



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Wilson's Radical Vision for Global Governance

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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 U.S. foreign relations, this is hardly a surprising development. Wilson was responsible for articulating a vision of the U.S. 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 it 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—which sought to throw off foreign rule. Perhaps the single most striking example of this pattern was the “Wilsonian moment” of 1919: after a world war that caused

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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 a 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 U.S. 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 harking back to 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, as owing 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, approach to 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” as 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 approach to the United States’ role in the world. In order 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.

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Wilson's Program

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, while it attracted wide support as a general principle, remained highly contentious as to its specific mode of implementation, and indeed this was the issue that eventually led to the rejection of the entire Treaty of Versailles in the U.S. 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,"⁵ it read, "undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League." 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 U.S. 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 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 that boundaries be redrawn and sovereignties readjusted.

This draft 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 center of an international system in which the sovereignty of individual states would be thoroughly penetrated by and

dependant on the organized force of “world opinion,” to use one of Wilson’s own favorite 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. 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.

Versailles: Compromise and Consequences

In the end, the near universal opposition that his draft of Article III met Paris forced the president to acquiesce to the evisceration of his version of what would become Article X. The article was transformed from a radical move to subordinate the sovereignty of individual states to an international body to 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 order, designed to preserve the status quo. For Wilson, 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 in the League fight 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 can not for one see anything that robs me of any inherent right that I ought to retain when I promise that I will do right.”⁸ Throughout the debate, 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.

The Wilsonian program for the postwar order has often been described by historians as designed to stem the spread of the revolutionary fervor 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 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 which 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 U.S. 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

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preemption 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 U.S. 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 dominant world power must strive for multilateral action in international affairs, rather than act alone. 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 about the feasibility and even the desirability of his vision. 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.

article footnotes

- 1 H.G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (New York, 1933), 82.
- 2 “Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 2000.
- 3 John Milton Cooper, Jr., and Charles E. Neu, eds., *The Wilson Era* (Arlington Heights, Ill.), 330
- 4 Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (Boston, 1921), 97
- 5 David Hunter Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant* (New York, 1928), 2:727.
- 6 Miller, 2:99.
- 7 Miller, 1:53
- 8 Albert Shaw, *The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1924), 2:746-7



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