson, John Milton Cooper’s recent biography, *Woodrow Wilson* (2009), offers the most sustained challenge to the stylized, missionary-idealist version of Wilson’s foreign policy, and indeed of Wilson himself. Cooper presents Wilson as a flawed character, marred further by prejudices common to his era, while reminding readers of his timeless virtues and accomplishments in the domestic and international realms. For Cooper, Wilson epitomized “the mobile, rootless American” central to American myth (598). Born in the south to a northern father and immigrant mother, he lived in eight states before assuming the presidency. His faith, too, was flexible: though deeply religious, he never treated his faith as a guidebook to politics. Wilson did view life through the prism of God’s covenant with humanity, but the main feature of that covenant was its demand for constant service to others and vigilance over oneself. Indeed, Wilson rejected both religious and secular worldviews that ignored human fallibility and the unpredictability of events. An
unhappy stint as a lawyer made him scornful of legalistic solutions to human problems; he made his scholarly reputation arguing that the living Constitution had grown twisted by strict constructions impeding its development; and his subsequent works trumpeted the virtues of a “strong, activist, centralized government” which could adapt institutions to society’s changing needs (235).

Wilson brought this experimental attitude with him to office. Cooper argues compellingly that by the time he called for war against Germany, Wilson had achieved a legislative record rivaled only by Franklin Roosevelt’s and Lyndon Johnson’s. Positioning his party as that of government activism for common people, Wilson “[laid] the foundation for the majority Democratic coalition” his successors enjoyed from the 1930s to the 1960s (360). In Cooper’s view, the same experimental, democratic approach characterized Wilson’s foreign policy toward World War I. Wilson rejected pacifist arguments that war was never necessary. As he told anti-militarists in 1916, if telling nations they shall not make war, one had to find a way “to make that ‘shall’ bite” (326). Yet one year later, when he said the world “must be made safe for democracy,” his conscious use of the passive implied uncertainty and humility. A more stable, just, and peaceful world would not be achieved by America alone, but “by a concert of free peoples” (386-387).

Cooper’s treatment of the paramount issue of Wilson’s presidency, the League of Nations, clearly conveys the extreme care with which Wilson considered its design, and his constant and relatively successful efforts to make reasonable compromises that would result in an effective, if imperfect, covenant. “Despite Wilson’s dissatisfaction with its language,” Cooper notes, the covenant guaranteed territorial integrity against external attack, asserted the League’s right to address war or the threat of war anywhere, at any time, and established procedures for mediation, arbitration, disarmament, colonial reform, international labor regulation, and the imposition of economic sanctions on “offending nations.” It was, Cooper concludes, largely what Wilson wanted: “an essentially political body with the potential for enforcing peace and order in strong and far-reaching ways” (474-475). What Cooper does not emphasize as explicitly as he might, however, is just how radical Wilson’s postwar vision was, and how powerful he hoped the League would become. In fact, Cooper’s extreme aversion to reductionism prevents him from defining Wilsonianism at all. Cooper’s Wilson, like Cooper himself, was a historian, who viewed the world with an eye toward its variety and flux. The protean nature of experience sometimes encouraged Wilson’s conservative streak—after all, no one could predict with certainty the consequences of action in such a world. At other times, the same appreciation of history’s contingency appealed to the high-stakes gambler in Wilson, a man who saw the world as at least partially malleable. Faced with his own protean subject, Cooper takes the conservative approach: Wilson “was no Wilsonian,” Cooper writes in his prologue; “just Woodrow Wilson” (6).

Cooper’s treatment of Wilson is the subtlest, best-informed, most comprehensive we are likely to get in a single volume. It will unquestionably serve as the standard biography for Wilson scholars and non-specialists alike. Still, not everyone will be satisfied. Above all, many historians of American politics and society will wish Cooper had moved beyond acknowledging and condemning Wilson’s racism, and made a more sustained effort to explain its inconsistency with his genuine democratic instincts and clear capacity for intellectual growth. Meanwhile, students of historical and contemporary U.S. foreign policy may well wonder: What do we do with a non-Wilsonian Wilson?
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One answer is to articulate a new, historically grounded concept of Wilsonianism, reflecting Wilson’s own ideas and diplomatic record, that can be distinguished from the current concept—a concept which has been spread so thin as to cover everything and contain nothing. By recovering the radically internationalist content of Wilson’s Wilsonianism, we may rediscover alternative views of America’s potential world role, and alternative narratives of their eclipse in the years since World War I, that challenge prevalent assumptions about the potentialities and limits of international organization.

