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A man ahead of his time?

Wilsonian globalism and the doctrine of preemption

In recent years, Woodrow Wilson has returned to feature prominently in the public discourse on the role of the United States in the world. For students of US foreign relations, this is hardly a surprising development. Wilson was responsible for articulating a vision of the US role in the world—usually described as “liberal internationalism”—that has remained, despite well-known flaws and scores of critics over the years, dominant in shaping American rhetoric and self-image, if not always policies, vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Competing foreign policy postures, such as isolationism or “national interest” realism, have surely been influential in particular eras and contexts. But they have failed to match the ideological and popular appeal of liberal internationalism, which has echoed so compellingly the most basic ideas many Americans hold about who they are, what their country is about, and what it should stand for in the world. And not only Americans. Just now it is hard to imagine, but should not be forgotten, that for much of history since the American Revolution the example of the United States and its ideals have served as inspiration to countless movements—in Latin America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere—that sought to throw off foreign rule. Perhaps the single most striking example of

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this pattern was the “Wilsonian moment” of 1919: after a world war that caused unprecedented devastation, Wilson was hailed in Europe, and many places besides, as a herald of peace, independence, and dignity. For a brief period, in the words of H. G. Wells, he “ceased to be a common statesman; he became a Messiah.”¹

The American president soon proved to be a false Messiah, and in the decades since Wilson, his ideas and his policies have had many critics. In the wake of Versailles, the president’s Republican opponents attacked him for compromising American sovereignty in his quest for the League of Nations, while erstwhile supporters were disappointed that he had not gone far enough: rather than heralding the promised “new order” where right would triumph over might, the peace treaty reaffirmed the old order of empire and domination. In the middle decades of the last century, as the collapse of the Versailles settlement led to another world war and then the Cold War, Wilson came under fire from realist critics like E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and George F. Kennan. They ridiculed his naïve, impractical “idealism” and “moralism,” and called for a clear-eyed approach to international relations that proceeded, to cite latter-day realist Condoleezza Rice, “from the firm ground of the national interest, not from the interests of an illusory international community.”²

Some of these early critics have since changed their views. Kennan, shaken by the superpower conflict that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, admitted in 1989 that he had reversed his earlier view of Wilson and now saw him as a leader “of broad vision and acute sensitivities” who was “ahead of any other statesman of his time.”³ Henry Kissinger, an icon of realpolitik, has nevertheless credited Wilson with a pivotal role in defining the terms of American engagement with the wider world, and, indeed, this view reflects a broad consensus among commentators on US foreign policy. The international posture of the administration of George W. Bush, with its emphasis on the forceful projection of America’s power abroad and on the close relationship it envisions between spreading American ideals and safeguarding American interests, is often described as one that harks back to

1 H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 82.

2 Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the national interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 79 (January/February 2000): 62.

3 Quoted in John Milton Cooper, Jr., and Charles E. Neu, eds., *The Wilson Era: Essays in Honor of Arthur S. Link* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1991), 330.

Wilson's vision. But so were the (quite different) foreign policies of the preceding administration. For that matter, the foreign policies of nearly every American president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt can be understood, in one way or another, to owe a debt to Woodrow Wilson. The frequent invocation of Wilson's ghost to describe a diverse range of approaches and policies, however, has done nothing to clarify the precise meaning of the term. What exactly are "Wilsonian principles," and what constitutes, or does not, a "Wilsonian" foreign policy?

A number of core terms—slogans, really—have come to be commonly identified as Wilsonian: collective security, self-determination, making the world safe for democracy. In and of themselves, they are not sufficient to form a coherent, or even comprehensible, description of the role of the United States in the world, though they do tend to suggest what Wilsonianism is not. It is not isolationism, since it implies a robust American engagement with the world, and it is not "realism," since it both draws on American "ideals" in articulating its vision for world order and calls, as a matter of policy, for spreading those ideals as broadly as possible to diverse societies across the globe. Such negative definitions and references to broad inspirations and aspirations, however, still leave "Wilsonianism" a nebulous concept, one that may serve as rhetorical background noise to a whole range of different attitudes and policies but cannot point toward any one coherent understanding of the United States' role in the world.

To restore clarity and focus to core aspects of Wilson's vision for world order and for America's role within it, it may therefore be worthwhile to go back and reexamine his original blueprint for postwar international organization.

