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MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

## The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

*In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)*

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## Wilson and the Founders: The Roots of Liberal Foreign Policy

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We can't do much better than reclaiming the Declaration of Independence as a fundamental foreign policy document in American history. We have a tendency to read it in a simplistic way, and to think of it only as a sort of airy declaration of what were then human rights, and a declaration of separation from England. But, in fact, the founders had a fairly well-articulated sense of what they were doing with foreign policy, and a fairly revolutionary sense of their foreign policy. So I'm quite interested in how Woodrow Wilson rediscovers the founders and makes them relevant for his time.

This thinking about Wilson began for me about ten years ago when I came to be a speechwriter in the second term of Bill Clinton's presidency. I was quite interested in which presidents were considered historically interesting to Clinton and quickly figured out it was John F. Kennedy, obviously, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, a little less obviously, and Teddy Roosevelt, who was a huge influence on Bill Clinton, and always has been. It was a time in the 1990s when a lot of very favorable books were coming out about Teddy Roosevelt, and it was an attractive time to be thinking about him. At the same time, I felt Wilson was completely ignored. I don't remember Clinton ever talking about Wilson. In the collected speeches of Bill Clinton—it's something like eighteen very fat volumes, the man enjoys speaking—if we looked up Wilson, I'm sure we could find a few references, but very few.

As a historian, I thought that was fascinating. I looked a little into Wilson and the way people talk about him, a sort of casual dismissal of Wilsonian idealism, which is a put-down—I don't think it's ever used favorably in the press. George Bush vigorously denies that he's a Wilsonian idealist, and it's largely an accusation leveled at him, not some-

thing he claims for himself. Henry Kissinger's book, *Diplomacy*, opens with a discussion of Wilson versus Theodore Roosevelt, and he states it very clearly. One is an idealist, one is a realist.

I think the tide may be about to turn for Wilson. I do think he is a pivot for all of American history before him, converting it into the twentieth century. For my research, more than anything, I read his speeches, which was a pleasure. There are a lot of Wilson's speeches, and they are fascinating. They are radically different from what came before. They are radically different from what Theodore Roosevelt was saying. We think of them as roughly equal levels of orators, but I think Wilson vastly exceeded Teddy Roosevelt, and there's nothing in the late nineteenth century like him at all. You really have to go back to Abraham Lincoln for a sense that there's a mystical power in American history that's very forceful, that is acting through Wilson and through the American people and exerting considerable force on world events.

You can call it naïve and idealistic, and it's easy to find examples of naïve phrasings in Wilson's oratory, but you can also say, this person knew American history better than any president before him, and arguably better than any president since, and knew the founding moment extremely well: Jefferson in particular, but Hamilton, also, and knew the Civil War vividly, and with first-hand knowledge. It's always worth restating that he was a war child. He grew up in a ravaged South. He saw destruction around him. He was not in peril himself, but he certainly lived in a South that was basically destroyed by the Civil War and had a lifelong, profound aversion to war.

He knew—as many people did, but I think with particular clarity—that the moment he was living in was a moment of great destiny for the United States. He uses the word destiny and the word providence a lot. Throughout the years of his presidency, you see him changing and evolving considerably. He comes in, of course, as an anti-war president, and even in his second term he promises to keep us out of war. Events conspire against him, and in April 1917 he leads the United States into World War I, where it exerted a decisive impact—a late entrance into the war, but a very decisive entrance, and there was nothing half-baked about it. Nearly two million soldiers were sent over. It was full war. It was the first European intervention by the United States, and it was a moment of tremendous change in the history of the United States that I don't think we give him proper credit for. It seems like our mixed memories and our largely negative memories are almost entirely rooted in the failed struggle to bring the U.S. into the League of Nations, and we overlook the considerable importance of the fact that he entered World War I at all.

## World War I and Afterwards

The general consensus is that during the war itself he led effectively, and there's no better way to gauge his performance than to see the way the world looked at him as the war ended, which is perfectly captured in Erez Manela's book, *The Wilsonian Moment*. H.G. Wells uses the word "messiah" to describe the way people felt about him. So, I consider him a most significant president and a most significant interventionist, and not someone who was so carried away with pacifism that he didn't act in the opposite direction when circumstances required it.

He failed, of course, in the Versailles negotiations. He failed to win passage in the Senate of American entry into the League of Nations. And his health failed. That basically is the cardinal sin of American politics, failure. It taints the way we remember him. But that does not mean that the ideas he was expressing were insignificant or insincere, or that his idealism did not have a considerable realism inside it. Idealism is only idealism when it can't be achieved, but when you have the political willpower to make an idea happen, then it's not idealistic—it's realistic.