The recent collaboration of G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith, The Crisis of American Foreign Policy (2009), contains two provocative and extremely useful attempts to achieve such a recovery and mount such a challenge. These efforts, by Knock and Slaughter, are bookended by Ikenberry’s able framing of the debate and Smith’s lucid and powerful version of Hoff’s Faustian critique, which Smith in fact anticipated in his 2007 book, A Pact with the Devil [14]. In his introduction to the volume, Ikenberry raises several questions that he believes must be answered if Wilson’s policy, legacy, and contemporary value for theorists and practitioners of U.S. foreign policy is to be understood. The timing of the volume makes the question of whether or not George W. Bush’s policies were continuous or discontinuous with those of Wilson, in their objectives, methods, and rationales, paramount. This larger question suggests five related questions of more lasting relevance. Was Wilson’s internationalist vision largely democratic or imperialist? Did that vision seek to implant democracy in other regions? What elements of Wilson’s internationalism survive in contemporary liberal internationalism? Can a liberal-internationalist project incorporate adequate safeguards against imperialism? These lead, of course, to the ultimate question: Can Wilson’s internationalism help meet the challenges of the twenty-first century?

Ikenberry’s main contribution to answering these questions is to lay out six ideas he considers central to Wilson’s foreign policy: that war is unlikely within a democratic community of states; that free trade civilizes states and the relations among them; that international law is a necessary and potentially powerful source of global norms and restraints; that international interdependence makes collective security necessary to national security; that international society is evolving in a modern, progressive direction that the United States must encourage through its leadership; and that such leadership demands exertion of influence without pursuit of hegemony.

Ikenberry’s conclusions, amounting to skepticism about Wilson’s relevance for today, are somewhat less useful. Wilson, in Ikenberry’s view, was a man ahead of his time as well as our own; his call for significant concessions of national sovereignty was, and is, “a bridge too far” (15). At the same time, Wilson’s League scheme, focused on containing and ultimately transcending Great-Power politics, was not designed to deal with the unpredictable dangers of today’s weak states and the rogue actors they incubate; codifying the “terms of action and intervention” in those cases was left to policymakers of the post-Cold War era. Yet Ikenberry concludes, confusingly, that this late twentieth-century shift in the sources and perception of threats provides the best evidence that George W. Bush was in fact “following in the footsteps of Wilsonian and liberal internationalists” by launching the war on terror, though he does not insist on the point (21-22).

Smith, however, does insist on Bush’s Wilsonian pedigree. Both leaders, he asserts, sought to spread democratic governments, secure open markets, and establish and preserve America’s moral, political, and economic hegemony. Indeed, despite the harsh criticism of
Bush and his neoconservative advisers by Wilson’s liberal-internationalist heirs, Smith sees the former as fitting nicely within a “neoliberal” tradition of “internationalist hegemonism” promoted by the latter since the end of the Cold War (73). The only aspect of Wilsonian “progressive imperialism” Bush eschewed, in Smith’s view, was a preference for multilateral action through international institutions (59). Yet this is of little consequence to Smith, who sees multilateralism as the lowest totem on Wilson’s pole, and only slightly more prominent in the policy prescriptions of contemporary liberal-internationalists, despite its apparently fetishistic importance.