Two notions were most identified with Wilson's program in his own time: the League of Nations and the principle of self-determination. Neither term, nor the ideas behind them, originated with Wilson. Nevertheless, he was the first major statesman to pluck these notions out of the realm of intellectual speculation and political marginality, synthesize them into a plan for restructuring postwar international relations, and make what seemed to be a credible commitment to implement them. By the time of the armistice in November 1918 they had become inextricably linked with him in the minds of millions worldwide, even though the projects implied in both terms remained controversial on grounds of desirability as well as feasibility. The League of Nations idea attracted wide support as a general principle, but its specific mode of implementation remained highly contentious, and indeed this was the issue that eventually led to the rejection of the entire Treaty of

Versailles in the United States senate. And the notion of self-determination, while widely embraced by claimants to independent nation-statehood both within and outside Europe, was, not surprisingly, fiercely resisted in its broader implications by the imperial great powers as well as by many of Wilson's own advisers. Wilson's own secretary of state, Robert Lansing, warned darkly at the time "of the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races," since they were bound to lead to "impossible demands" and "breed discontent, disorder and rebellion."⁴

In retrospect, most students of international relations would probably cite the notion of "collective security"—the mutual guarantee provided by members of the League of Nations for each others' sovereignty and territorial integrity—as the main legacy of the Wilsonian plan for international organization. This principle was enshrined in the ill-fated Article X of the League covenant. "The Members of the League," it read, "undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League."⁵ Thus defined, it is easy to conclude, as many did at the time, that the League was intended as a reactionary instrument for preserving the international status quo. This article, of course, was the main target of attack by Wilson's domestic opponents in the Senate. Its blanket guarantee, they complained, infringed on the sovereign rights of the United States and, more specifically, on the senate's constitutional prerogative to declare war, since it committed the United States in advance to go to war to defend any League member under attack without regard to actual US interests, or lack thereof, involved in any particular situation. In the end, no compromise was reached and the League covenant, together with the peace treaty as a whole, was never ratified by the senate.

A closer examination of the evolution of the League covenant, however, shows that Article X, which we now think of as the core of the Wilsonian program for international order, in fact reflected a vision of the League that was very different—even, arguably, precisely opposite—to what Wilson initially had in mind. To understand why, we must return to Wilson's original version, now largely forgotten, of what eventually became Article X of the League covenant. This is the version that appeared in the draft covenant that

⁴ Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 97.

⁵ David Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), vol. 2, 727.

the president initially drew up in the summer of 1918. This text, which he kept closely guarded until after the armistice to forestall opposition, was at the heart of the draft that he brought with him when he arrived in Europe in December 1918. The text of this article, numbered in the early drafts as Article III, read as follows:

The Contracting Powers unite in guaranteeing to each other political independence and territorial integrity; but it is understood between them that such territorial readjustments, if any, as may in the future become necessary by reason of changes in present racial conditions and aspirations or present social and political relationships, pursuant to the principle of self-determination, and also such territorial readjustments as may be in the judgment of three-fourths of the Delegates be demanded by the welfare and manifest interest of the peoples concerned, may be effected, if agreeable to those peoples; and that territorial changes may in equity involve material compensation. The Contracting Powers accept without reservation the principle that the peace of the world is superior in importance to every question of political jurisdiction or boundary.⁶

It is clear upon first reading that this version is far more radical than the final text of what became Article X. Like the final text, it begins with a guarantee of political independence and territorial integrity, but it does not end there. Instead, it proceeds to render this guarantee all but meaningless by vesting in the League broad powers to redraw borders and readjust sovereignties in the future, whenever and wherever they fell short of meeting a list of broad criteria, loosely based on the principle of self-determination. In essence, what Wilson's text proposed was to do away with the long-standing international principle of inviolable state sovereignty, and instead make the political independence and territorial integrity of all states contingent on a broad array of internal conditions: ethnic, social, political, or anything else that three-quarters of the League members—no unanimity required—would have found justified the redrawing of boundaries and readjusting of sovereignties.

Despite the radical possibilities embedded in this text, one could very plausibly argue that even if this article had been incorporated into the final text of the covenant, the results would hardly have been revolutionary. League members, led by the great powers, would have been exceedingly cautious in exercising such powers against another state, lest they be turned

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 99.

against them next. Still, the fact that Wilson wanted to endow the League with an open-ended authority to redraw the boundaries of existing states based on such a broad array of loosely defined guidelines suggests that, in his conception of the League, he envisioned an organization that would do far more than simply provide a collective security guarantee for existing states. Indeed, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that what he had in mind was to fashion the League as an incipient organ of global governance, placing it at the centre of an international system in which the sovereignty of individual states would be thoroughly penetrated by and dependent on the organized force of “world opinion,” to use one of Wilson’s own favourite concepts.

