

The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security

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The Will to Believe examines Woodrow Wilson's national security strategy from the beginning of the First World War in 1914 to the end of his presidency, contrasting his ideas with alternative policies offered by his political rivals. Despite contradictions and weaknesses in Wilson's argument, Kennedy argues, the president's formulation proved more attractive to Americans during his presidency than those offered by others, and after a hiatus in the 1920s and 1930s, returned to dominate American foreign policy down to the present.

Wilson and the 'liberal internationalists', who generally agreed with his analysis of the world situation, believed that 'power politics' or 'balance of power' policies pursued by the European great powers had precipitated the war. The system, they argued, had proved inherently unstable, forcing participants to militarize their societies. If the United States found itself having to arm heavily to protect itself from potential enemies such as Germany, militarism might jeopardize its democratic institutions also. To escape from the power politics game, Wilson reasoned, the balance of power must be replaced by collective security, in which every nation would become responsible for maintaining the peace.

Winning acceptance of an entirely new form of international organization, however, proved difficult in the midst of war. Initially, Wilson hoped to clear the way for reform by mediating an end to the conflict on the basis of *status quo ante bellum*, with a ceasefire to be followed by the inauguration of a system of collective security. But it soon became clear that neither the Entente nor the Central Powers wanted peace on those terms. And in any case, Wilson distrusted the German government. He doubted that an autocratic,

militaristic regime could become a reliable partner in a system of collective security. A durable peace, he became convinced, required not only that the Germans return the territories they had occupied since the beginning of the war, but that the German government must be democratized. In short, he found himself essentially in sympathy with the Allied objectives. Once the United States entered the war in April 1917, Wilson concluded that his only chance to achieve liberal internationalist goals would come at the peace conference. The peace might be imposed by the victors, but to reform international relations, it must be acceptable to all sides as just.

How could Wilson imagine that the Germans would see being forced to give up conquered territory and pay for damage inflicted on Belgium and France as fair? Why should they accept what looked from their point of view like a defeat? Kennedy argues that Wilson, like most Americans, believed that the Allies would eventually prevail, and that as they found themselves losing, the Germans would become more receptive to his peace terms, provided they felt they were being treated respectfully and could see that the proposed settlement would assure them security. He was convinced that they would recognize that the United States, alone among the major powers, had no selfish interests and wanted only to create an international system that would be fair to everyone. Wilson's certainty that other nations would recognize and accept American exceptionalism was a major part of the 'will to believe' in Kennedy's title.

Aside from the obvious difficulties in attempting to reform the international system in the midst of a war, Kennedy argues that there were serious inconsistencies in Wilson's own position. One was that while he distrusted the German autocracy and essentially argued that the German people needed to replace it with a more democratic system, he did not entirely trust a democracy – particularly a German democracy – either. Ordinary citizens, he noted, could be swayed by emotion, and he displayed little confidence that a democratic Germany would necessarily be more peaceful than the Reich. Any peace therefore needed to be severe enough so that the Germans would learn the cost of aggression, yet conciliatory enough so that they would see the terms as fair. Even if such terms could be designed theoretically, however, winning the consent of the Allies and, after 1917, the American public, to them proved impossible.

An equally fundamental contradiction within Wilson's program became obvious even before the United States entered the war. During the neutrality period, Kennedy contends, the president favored the Allies for ideological reasons and threw 'America's weight onto the Allied side on the scales of a balance of power directed at Germany' (p. 122), thus rendering mediation impossible and undermining his own efforts at international reform. Following America's entry into the war, the contradiction became even more explicit as the United States employed force to compel a German surrender and to try to impose a new system that would theoretically make force unnecessary.

Wilson's program did not escape criticism in the United States. The group centered on Theodore Roosevelt, which Kennedy calls 'Atlanticists', agreed with the president that power politics tended to create international anarchy, but they could see no alternative to each nation being prepared to defend its interests. They doubted that nations in a collective security system would really be willing to use force to defend the rights of others if their own interests were not involved. Although they saw autocracies as likely to be militaristic, they, even more than Wilson, had little confidence that democracies would be more peaceful. Prior to the beginning of the war, Roosevelt in fact believed that the international system, dominated by 'civilized' great powers, was becoming more stable. The balance of power, he argued, had tended to make war less likely. That argument, of course, lost much of its appeal after war began, but the Atlanticists did not give up their belief that each nation's ability to deter a potential attack reduced the risk of conflict. Collective security seemed to them essentially unworkable.

