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BOOK REVIEW

Woodrow Who?

John Milton Cooper Jr., ed. *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War, and Peace*. Washington, DC, and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. ix + 359 pp. Notes, index. \$60.00 (cloth).

The great wave of scholarly interest in the twenty-eighth president, Woodrow Wilson, which began in the early 1990s, may have waxed and waned in the years since, but it has not abated. Wilson, after all, was president at a time of great uncertainty and transformation both at home and abroad. He thought, sometimes quite deeply, about the issues of the day, and spoke, sometimes quite eloquently, about them; and he made decisions, some successful and some disastrous, that have had a profound impact on what came after in American politics and society and in international affairs. When events shattered established conceptions of world order, first with the end of the Cold War and then with 9/11, and politicians, journalists, pundits, and scholars found themselves struggling to craft their views and responses, many turned to Wilson's tumultuous era for historical analogies, guidance, or cautionary tales.

Recent scholarship on Wilson—his thought, his policies, his legacy—has covered an expansive set of issues and perspectives, including reconsiderations of Wilson's wartime strategy, analyses of his public rhetoric and its impact at home and abroad, work on the influence of religious faith on his foreign policies, and broad-gauged studies that posit Wilson as a pivotal figure in the history of U.S. domestic and foreign policies, whose approaches and decisions shaped much of what followed, for good or ill.¹

1. A selective list of recent works includes Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH, 2009); Robert W. Tucker, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914–1917* (Charlottesville, VA, 2007); J. Michael Hogan, *Woodrow Wilson's Western Tour: Rhetoric, Public Opinion, and the League of Nations* (College Station, TX., 2006); Daniela Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy: Culture, Diplomacy, and War Propaganda*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Cambridge, MA, 2008). On foreign policy, see G. John Ikenberry et al., eds., *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (Cambridge, MA, 2008). On Wilson's impact on the domestic front see Ronald J. Pestritto, *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism* (Lanham, MD, 2005).

Even within this flood of new work, however, the volume under review here deserves attention. The editor, John Milton Cooper, is the preeminent living historian of Wilson and his era. He established his reputation with the classic *The Warrior and the Priest*, a dual biography of Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt published in 1983, and has just completed a much awaited full-length biography of the twenty-eighth president.² The gist of Cooper's opening chapter in this volume is nicely encapsulated in its title: "Making a Case for Wilson." And he proceeds to do just that, showing that Wilson, often caricatured as a flighty idealist, had a deep understanding of the workings of political power and could wield it expertly, as he did when he pushed through a raft of major reforms in financial and economic regulation in his first term. Cooper is convincing on the significance of Wilson's domestic achievements, even if his claim that Wilson "may well have surpassed FDR and LBJ in this arena" (p. 13) may go a step too far.

Cooper ventures onto more difficult ground when he moves to Wilson's foreign policy, the results of which, he admits, were mixed at best. Wilson did keep the United States out of war for a time; he entered it on arguably favorable terms; he managed the massive, unprecedented wartime mobilization of the American economy and society; and he carved a major role for the United States at the peace table. All this, however, must be weighed against his numerous failures, from the ham-handed interventions in Mexico and elsewhere to the colossal disappointments of the peace negotiations and the League of Nations fight. In Wilson's defense, Cooper argues that he was often the victim of forces beyond his control, whether in Mexico, in Europe, or within his own body, whose failing health, culminating in the devastating stroke of October 1919, altered the course of history.

Cooper is a sympathetic biographer, but his sympathy is both buttressed and tempered by an encyclopedic knowledge of the period and the sources. And his brief for the defense is hardly all that this volume has to recommend it. The list of contributors includes some of the leading historians of the Progressive Era and of U.S. foreign relations then and since. Moreover, unlike many works that focus *either* on Wilson's domestic policies *or* on foreign affairs, this volume gives equal attention to both, with five chapters devoted to each arena (excluding Cooper's opening essay and Anne Marie Slaughter's brief afterword). Finally, and importantly, it is apparent that most of the contributors took to heart the instruction in the book's title—they really did set out to *reconsider* Woodrow Wilson rather than to restate long encrusted views on the man and his influence.