Such revolutionary ideas were bound to meet with opposition from the leaders of the other great powers at the negotiation table in Paris. Even the president’s own advisers thought he had gone too far, and Lansing’s view, cited above, that the principle of self-determination was too vague and destabilizing was hardly unique. General Tasker Bliss, an American peace commissioner who was usually an ardent supporter of the president’s worldview, wondered incredulously upon seeing Wilson’s draft whether the provisions of Article III “contemplate the possibility of the League of Nations being called upon to consider such questions as the independence of Ireland, of India, etc., etc.?”⁷ David Hunter Miller, the international lawyer who was the chief American legal expert responsible for negotiating the final text of the League covenant, warned the president that his provisions for continuous adjustment of boundaries in accordance with the principle of self-determination would make “dissatisfaction permanent,” compelling “every power to engage in propaganda” and legalizing “irredentist agitation.”⁸ When Miller met his British counterpart in order to merge the various American and British proposals for the League covenant into a single document, the two quickly agreed that this section of Wilson’s draft simply had to go.

In the end, the near universal opposition with which his draft of Article III was met in Paris forced the president to acquiesce to the evisceration of his version of what would become Article X. After insisting on the retention of the offending paragraphs in several consecutive drafts, he finally allowed the legal experts—despite his famous quip that he would never allow the League to be designed by lawyers—to delete everything but the first section of the article, which guaranteed the territorial integrity and political independence

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 53.

for existing states. Thus, the article was transformed: from a radical move to subordinate the sovereignty of individual states to an international body, it now became a commitment to defend it against all challenges. What Wilson had conceived as an instrument of managing change in the international system now became a tool designed to preserve the status quo. For Wilson, of course, these two aspects of the international system, order and change, were not only compatible but interdependent. International peace and prosperity, in the long term, required a flexible system that would respond to changing conditions, but would manage change through a rational and orderly process that reflected principles of justice and legitimacy as well as relations of power. The final version of Article X failed to achieve that balance, and was therefore roundly criticized at the time by disillusioned Wilsonians, along with the entire covenant and the treaty of which it was part, as a betrayal of the vision of their erstwhile hero.

Wilson himself, it seemed, did not entirely disagree. In the fall of 1919, facing the charge of his senate opponents that Article X constituted an unacceptable compromise of the sovereign rights of the United States, the president essentially conceded the fact, but not the judgment: “Every man who makes a choice to respect the rights of his neighbors deprives himself of absolute sovereignty,” he retorted, “but he does it by promising never to do wrong, and I cannot for one see anything that robs me of any inherent right that I ought to retain when I promise that I will do right.”⁹ Throughout the debate—until the debilitating stroke he suffered in October 1919 practically ended his participation in it—Wilson insisted that the guarantee contained in Article X was a necessary component of the treaty. But he showed little passion in defending it: it was a necessary component of the peace he had wanted, but not a sufficient one.

Instead, in his public speeches Wilson often proclaimed another article, far more obscure even at the time and certainly today, as the heart of the covenant. This article, Article XI, declared it to be “the friendly right of each Member of the League to bring to the attention of the Assembly or of the Council any circumstance whatever affecting international relations which threatens to disturb international peace or the good understanding between nations upon which peace depends.” Why was Wilson so enamored with this vague and largely ignored section of the covenant?

⁹ Albert Shaw, *The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: The Review of Reviews Corporation, 1924), vol. 2, 746-47.

Perhaps, one suspects, he saw it as a backdoor for introducing the same principles outlined, far more directly and forcefully, in his original version of Article X. Namely, that the League was entitled, indeed obligated, to intervene in the internal affairs of states—hence his frequent emphasis on the phrase “any circumstance whatever”—if they were deemed a threat to international peace.

The Wilsonian program for the postwar order has often been described by historians as having been designed to stem the spread of revolutionary fervour then emanating out of Russia, and, indeed, in some ways it was. In its own manner, however, it too was revolutionary. Wilson did not want the League to be designed by lawyers because he suspected that they were too conservative: bound by precedence and prudence, they would fail to grasp the broader picture, as he saw it, of a radically changed world. As his draft version for Article X makes clear, Wilson rejected as inadequate the system of “collective security” among existing states that his advisers and allies wanted because he saw such a system as reflecting a much-too-narrow view of the threats to peace. The dangers, he thought, inhered not only in the aggressive designs of existing states but also—perhaps primarily—in their domestic structures, where oppression along ethnic, social, or political lines would lead to instability and violence that would, in turn, imperil world peace. In order to ward off such dangers, Wilson was willing to give his world assembly extraordinary powers to intervene in the internal affairs of existing states and even manipulate their essential structures, if their internal conditions required it. In such a Wilsonian order, the security of existing states and regimes, far from guaranteed by a system of “collective security,” could in fact be severely compromised if the interests of “world peace,” as determined by the League, required it.

