Abandoning American Neutrality: Woodrow Wilson and the Beginning of the Great War, August 1914-December 1915

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Ryan Floyd’s *Abandoning American Neutrality* should be considered required reading about America’s entry into the First World War. In a concise prose his study delivers a new perspective on Woodrow Wilson’s decision-making process at this crucial juncture, and he challenges older assumptions about America’s role and interests during these eventful years and delivers an original contribution whether the United States went to war out of moral reasons, collective security or economic interest. In light of the centennial anniversary, Floyd has written a book that focuses on a very narrow and specific aspect of the First World War but at the same time delivers a broad international and legal history of this catastrophic event.

Without a long introduction Floyd states the divisive issue at the core of Wilson’s foreign policy that emerged with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914: Wilson’s idealism, portrayed in his notes to the belligerents, clashed with his pragmatic desire to protect American economic interests. Floyd thereby engages an extensive debate between older scholars who reduce the history of the First World War to simple economics and war profits and historians who analyze the war in a framework of collective security and the spread of democracy.

Floyd’s work challenges the reader to reevaluate the economic aspects of the First World War, which have been explored by Richard Hofstadter (1), and his argument leaves no doubt that economic interests lay at the
core of Wilson’s decision to enter the war on the side of the Allies and against the Central Powers. Yet his work adds cultural and political perspectives which enrich *Abandoning American Neutrality* and make it far more than a simple economic-oriented analysis of the first war years. While Ross Kennedy studies the influence of three major political factions on Wilson’s foreign policy in *Will to Believe*, Floyd drops the Atlanticists and focuses on the clash between Wilson’s liberal internationalism and William Jennings Bryan pacifism.\(^{(2)}\) The attention paid to these two camps in no way lessens the merits of his argumentation, because Floyd makes a strong case that in the end Colonel House, Bryan and Lansing represented both political alternatives relevant to Woodrow Wilson – Bryan being the only real neutral and outspoken pacifist and furthest away from the President’s ears, too.

At the start of the First World War the American public seemed evenly divided along the belligerents’ lines. Wilson, knowing that any rash decision could seriously provoke the large and influential German-American as well as the pro-British population, heeded Washington’s farewell address for as long as possible. The public’s strong distaste for European wars and the ethnic composition of his own country made it clear that in 1914 for America ‘maintaining neutrality was not simply a matter of diplomacy’ (p. 11).

The cheering of more than 300,000 people for both sides of the war on Times Square on 5 August 1914 illustrated the division of the general public, as well as that between Democrats and Republicans, and the president and his advisers. The author draws attention to the significance of public opinion in the First World War by elaborating the steps London took to assure a favorable opinion in the United States. The decision by the British Government to cut the transatlantic cable ‘to control the flow of information reaching the United States’ (p. 14) speaks volumes how unsure London was about the state of its relations with Washington. Often overlooked by other authors, the First World War offers lessons for the wars of the 20th and 21st century, where the ‘winning of hearts and minds’ was central for the course and outcome in places like Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. The British covert propaganda in the United States, which included famous writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was a first step to demonize Germans and initiate a process to win over the American public.

Even when Floyd introduces additional historical aspects, he never leaves his core premise out of sight: at the beginning of the war, Europe was the most important trading partner for the United States – 77 per cent of American exports went to the belligerents, the largest amount to the United Kingdom, closely followed by Germany. At this point American economic dependence on the European market constituted a serious disadvantage and Wilson was rightfully concerned over the economic health of his country. In July 1914 Europeans withdrew $45 million and the ‘doors of the NYSE remained sealed for nearly four and a half months’ (p. 15) to prevent its collapse. Contemporary readers, who think the crisis of 2009 was bad, will find useful insights about the interconnectedness of the global trade system in Floyd’s work. Leaving aside Wilson’s idea of American moral superiority, Floyd focuses on the political aspects of American economic prosperity and depicts how the outbreak of war in Europe led to a downturn of globalized commerce and endangered United States prosperity.

In light of this economic interdependence, Wilson and House’s efforts to mediate peace were borne out of necessity and a real desire for peace. Yet the author attests to both politicians’ ignorance of the political and military realities in Europe, where neither side was interested in peace talks. The Imperial German army had achieved victories on the battlefield and the British and French had suffered grave losses in men and territory. Instead of any signs that an end to the war was becoming a possibility, all sides counted on its prolongation. Wilson, still very idealistic, started what became a long series of notes and appeals to the belligerents calling for peace and offering mediation. These went nowhere, as Floyd carefully elaborates over the main part of his book. The only transatlantic diplomacy with any effect revolved around the infringement on neutral trade between the belligerents and America.

