

# Wilson, Past and Present

*The neoconservatives turned Woodrow Wilson into something he was not. In truth, Obama is more like him than Bush ever was.*

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**WOODROW WILSON: A BIOGRAPHY** BY JOHN MILTON COOPER, JR. • KNOFF  
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he minute I stop changing my mind as President, with the change of all the circumstances in the world, I will be a back number.” These are not the words of the Woodrow Wilson most of us know: unflinching idealist, narrow moralist, stubborn racist. But as John Milton Cooper Jr. demonstrates in his biography of the 28th president, they are words to take seriously if we want to understand the ideas, achievements, errors, and impact of a man whose story is too often treated as old news, even as his foreign policy legacy is taken up by liberals and conservatives alike today.

Indeed, *Woodrow Wilson* should relegate most previous efforts to back-number status themselves. Debate over Wilson’s practical fidelity to his creed will persist, but his ideal of statesmanship as informed adjustment rather than rigid resistance to change, and his genuine commitment to it, will be harder to dispute after reading Cooper’s deeply researched book. Moreover, the appeal

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TRYGVE THRONTVEIT *is a lecturer on history and assistant director of undergraduate studies in history at Harvard University.*

of Wilson's pragmatic idealism in his day, and its divergence from the so-called "Wilsonian" policies pursued and proscribed by ideologues ever since, will interest anyone pondering a new president's efforts to shift American policy—and political culture—in a more deliberative, even humble, yet fundamentally idealistic direction.

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 short, he treats Wilson as both human being and great man. Not everyone will grant that Cooper succeeds; even historians may balk at Cooper's comfort with contradictions, especially those of a man many in the academy and beyond see as a racist, imperialist, and enemy of civil liberties.

Such contradictions too often cloud our understanding of Wilson, encouraging many liberals to repudiate his legacy *in toto*. Historians have rightly castigated him for his apathy toward racial injustice and impatience with the civil rights leaders who complained. They have justly condemned the violations of civil liberties his administration committed during wartime. Yet as president of Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and president of the United States, Wilson spearheaded reforms that awed contemporaries with their boldness and inspired even avant-garde progressives with their egalitarian implications.

True, Wilson sometimes described himself as conservative. But Wilson's understanding of conservatism bears little relation to modern conceptions. To him, it meant eschewing theory and taking experience—past, present, and most important, social—as one's guide for responding to change. Essentially, it meant pragmatism. When, in 1910, his gubernatorial rival promised never to ignore "constitutional limitations" in serving the people's needs, Wilson retorted that he would be "an unconstitutional Governor" who would do just that if circumstances demanded it. Three years later, he inaugurated his presidency by promising tariff reform, progressive taxation, expanded credit, and several other measures designed, as Cooper puts it, "to bring justice and protection to ordinary citizens" struggling with rapid economic change—and in 18 marathon months he pushed nearly all of them through Congress.

Wilson's attitudes toward the outside world can seem as contradictory as his domestic views. He is remembered both as an imperialist and prophet of international democracy. At the turn of the last century, Wilson did embrace imperialism as a means of uplifting other peoples while enhancing America's power, and Cooper cites Wilson's early Latin-American policies as evidence that "a bit of the imperialist was lurking within this new Democratic president." Yet Cooper refuses to assume that deep-seated prejudice toward nonwhite peoples

persisted to shape Wilson's later foreign policy. There is too much evidence it did not. After a hubristic intervention in Mexico in April 1914, Wilson spent three years resisting pressure for a full-scale invasion of the revolution-torn country, even when cross-border chaos threatened Americans and his presidency. His early mistakes there convinced him the Mexicans were not political children wanting a teacher. Indeed, he remarked in August 1914, "There were no conceivable circumstances" justifying outside attempts to direct "a revolution as profound as that which occurred in France." For the rest of Wilson's presidency, that same attitude informed his policies toward other peoples struggling for self-government, and he interfered with those struggles, regretfully, only when it seemed necessary to prevent more damaging interference from other quarters.

As for racial matters at home, Wilson rarely spoke of them. Too many other matters, vastly more important to him and most white Americans, occupied him. Certainly Wilson sometimes exhibited racial prejudice. But he also sometimes expressed empathy for blacks, and in rare instances acted, timidly, upon it—as when during the war he vehemently (but belatedly) condemned lynching. Either way, he left few clues to his mind, except that it was generally elsewhere. On civil liberties, too, Wilson remains, in Cooper's words, "a mystery." The best one can glean from his papers is that he feared but respected the power of popular passions, gambled on his ability to direct them to constructive ends in wartime, and was either distracted from or incapable of that task amidst the others war presented.

Despite these challenges, evidence of Wilson's democratic instincts litters Cooper's pages. The figure that emerges expended far more energy pursuing ideals modern liberals can embrace than clinging to prejudices they must abhor. Those various ideals were subsumed under a single, paramount ideal: perfecting self-government. Yet Wilson's particular conceptions of his ideals, and how to realize them, changed over time, reflecting the very meaning of self-government as he understood it: the power and responsibility of communities to adapt cooperatively to change. In short, Wilson was an oxymoron in modern political discourse: a pragmatic idealist.