The discussion of Wilson's domestic impact begins with an impressive essay by Trygve Thrøntveit, who draws on his recently completed Ph.D. dissertation to provide a deep analysis of Wilson's political thought. His most important insight, hardly surprising but surprisingly often overlooked, is that Wilson's

2. John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York, 2009).

thinking evolved profoundly throughout his life and drew inspiration from a broad array of sources, from Edmund Burke to Charles Darwin. Far from being the woolly-headed idealist of lore, Throntveit finds Wilson a pragmatist and empiricist, who stressed the role of lived experience rather than abstract theory as a guide to action. The tumult of his times, from civil war to financial panics to rapid industrialization to massive immigration, convinced Wilson that the main challenge of modernity was to square individual liberty with the profound interdependence of modern societies and economies. Wilson, Throntveit argues, concluded that only government by “common counsel” could surmount that challenge. This insight, though stated here in the context of Wilson’s domestic policies, also casts important light on his thinking on international affairs, particularly his oft-misunderstood advocacy of self-determination as a central principle of international order (more on this below).

If Throntveit focuses on Wilson’s political thought, W. Elliot Brownlee treats his thinking and policies in the economic realm. The central insight of Brownlee’s chapter, however, resonates powerfully with Throntveit’s, presenting Wilson as a subtle economic thinker who sought policies that would preserve individual initiative within the context of large-scale industrial and financial capitalism or, as Wilson himself might have put it, combine liberty with “efficiency.” Wilson’s impressive legislative legacy in the realm of economic regulation—tariff reform, antitrust, the establishment of the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission—was all aimed at resolving this central contradiction that he identified at the heart of modern economic life: namely, that the primary principle of classical liberalism, economic freedom, had to be reconciled with that of republicanism, democratic control. Wilson’s institutions of the income tax and the wartime Liberty Loans were aimed at the same end: to break government dependence on the financial elites and thus help bring capitalism under popular control.

Throntveit and Brownlee make a convincing case for Wilson’s intellectual subtlety and policymaking acumen, but they are followed by two chapters that probe areas where Wilson was feeble, often abominably so, both in thought and action. In a compelling chapter, Gary Gerstle delves into Wilson’s failures, both personal and political, in the area of race relations. Rejecting the common portrayal of Wilson’s record on race as a result of his southern upbringing, Gerstle shows that, though Wilson was sentimental about the South, he had a far stronger commitment to a unified American nation. What’s more, Wilson’s conception of American identity evolved significantly over the decades, from an early ethno-racial view that highlighted the “Anglo-Saxon” roots of the people and traditions of the United States to a “civic nationalism” that envisioned the melding of many European ethnicities into a homogenous American nation. But even in his most capacious construction of American identity Wilson never made room for African Americans. He never considered their suffering under slavery, nor that they had made (or could make) any worthwhile contribution to U.S. history or society. Gerstle does find mitigating circumstances for the most

egregious race policy of the Wilson administration, the move to segregate the federal workforce, concluding that it was less an expression of the president's personal racism than the result of pressures from cabinet members, southern politicians, and racist whites within the federal workforce. Still, Wilson's treatment of African Americans remains perhaps the biggest stain on his domestic record.

On women's rights, on the other hand, Victoria Bissell Brown paints a relatively benign picture. Though Wilson was slow to convert to the cause of female suffrage, she finds his eventual conversion genuine and not merely reflective of the political opportunism that previous scholars have highlighted. The issue, she reminds us, had complicated political and constitutional ramifications, and though Wilson endorsed female suffrage at the state level as early as 1915—he was the first president to do so—he was slow to accept the need for a constitutional amendment and, more damagingly, acquiesced in the mistreatment of protesting suffragists during the wartime frenzy against dissent. Wilson's record on female suffrage, then, may be better than we thought, but it was still decidedly mixed at best.

One of the major attractions of this volume is that most contributors took seriously the injunction to "reconsider" Wilson, and it is hardly surprising that those chapters that are adapted from elsewhere are less successful in this task. One such chapter—the final one on the domestic arena—concerns precisely the wartime abuses of civil liberties that, along with the race question, constitute the greatest blots on Wilson's record as president. Geoffrey R. Stone provides a highly readable account of the origins and careers of the wartime Espionage Act and Sedition Act. But his passing attempt to explain wartime suppression in terms of Wilson's character flaw as a leader who brooked no dissent is undermined by the narrative that the chapter itself provides, in which Wilson himself makes few appearances. The picture we get instead is of a passive president, uncomfortable about the excesses of his subordinates but making only feeble and infrequent attempts to rein them in. The strains of the massive war effort may help explain his behavior, but, even so, this was far from Wilson's finest hour.

Like Stone's essay, Mark Gilderhus's chapter on Wilson's policy in Latin America is adapted from elsewhere, in this case a survey of the history of U.S.-Latin American relations. And while the chapter does the job of filling a gap in the book's coverage, it misses the opportunity to take up—whether to refute or develop—Cooper's contention that Wilson had learned from his early missteps in Mexico and elsewhere in the hemisphere, important lessons that shaped his later policies toward the European war.