Kennedy labels a second group of domestic critics of Wilson's liberal internationalism 'pacifists.' This, he admits (p. 229, n.3), is not an entirely satisfactory term, since some of the important members of the group – William Jennings Bryan, for example – were not pacifists in the sense of opposing all uses of force. It also seems strange that he omits any mention of the most notorious pacifist of the era, Eugene Debs. My own preference would have been to use Robert David Johnson's term, 'the peace progressives', but the issue is not crucial. The pacifists' central argument was that participation in the war 'would imperil both America's

safety and the cause of international reform' (p. 114). Unlike the Atlanticists, they shared Wilson's belief in a system of collective security, although they generally preferred that an international league of nations pursue the resolution of disputes, arms limitation, and anti-imperialism by non-coercive methods. In the end, believing that no foreign nation posed a credible threat to the United States, they were skeptical of Wilson's arguments both for entry into the war and for collective enforcement of international peace. They charged that the Treaty of Versailles contradicted Wilson's own Fourteen Points because it stripped the Germans of territory rightfully theirs, handed over Chinese territory to the Japanese, imposed excessive reparations on the Germans, excluded Germany from the League of Nations, and disarmed Germany without general disarmament. They distrusted Wilson's contention that the League could correct the admitted weaknesses of the treaty.

Given the logical force and popular appeal of the arguments advanced by the Atlanticists and pacifists, why did Wilson's position not only win out but go on to shape American foreign policy well into the 21st century? As Kennedy points out, Wilson had the advantage of incumbency, and he proved a talented political leader with a particular gift for public speaking. His arguments, which rested on assertions of American exceptionalism, also had a strong and continuing appeal for Americans who assumed their nation's moral superiority over all others. The Atlanticists' arguments, on the other hand, implied American participation in a balance of power system that was foreign to American tradition and seemed extremely risky. The pacifists' assertion that the United States could rely for its security on geography and for its influence on moral suasion also seemed increasingly questionable in the age of submarines and airships. By the 1920s, however, with liberal internationalism rejected and the Atlanticists having failed to make a convincing case for an alternative balance of power strategy, America's traditional policy, 'the course of relatively disarmed isolation from international political-military affairs' (p. 125), became dominant by default. Then, when the events of the 1930s and 1940s discredited that position, liberal internationalists reasserted their primacy. In the cold war, Kennedy contends, the key assumption of liberal internationalism, that the United States had to respond to every threat to peace everywhere, came to shape policy, and after the end of the cold war, apparent American military superiority in the world made the argument even more attractive. Thus the Wilsonian formulation continues to influence American policy.

Kennedy's argument is based on solid research in published collections of documents and papers – particularly Arthur Link's edition of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* – and wide secondary reading. Every major point is buttressed by appropriate quotations from the primary sources. Kennedy has a shrewd eye for the telling quotation and a gift for expressing his principals' arguments clearly and concisely. His juxtaposition of Wilson's arguments against those of the Atlanticists and the pacifists for the whole period from 1914 to 1920 goes far to clarify both the weaknesses of Wilson's position and the reasons it won out despite those limitations. I know of no other study of this period that so sharply defines and contrasts competing formulations of national security policy.

The limitation of Kennedy's approach, in my view, is that it both overstates the consistency of Wilson's objectives and makes his adversaries sound more unified than they were. To be sure, Wilson always blamed the war on balance of power politics – so did most Americans – but he did not immediately propose collective security as an alternative. Throughout the autumn of 1914 and well into 1915 he displayed great uncertainty about the best American policy. The sharp differences between his ideas and those of Secretary of State Bryan that led to Bryan's resignation in June 1915 did not seem obvious to either man prior to the late spring of 1915.