**F**or Cooper, Thomas Woodrow Wilson epitomizes "the mobile, rootless American" central to American myth. Born in the South to a northern father and immigrant mother, he lived in eight states before assuming the presidency. His faith, too, was all-American, or what used to be considered so; though the deeply religious son of a Presbyterian minister, he never treated his faith as a guidebook to politics. Still, "Tommy" learned to view life through the prism of God's covenant with humanity, which demanded constant service to

others and vigilance over oneself. In college he wrote constitutions for numerous campus groups—all amendable, as life was changeable. In 1884, Wilson (now “Woodrow”) even asked his fiancée Ellen—his first wife, who died while he was in office in 1914—to ratify a two-member “Love League” permitting adoption of new “bylaws...as they become necessary.”

An unhappy stint as a lawyer made Wilson scornful of legalistic solutions to human problems. He turned to history, and made his scholarly reputation arguing that the living Constitution had grown twisted by strict constructions impeding its development. He garnered national attention in the early 1900s as the reforming president of Princeton University, which he determined to make a more modern, egalitarian, tight-knit community of inquiry. After academic politics prompted his resignation, he followed a similar vision for the state

of New Jersey—with the same intense commitment that, for years, brought him near tears when he thought of his unfinished work at Princeton.

No reader introduced to this Wilson will easily credit the commonplace notion that he was a fair-weather progressive. He was a reformer at heart. As governor and president, he was indeed

**Like no president since Wilson, Obama has insisted on our responsibility to common international interests as well as narrow national interests.**

an “opportunist,” wooing constituencies to back his goals. But those goals began liberal and developed in progressive and even radical directions, informed by early, sympathetic engagement with socialistic thought. Granted, reverence for Edmund Burke—whom he considered the prophet of “expediency” in government—encouraged his skepticism of theoretical socialism, along with *laissez-faire* conservatism, populist utopianism, and all political dogmatisms. But Wilson refused to judge policies by their provenance. Rather, his test was their relevance to goals emerging from “common counsel”: the collective inquiry of citizens trained in habits of deliberative discourse, encouraged by leaders adept at fostering constructive exchange.

Convinced that economic stratification impeded common counsel, Wilson devoted his early presidency to a “New Freedom” legislative program designed to rebalance economic power. Simultaneously, he spearheaded a suite of institutional innovations—including the Federal Reserve—to exercise constant vigilance over a dynamic economy and address problems no single Congress or executive could anticipate. Cooper argues compellingly that by the time Wilson ran for reelection in 1916, he had achieved a record of constructive legislation later rivaled only by Franklin Roosevelt’s and Lyndon Johnson’s. And Wilson

had already moved on: Concluding that corporate, commercial, and monetary reforms only began to address industrial America's inequalities, he wrote nearly every social-justice goal of the 1912 Progressive Party into the 1916 Democratic platform. 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.

In Cooper's view, the same bold yet flexible approach characterized Wilson's foreign policy, especially toward World War I. Wilson's journey from neutrality to military preparedness and finally intervention was a harrowing personal trial, conveyed affectingly by Cooper. Wilson rejected pacifist arguments that war was never necessary. As he told anti-militarists in 1916, if telling nations they shall not make war, "you have to make that 'shall' bite." Yet no bone in his body resonated to the tocsin-beating of Teddy Roosevelt and others who pleaded, in God's name, that America join the righteous fight against Germany. "War isn't declared in the name of God," Wilson once responded, "it is a human affair entirely." When both Congressional supporters and opponents applauded his speech requesting intervention, Wilson was sadly perplexed. "My message tonight was a message of death for our young men," he remarked. "How strange it seems to applaud that." He never denied America's high calling, but he knew it entailed high cost—and knew mounting the high horse was foolish. When he said the world "must be made safe for democracy," his conscious use of the passive implied uncertainty and humility. The goal, and any glory, would not be won by America alone, but "by a concert of free peoples."

Cooper overstates neither Wilson's boldness nor his circumspection. If anything, he understates the directness with which Wilson translated his ideal of common counsel *within* nations into one of common counsel *among* them. One reason is Cooper's lack of attention to the numerous other programs for international organization floating around Wilson—particularly those of pragmatist progressives like Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann, who frequently shared with Wilson their ideas for a deliberative, adaptive international body demanding a significant relinquishment of sovereignty from its members. More attention to these ideas would have brought the overall pattern of Wilson's world vision into clearer focus.

Even so, Cooper's treatment of the paramount issue of Wilson's presidency, the League of Nations, suggests how expansive yet coherent—and pragmatic—that vision was. For Wilson, the only way to prevent another cataclysm was to recognize global interdependence and institutionalize the principle of deliberative self-government fire-tempered in America's own Civil War. Wilson never claimed the League of 1919 should be a superstate; it was a newborn

institution that would grow more effective as its members grew familiar with the complexities and benefits of international cooperation. Yet he would not surrender to foes of the League's Article X, which bound the United States to rank narrow national interests below those the world collectively determined. He believed no single viewpoint encompassed the common good, collective pursuit of which was the only long-term guarantee of freedom. Hence his 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—a democratic world order.