The chief Republican critique of Wilson at the time was that he was giving away something extremely valuable, which was American sovereignty. But what he was trying to do was to create a collective arrangement, which required all parties to give up a certain amount of sovereignty to make the new arrangement work. It was a tiny amount of sovereignty, and no serious person thinks that the United States would have been threatened in any way by this. But that the way he talked about it, and the way the Republicans talked about it, allowed

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him to be perceived as articulating a weaker position than he actually had. The ideas that he was expressing were quite radical and new, and we're still, in many ways, trying to live up to them. They're in place in many ways that we accept nowadays without even thinking about it. We gave up sovereignty in 1949, for example, when we entered NATO. We're giving up sovereignty every time we allow a new country into NATO, which we're doing often, because we are obligated by treaty to go to their defense.

Consider a few more modern ways that Wilson's legacy has been used, and effectively, since his death. F.D.R. cites him quite movingly when he comes to take the nomination at Chicago in 1932. John F. Kennedy alludes to him briefly in his American University speech in 1963. Jimmy Carter gave a number of speeches that fit right into the Wilsonian rubric. Ronald Reagan, in many ways, was profoundly Wilsonian. In his famous speech to Evangelicals in 1983, he said, "America is great because America is good," which is a very Wilsonian thought—that virtue conveys political power and, ultimately, military power. Mikhail Gorbachev's important speech in 1988, when he proposed a new world in which the Soviet Union would renounce weapons and all countries would renounce weapons, and we would live by a more virtuous international standard, was a profoundly Wilsonian speech.

And then we get to George W. Bush, who has certainly given Wilsonian utterances. It would be hard to find a better example than his second inaugural address, which pledged to end tyranny for all time. And yet, I don't find him a sincere Wilsonian. I don't think it was a sincere use of that rhetoric. I don't think there was anything like the learned understanding of American history that Wilson always had. I don't think there was anything like the implied commitment to egalitarianism and democracy that is in every Wilson speech, and certainly not to economic egalitarianism, which Franklin Roosevelt was certainly leading up to at the end of his presidency. So, in my opinion, Bush's is a kind of convenient rhetoric because it sounds good, but used in ways that Wilson would have been extremely uncomfortable with and profoundly opposed to.

### The Declaration and Liberalism

How might the liberal tradition in foreign policy be defined, as seen through the prism of Woodrow Wilson? Admiration for the full promise of the Declaration of Independence, which is a document we've had trouble living up to for our entire history. In speech after speech, Wilson talked about it. He went to Philadelphia just before leading the United States into war and called the Declaration a document leading up to war and an important statement of American foreign policy.

The Declaration implies full political participation. Of course, we failed to live up to that for many decades, and even centuries. Human rights—the term isn't used, but it's implied. And economic empowerment is also implied in a phrase like, "the pursuit of happiness." Every time another great document has been written—the Atlantic Charter, or the Helsinki Accords, which aren't really American documents—the Declaration of Independence is very much in the background.

In the Declaration there is a sense that diplomacy was broken, that we needed more open dealing between nations, and that the

European system was profoundly flawed. There was a system—it was the monarchical system, and aristocratic emissaries between countries—and Wilson, like so many Americans before him, wanted to smash that system. "Open covenants, openly arrived at" is also something with a direct link to the ideas about open diplomacy in the Declaration of Independence. (The classic study of the founders and their foreign policy is *To the Farewell Address*, by Felix Gilbert, an absolutely brilliant distillation of what they were trying to do in foreign policy.)

Fewer rituals of diplomacy, fewer complicated treaties with secret codicils. Willingness to intervene in a just cause, which is an important and complicated point for Democrats to assume, but, for most of this century, until after Vietnam, the Democrats were considered the party more likely to intervene than the Republicans. Bill Clinton considered himself quite willing to intervene in a just cause, someone with pacifistic tendencies but no aversion to the use of force when the cause was morally just. And that is, of course, an extremely complicated thing to parse, but it's in the story of Woodrow Wilson. It's in the story of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It's in the story of Democratic foreign policy in the twentieth century.

A devotion to free trade, another very complicated point. Democrats have not always been the strongest advocates of free trade, but that is a principle that goes back to the founders. The American Revolution, in a way, was a fight over free trade. Freedom of the seas is a codicil of that thought.

A particular concern for Europe and its great relevance to the United States, without thinking that European rituals are desirable, but nevertheless accepting that Europe is key to the stability of the United States. At the same time, a particular concern for the welfare of small nations, which Wilson talked about over, and over, and over again, and was seen in the international arena as the defender of small nations against England, France, and Germany.

Self-determination, that very slippery concept that got him into so much trouble, and which we, ourselves, were not entirely living up to in the Wilsonian moment. The Palmer Raids, the way black people were treated, and women were treated, certainly suggests that we didn't have full self-determination. But all people ultimately do have the right to shape their foreign policy. They not only have the right to elect their leaders, but as a consequence, they have the right to shape foreign policy. That's an important thought that I think Democrats should retain.

And, finally, an important thought that's in everything Wilson said, and a most effective tool of persuasion, is this profound belief that a new time is coming. Whether you think it's a religious new time, or a political new time, but nevertheless, the disasters of the present can be solved, and a new time is coming.



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