Knock, perhaps the preeminent historian of Wilson’s foreign policy, punches wide historical holes in Smith’s portrait of Wilson. Through frequent reference to the rich documentary record of both the intentions and consequences of Wilson’s actions, Knock does more than any other scholar to articulate a historically grounded, policy-relevant Wilsonian internationalism. For Knock’s Wilson, the only way to prevent another world cataclysm was to recognize global interdependence and organize the international community around the principle of deliberative self-government. As Knock demonstrates, Wilson concluded from his Mexican mistakes that promoting democracy among nations was hampered by America’s unilaterally implanting it within them. Thereafter he insisted that the United States commit itself to the collective formulation and execution of strategies for maintaining peace and promoting wellbeing worldwide, to create conditions under which domestic democracy could arise and thrive. He denied that American power could ultimately maintain national security; to the contrary, national security depended on collective security, which in turn depended on inclusively cooperative identification and pursuit of international interests, not American moral or political dictates. Hence Wilson’s goal was the gradual development of a powerful deliberative body, with whatever degree of sovereignty over its members’ activities was demanded by peace and justice. Wilson did not, as Ikenberry claims in his essay, see America as “God’s chosen midwife of progressive change” (13), except in the sense that he saw every nation, and every person, as duty-bound to promote freedom as effectively and responsibly as possible; and he certainly did not see himself as an infallible prophet of world history. Rather, he designed and fought for a League that would be, in Knock’s words, “a compass, not a final destination” (42), leading the world through ever-changing terrain rather than toward any fixed point. In short, Wilson envisioned a global democratic order as dynamic and indeterminate as the national order fostered by the U.S. Constitution.

Slaughter channels this Wilsonian spirit. “The twenty-first century,” she proclaims, “like the twentieth century, must be made safe for democracy” (109). After echoing nearly all of Knock’s historical assessments of Wilson’s policies, she suggests a number of ways in which a more genuinely Wilsonian liberal-internationalism might advance this goal. One arises from the link she identifies between the liberal-internationalist’s assumption of a “responsibility to protect” and the occasional necessity of intervention with intent to democratize repressive, unstable societies. Slaughter explains her own early support of the Iraq war with reference to this linkage, admitting that, for her and other liberal internationalists, Saddam Hussein’s human rights violations “may have led us to be more willing to believe that he had nuclear or biological weapons without scrutinizing the available evidence” (109). Chastened, Slaughter now advocates an approach more reminiscent of Wilson’s mature policy. She still favors enhancing the relative influence of “liberal democracies” vis-à-vis anti-democratic regimes, but through a formal “Community of Democracies.” This community would primarily promote democracy by example, by working cooperatively toward shared goals. It would not
categorically reject the use of force to protect human rights or to prevent domestic turmoil from metastasizing into international anarchy. It would, however, ensure that interventionist actions were taken only after far more searching deliberation, and with a far greater measure of legitimacy, than is likely to characterize ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” like the one assembled (or coerced, or duped) by Bush’s administration (91, 97).

Critics have objected to Slaughter’s approach ever since she and Ikenberry outlined (in far greater detail) a similar plan for a new, more cooperative grand strategy in their 2006 final report of the Princeton Project for National Security. When, exactly, does the “responsibility to protect” justify intervention in a sovereign state’s affairs, and what makes Bush’s Iraq invasion wrong in principle, rather than just bad judgment? Is there really so much difference between a “Community of Democracies” that the U.S. is bound to dominate, and a “coalition of the willing” that the U.S. alone has the clout to assemble? [15].

In order to meet these challenges, radical Wilsonians must follow Wilson’s example, and bring the intellectual resources of the American political tradition back into the discussion. This includes a renewed focus on Wilson’s own ideas about American politics. Wilson sought to foster habits of global governance through institutionalized processes of deliberative discourse that he modeled on the American constitutional system; or rather, on a particularly subtle understanding of that system’s actual and potential capacity to resolve, through constant inquiry and experimentation, the tensions—between ideals and interests, autonomy and obligations, order and change—that characterize the democratic project. Based on his admiring but surprisingly unromantic view of America’s relative success in this project, Wilson built an academic and political career on promoting the constant improvement of American government through popularly inspired and accountable experimentation. Many reformers of Wilson’s day practiced a similar politics, and as Knock’s previous work has shown, Wilson learned much from left-of-center progressives and even socialists [16].