If Cooper presents neither the scope nor the radicalism of Wilson's internationalist goals so clearly, his chronicle of Wilson's failure to achieve them is political history at its clearest and best. Wilson's ideas of cooperative internationalism were well-considered responses to the catastrophe spawned by competitive nationalism. The majority of Americans leaving record of their thoughts favored some permanent engagement in international affairs. A large portion believed Wilson's version was worth trying. That alone made it more feasible than historians typically allow. Yet as Cooper shows, Wilson trampled the shoots of internationalism with political missteps. He probably could have preempted some Senate opposition to the League by more inclusive policy-making. And he certainly should have honored his commitment to open diplomacy. Instead, from 1918 on, he refused to discuss the specifics of the peace, or the League that would enforce it, until after the Peace Conference settled them. Influential supporters, ignorant of Wilson's struggles at Paris, their confidence shaken by domestic repression, could muster little of their former enthusiasm for the president. Nevertheless, it was Wilson—after suffering a crippling, judgment-impairing stroke—who twice ordered Democratic senators to reject a treaty with the famous Lodge reservations. Though his second wife, Edith, played gatekeeper during his illness, his isolation only reinforces the fact that those decisions were Wilson's own; it was he who prevented ratification and membership in the League. True, the alternative was a painful compromise falling far short of the internationalist commitment Wilson sought. But it would have been a start—uncertain to be sure, but presenting opportunities that in better days, one thinks, would have struck Wilson as worth exploring.

**O**ne suspects Wilson would have liked Cooper's book, even if it was not about him. Despite his own lyrical style, Wilson the rhetorician would appreciate the clarity and force of Cooper's lapidary prose. Wilson the historian would find even more to admire. Cooper's tale follows the logic of a life unfolding through time, and assumes the organic unity of that life. Cooper is

also a rigorous researcher and restrained interpreter of the past; the conclusions the record supports are those Cooper draws, and like most good history they yield neither the closure of absolution nor of utter condemnation for Wilson. Cooper presents the Wilson he finds.

Wilson clearly was the titan of his era. He turned progressivism into a national program, and he laid the foundation of the modern American welfare state. As for his international vision, Cooper reminds us how deeply relevant it was to many Americans, and to a devastated world.

At the same time, Cooper's book suggests the irrelevance of Wilson's vision to the self-styled "Wilsonians" who have shaped American policy since his time. Take FDR. For him, Wilson's political failure evinced a flaw in Wilson's vision. Combined with the belief that America—having beaten the Depression and the Nazis—had things figured out, FDR sought a postwar architecture that facilitated pursuit of the world's best interests as America understood them. His successors in both parties followed his lead, winding up in both Vietnam and Iraq, among countless places mostly forgotten. All of them, at one point or another, claimed the banner of Wilsonianism.

Applied to such imperial internationalism, the Wilsonian label would seem a libel to Wilson. Yet this brand of internationalism has cornered the conceptual market, so that any politician supporting constructive engagement with the outside world has to invoke the "realistic" idealism of the postwar philosopher kings. Compounding the irony, the memory of World War I as a failure has deposed Wilson from his eponymous pantheon, so that even "Wilsonian" liberals treat him like the crazy uncle in the attic. Barack Obama's Nobel acceptance was telling. Though briefly mentioning Wilson's own Peace Prize for his League of Nations campaign, Obama consistently invoked post-1945 administrations in both describing how force could underwrite peace and rejecting the "stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world."

Yet if Wilson has a contemporary avatar, surely it is Obama, whose 2008 campaign promised a deliberative alternative reminiscent of Wilson's. Contrary to disgruntled Republicans citing his campaign pledges of "pragmatic" governance, Obama has insisted that deliberation does not mean "getting chronically steamrolled" in the name of centrism. Contrary to those further left who sneer at his "pragmatism," he continues to assert that deliberation means approaching issues critically, empirically, and compassionately rather than dogmatically. And despite countless difficulties, he seems hopeful not only of building such deliberative capacities into American government, but of infusing a new appreciation of them into American culture.

History might seem against him. For decades, Americans have trumpeted deliberative ideals while accepting policies that skipped the deliberation, masking domestic conflicts with economic growth and overcoming international differences through economic or military coercion. But they also recently elected a president espousing two impeccably Wilsonian ideals. The first is the promotion, at home, of a political culture in which ideals, visions, and values are tested against the changing circumstances and differing perspectives that define life in a dynamic, diverse, free society. The second is the adoption of a similar approach to international affairs. Like no president since Wilson, Obama has insisted on America's responsibility not just to subordinate narrow national interests to common international interests, but to let other peoples help determine what those interests are and how to pursue them.

Like Wilson, Obama will fail to follow these ideals perfectly in practice. Whether his policies realize them on a larger scale remains to be seen. In either case, the judgment will fall not to historians alone, but to a public that will determine both outcomes to greater or lesser degree. Those wondering if and how Americans have sustained similar ideals in the past, and willing to accept the frequent tragedy of historical contingency without throwing their hands in the air, should read Cooper's book. **D**