Wilson’s vision for a new international order, then, was far more radical than most observers, including most of his critics, either realized at the time or remember now. He wanted—he thought it imperative for international peace—to challenge the primacy of state sovereignty in international relations, and institute a world council that would have the authority to intervene in the internal affairs of states, redraw boundaries, and rearrange sovereignties in the interests of peace. The international interventions in recent years in the internal affairs of states, from Bosnia to East Timor to Iraq, would hardly have surprised the man who gave “Wilsonianism” its name, and who himself authorized numerous US military interventions in foreign lands. Does this mean, then, that the “doctrine of preemption” recently expounded

by the current US administration is the logical corollary of the Wilsonian vision for world order? It, too, claims the right to subordinate the principle of state sovereignty to the interests of the international community, and more than a few commentators have recently highlighted these similarities between Wilson's ideas and the Bush doctrine. After all, the notion of pre-emption does share the Wilsonian insistence that the "interests of peace," however defined, must supersede questions of political sovereignty, and thus allow, indeed require, outside interventions in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Wilson himself, however, had come to believe that the mode of US actions to promote international peace was no less important than the goal itself. Having learned the lessons of the failed interventions of his early period in office, most conspicuously in Mexico in 1914, by the end of the Great War Wilson seems to have grown convinced that even the dominant world power must strive for multilateral action in international affairs, rather than act alone. During the League fight, the president had sharp words for those critics who rejected that principle:

They believe that the United States is so strong, so financially strong, so industrially strong, if necessary so physically strong, that it impose its will upon the world if it is necessary for it to stand out against the world, and they believe that the processes of peace can be processes of domination and antagonism, instead of processes of cooperation and good feeling. I therefore 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.¹⁰

For Wilson, then, the national interest of the United States stood on shaky ground indeed if it were not conceived as consonant with the interests the international community and pursued, as far as possible, in harmony with other members of that community. If, as he believed, other states had to subordinate their national interests to the interest of "world peace," then the United States, as the leading nation in world affairs, could be expected to do no less.

The recovery of the radical nature of Wilson's blueprint for international order does not resolve the arguments between its proponents and opponents

¹⁰ Ibid., vol. 2, 768.

about the feasibility and even the desirability of his vision. It is still possible today to argue, as E. H. Carr did nearly 70 years ago, that while aspirations for global harmony may be admirable, the “embryonic character” of “common feeling between nations”—that is, the relative lack of shared values and a sense of common identity—does not bode well for any attempt to institute “an international procedure of peaceful change.”¹¹ The story of Wilson’s original draft of Article X, however, does help to restore some coherence to our understanding of his vision of world order, and clarify the boundaries of what could properly qualify as “Wilsonian”: perhaps better described as “liberal globalism” rather than internationalism, since the president clearly sought to construct a world body that would not merely facilitate relations between sovereign states but transcend them; one that would give effective institutional form to the common values that, he believed, were bound to be shared by all peoples.

The ideas that Wilson articulated inspired millions in Europe and elsewhere in the immediate wake of the war, but they were far too radical for most of those who held power at the time, both domestically in the United States and internationally. Neither the Allied leaders in Paris, nor Wilson’s opponents in Washington, were willing to compromise the sanctity of national sovereignty, most especially their own, for the interests of “an illusory international community.” Some elements of the Wilsonian formula—his casting of the war as a conflict between liberty and autocracy, his call to defend democracy and promote self-government—have been recurring features in the foreign policy rhetoric of the United States under practically every president since FDR. But Wilson also had faith in the ability of a liberal “world opinion” to act in concert through a supranational organization, and was willing to invest some of the sovereign rights of nations in such a body. These latter convictions, while still not broadly accepted among decision-makers in the United States, have now become less outlandish than they were in his own time: they are common (if not unchallenged) within the context of European integration, for example, and even the United States government now routinely accepts the supranational authority of international bodies such as the WTO. It may be, then, that George Kennan was right the second time: Woodrow Wilson may have been, in fact, simply a man ahead of his time.

¹¹ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2001; 1939), 200.