One group whose influence on Wilson should be further explored, however, might be called the “pragmatist progressives”: the numerous early twentieth-century reformers influenced by the ethics of the philosophers William James and John Dewey [17]. Their distinctive brand of political analysis provided the clearest, most compelling exposition of the ties binding individual freedom to egalitarian reform of American and international society. They thus helped impel the cultural shift that made Wilson’s internationalist policies feasible. These pragmatist progressives held that policies and institutions, like the ideas and values behind them, were historical, experimental, and improvable. They thought participatory, deliberative democracy was the best means to evaluate political achievements and learn from failures. Finally, they insisted that individuals and groups granted a voice in the deliberative process were obliged to accept any outcomes that preserved its capacity for peaceful change. Jane Addams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Randolph Bourne, Walter Lippmann, and Herbert Croly were among those who applied this pragmatist sensibility to national debates over women’s suffrage, racial justice, immigration, industrial regulation, and other issues from the 1890s forward.

The pragmatist character of Wilson’s foreign policy is clearest in his plan for the League of Nations: a deliberative polity requiring significant relinquishment of sovereignty from members in order to facilitate cooperative change. Wilson’s plan was not perfect, nor was the League that was adopted at Paris. Both were deeply flawed, especially in their indefinite deferral of full participation for many darker peoples. Still, the League was designed to be self-correcting, considering alterations suggested by member states as well as non-state
actors. Thus, even while recognizing many of the League’s shortcomings, Wilson believed it could evolve, however slowly and erratically, toward an egalitarian world federation—provided America, in spite of its immense strength in the wake of the war, lent crucial prestige to the internationalist project by joining. The source of his faith in this possibility was the willingness of so many average, unremarkable Americans to embrace both pragmatist-progressive policies at home and formal cooperation with diverse peoples in international life. However briefly, these were cultural priorities for many Americans, and thus political possibilities.

Tragically for Wilson, his country never joined the League. Yet the outcome might have been radically different. As Cooper details, in 1920 it was Wilson—impaired by stroke, incapable of the pragmatic gift for compromise he had often displayed in the past—who ordered Senate Democrats to reject a Republican-revised treaty most were inclined to accept. Indeed, despite the stereotype of an isolationist America, it is not at all clear that Wilson’s basic policy of U.S. participation in a global cooperative body met a hostile reception at home. Many Americans actively supported League membership, sharing Wilson’s vision of a “community of power” to maintain the “peace without victory” by which civilization might redeem itself. Many more accepted League membership as the logical outcome of a war to end catastrophic power politics. The League’s surprisingly successful functioning through the 1920s, combined with the return of American economic prosperity, dissipated many Americans’ urgent expectations of membership. It did not, however, diminish its importance. U.S. membership in the League would have facilitated a more coordinated response to the global crises of the interwar years, and might have mitigated the twentieth century’s subsequent tragedies. Instead, Wilson’s League is remembered as a failure, invoked ever since by skeptics of international organization—when in fact, U.S. abstention precluded its effective trial.

Whether or not the pragmatists directly shaped this abandoned experiment, their ideas are just as ripe for recovery as Wilson’s. To engage the world deeply without impaling it on our particular values, we must learn similar skills, and develop wisdom to use them, in the course of American civic life [18]. Of course it is difficult to know where the lines between sovereignty and obligation, humanitarianism or imperialism, even defense or offense lie, just as it is difficult to know where individual freedom ends and indifference to the needs and ideals of others begins. Though the past is a guide, those lines are ultimately drawn anew with every dilemma faced. By acknowledging that difficulty, and emphasizing the utility of empathy, humility, and conversation in human affairs, the pragmatist tradition provides both a vocabulary and a model for breaking down sharp conceptual distinctions between self and other, or interests and ideals—or, for that matter, national prerogative and international responsibility. A pragmatist sensibility, then, is not only important to recovering the historical Wilson, or the content and context of his internationalism. It is crucial to recovering a usable past from the era he dominated.

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[16] See Knock, To End All Wars, passim.