Lloyd Ambrosius's chapter, by contrast, has much that is new to say about Wilson's vision for world order despite the author's many previous writings on the subject. Nicely echoing Gerstle's analysis of Wilson's shifting views of American nationhood, Ambrosius traces the evolution of his vision for world order in similar terms, as a progression from a primarily racial construction of nations to one that emphasized a common civic identity. This insight sheds

important light on the president's well-known advocacy of a world order based on self-determination. Often taken to be aimed at creating ethnically homogeneous states, for Wilson it was more a principle of civic nationhood, with national identities based on a common practice of self-government. The flip side, Ambrosius notes, was that Wilson expected ethnic minorities in newly created states to assimilate, just as he did of immigrants to the United States.

If Ambrosius's chapter resonates with Gerstle's to show how Wilson's evolving views of race and nation shaped both his domestic and international agendas, Emily Rosenberg's essay on the economic aspects of Wilson's plans for world order pairs well with Brownlee's analysis of his domestic economic program. In the international as well as the domestic arena, Wilson identified a tension between capitalism and stability and sought a system of "reformed capitalism" in which business would collaborate with government to promote order at home and abroad. This vision, Rosenberg argues, would later be extended and implemented by FDR, who, like Wilson, wanted to make the world safe for capitalism by checking its excesses such as monopoly, labor abuses, and imperialism. The parallel with FDR can be stretched too far—Rosenberg notes that, at least in the international realm, Wilson's actual efforts to reform capitalism were limited at best—but the argument is compelling nonetheless.

The final two chapters and the afterword are not so much about Wilson as about his legacy—"Wilsonianism"—after 1945. Martin Walker makes an ambitious effort to show how America's ostensibly realist Cold War policies actually followed Wilson's precepts. But the argument requires Wilsonianism to be interpreted so loosely that it could fit almost any set of policies, an exercise made no more convincing by having become, in recent years, quite common. Frank Ninkovich attempts the equally ambitious if opposite task of showing that, in the post-Cold War world, Wilsonianism has lost all relevance because international conditions have changed so profoundly since Wilson's time. The danger of great power war, which loomed large in Wilson's mind, is now negligible, and his futuristic vision of a world order based on self-determining polities has now come to pass. The essay is sharp and insightful, and Ninkovich rightly ridicules recent attempts to paint George W. Bush as a Wilsonian, a charge, he says, that Bush would not have admitted even under "a thorough regimen of waterboarding."

If Walker left "Wilsonianism" too loosely defined, Ninkovich constructs it too narrowly, viewing the League of Nations as conceived solely to address the specific problems of its time. That it was, but for Wilson it was much more. He intended it, like other constitutional systems he had studied, to evolve and mature over time as an organ of global governance, even as old problems receded and new ones presented themselves.

It is for this reason that Anne Marie Slaughter's afterword, though adapted from another context, actually works quite well to end the book, laying out what might be considered a Wilsonian vision updated for the twenty-first century. Wilson, she explains, sought not "democracy" per se but the "ordered liberty"

produced by constitutional government well designed and operated. She proposes promoting the expansion of global institutions and networks that would work to bring governments up to PAR (Popular, Accountable, and Rights-regarding). And while her afterword is much too brief to explain how all this might work in practice, as the director of policy planning at the State Department—George Kennan's old job—Slaughter has now followed Wilson's path from Princeton to politics and has an opportunity to bring her, and his, vision to bear.

In short, this volume is a major accomplishment. Despite its editor's sympathy for Wilson, it is far from a whitewash, and Wilson's failures, both moral and political, are in clear evidence. It does, however, a crucial service in giving the lie—for good, one hopes—to the hackneyed view of Wilson as a naïve idealist or a crusading preacher. It shows him to be a complex, multidimensional figure, a subtle and careful thinker who was nevertheless afflicted with glaring blind spots, a canny and effective politician who still suffered colossal failures. Most essays, moreover, reflect not only Wilson's complexity, but also the shifts in his thinking and his politics throughout his life. There are, of course, some weaknesses. Beyond the few uneven essays already mentioned, one would have liked to see more said about the role of religious faith in Wilson's public life. And, though several of the chapters resonate powerfully across the domestic/international divide, the volume would have benefited from a more explicit effort to tie both arenas together in its analysis. Still, and most importantly, this book fulfills the central promise of its title. It will drive readers to reconsider Woodrow Wilson, and will become an indispensable starting point for future scholarship on the man and his legacy.