The so-called 'loan ban' offers a case in point. Traditional neutrality did not require it, and its effect on the belligerents would not have been impartial, since the Allies had greater need of foreign money and supplies than their enemies. Bryan proposed the ban not to favor the Central Powers, however, but to curtail access for both sides to the vast sums needed to sustain modern warfare, and Wilson accepted it initially for the same reason. Subsequently, as it became apparent that the ban would hurt American interests as well as the Allies in particular, both men went along, first, with permitting 'credits', and later with an outright repeal of the ban. Kennedy mentions the incident, but, to my mind, understates the degree to which neutrality policy was shaped by economic self-interest as well as an ideological preference for one side over the other. The

fact that the United States was in a recession at the outbreak of the war had a significant influence on the administration's policy.

Missing from Kennedy's analysis are a number of important figures who seem not to fit conveniently into his categories, including Claude Kitchin and most other Congressional leaders, as well other leaders such as Charles Evans Hughes and Herbert Hoover. Congressional debates, as well as the elections of 1916 and 1918, surely played some role in shaping American policy, yet they receive little or no discussion in the book. And, unless one accepts Wilson's opinion that Robert Lansing was only a sophisticated clerk, the secretary of state's logical and thoughtful interpretation of American policy deserves more thorough treatment than Kennedy gives it.

A perhaps minor example of the way in which Kennedy's focus on analyzing Wilson's thought from a single perspective subtly distorts his argument is the case of the Overman Act. Kennedy depicts the act, passed in April 1918, as part of a conscious effort by Wilson to 'sharply' expand 'the government's powers over the economy' (p. 146). Certainly it had somewhat that effect, although Wilson never made much use of it, but his main goal in asking Senator Overman to sponsor the legislation was not to enhance presidential power so much as to head off a Republican attempt to seize control over the war by creating a congressionally dominated 'war cabinet.' Partisan politics, more than a specific theory of how the president could make his office stronger, led to the law's passage. It was defensive rather than offensive. Kennedy is certainly correct that one of the war's effects was to enlarge the power of the presidency, but it is not always clear that Wilson deliberately sought that power, and it is notable that he tried to surrender as much of it as possible after the conflict ended. As Kennedy correctly notes, Wilson feared the militarization of the government. My disagreement with Kennedy's treatment of the Overman Act is with his depiction of it as part of a conscious plan, not with his estimate of its effect. A similar point, I think, could also be made about other aspects of his argument.

Kennedy's use of broad labels – liberal internationalists, Atlanticists, pacifists – for the various points of view he discusses has the probably inescapable effect of making them seem more coherent than they were. He is careful to point out disagreements within groups, but the mere use of the terms creates a greater impression of unity than was the case. The problem becomes particularly evident in his discussion of the period after the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles. Of course, as Wilson had anticipated, conversion of collective security from theory to treaty not only highlighted differences between America and the European Allies, and between the Allies and the Germans, but also realigned the groups in the United States. That was a major reason that he resisted offering specifics of his plans for so long. Indeed, the fragmentation of pre-war and wartime alignments was so great, with some pacifists supporting the treaty and some moving into isolationism, and with some Atlanticists outright opposed to it and others willing to accept it with reservations, that it becomes questionable whether Kennedy's categories retain any meaning. Perhaps he might have been well-advised to abandon them and devise new ones for the post-war period.

Curiously, after spending most of the book seemingly building the case that the internal contradictions within Wilson's position, as well as the criticisms of it made by the Atlanticists and pacifists, ultimately prevented American ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and entrance into the League of Nations, Kennedy abruptly concludes that 'the decline of Wilson's health in the summer and fall of 1919 played the decisive role in preventing ratification of the treaty' (p. 219). That argument seems to contradict his preceding ideological analysis, and Kennedy does not explain how the two can be reconciled. Indeed, the health argument seems like something of an afterthought here.

Nevertheless, despite these reservations, I think *The Will to Believe* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Woodrow Wilson's ideas, their rejection by the Senate in 1919, and their enduring influence on American foreign policy. Although it is notable for the clarity of its analysis and writing, it is perhaps not the best starting point for novices interested in understanding Wilson's policy, but specialists will value its trenchant and original analysis.

The author thanks Professor Clements for his thoughtful and detailed review and does not wish to comment

further.

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