The first diplomatic conflict was thus an economic matter and challenged American-British relations in earnest: The British Order of Council from 20 August 1914 gave London vast powers to infringe upon neutral trade. The British naval blockade, aimed to withhold food and war material from Germany, led to serious reactions from Washington. The Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law of 1856 demanded that
for a blockade to be effective it had to be backed by a force sufficient enough to prevent access to the coast of the enemy. Yet, due to the vastness of the high seas and ports in neutral nations traders did not respect Britain’s blockade. Cotton from the American South made its way to Germany and American businessmen were fiercely outspoken and used their influence in Washington to exert strong pressure on Wilson. The American president was very aware that he might find himself in a similar position as his predecessor James Madison during the War of 1812, which had started with the seizure of American ships by the British navy. Wilson feared that ‘public opinion could force his hand against Britain’ (p. 35).

The quick reaction of British ambassador Spring-Rice to this crisis underlines and justifies the economic focus of Floyd’s work. In the course of the war, the absolute contraband list was updated ‘to keep certain items that were vital to the German army and to the American economy, including cotton, on the free list’ (p. 37). The American-British ‘cotton crisis’ – cotton was important to manufacture explosives – constitutes a central argument in Floyd’s thesis that economic interests influenced the course of the war. The British strategy to impose an economic blockade on Germany put strains on the American cotton industry and led to very careful diplomatic deliberations on the British side.

The British fear became reality when the ‘cotton crisis’, in combination with ethnic divisions in the United States, seriously affected the mid-term congressional elections of 1914. Embittered businessmen together with the German-American public handed Wilson an electoral defeat, which Wilson believed was a vote against his party and his policies: German-Americans were angry over his ‘benevolent neutrality’ (p. 52) towards Britain and the Southern economic elite and members of the political caste were enraged over the British menace to their material well-being.

Floyd’s masterful depiction of the global and transatlantic trade relations explains the tectonic shifts that occurred in the early war years and constituted the underlying causes of the United States’ entry into the First World War. The author elucidates his narrative using very well chosen sources and secondary literature which allow him to deliver a well-rounded history of the state of the global trade in 1914–15. In late 1914 the bleak economic outlook of the United States began to change. No longer a debtor, it sold to the Allies as well as the Central Powers. Floyd illustrates the global economic history of the war with a telling example: When London decided to restrict copper exports from its colonies to neutrals in order to prevent copper reaching Germany through neutral trade, it caused serious repercussions in the United States. Goodyear Tire and other companies depended on rubber from Southeast Asia. But not only did the United States need rubber for its own production, the American South began smuggling large quantities of copper inside cotton from New Orleans, Mobile and Savannah to Germany and reaped huge profits.

The American trade with both belligerents in the name of neutrality was borne out of Wilson’s wish to offer mediation and Wilson’s sincere attempt to keep the United States out of the war. On the other side of the Atlantic, Europeans from all sides were eager for the continuation of the war: The United Kingdom’s objective of destroying the German navy, the latest rival to British power, did not include negotiation. The French wanted revenge for the war of 1871 and to retake Alsace-Lorraine. Russia pursued its age-old geopolitical aim to secure Bulgaria and the Dardanelles. Blind to these realities, Wilson’s hard work to negotiate peace between the belligerents was futile.

From February to April 1915 the contradiction between Wilson’s sincere attempts at mediation and the protection of the United States’ economic interests were resolved in a manner that gradually influenced American neutrality and the course of the war. Floyd’s narrative stays close to the development of the US-UK economic relationship: Without American economic support the Britain would have been close to dropping out of the war and the German high command correctly and fatefuly deduced that to win the war, it had to reorient its naval strategy accordingly. From February 1915 onwards, Germany announced its decision to attack Allied merchant vessels around Ireland and Great Britain with submarines. The British blockade had led to starvation in Germany and Floyd deserves merit for his balanced portrayal of the belligerents’ cruel military strategies that led to the death of civilians whether in Europe or on the High Seas.

Yet the decision to use submarines challenged Wilson’s morality and the plight of German civilians was
farther from his mind than the death of Americans on Allied merchant vessels. Floyd, who is very secure and strong in legal history compares the naval blockades of the American Civil War and the First World War to answer the issues of neutral trade and continuous voyage. He condenses these complicated issues for his readers using a telling source from Ambassador Spring-Rice. In an informed analysis Spring-Rice predicts that the death of American citizens on a neutral vessel would work in favour of Britain. His words ‘time works for us if we do nothing’ (p. 100) set the course of the following events.

Contrary to other books, which make the sinking of the Lusitania and the Zimmermann-Telegram the core of their explanation of America’s entry into the First World War, Floyd rightfully argues that the economic framework was at the heart of these historical events. The ensuing political crises between Berlin and Washington over the Fabala, Gulfflight and the Lusitania have to be seen in the context of the economically oriented policy decisions made since July 1914. Although under increasing pressure from the American public, who was enraged over the German attacks, this did not immediately lead to a complete abandonment of neutrality. Quoting from Wilson’s personal observations, the president did not want to simply revenge the death of over 1200 people on the Lusitania with a declaration of war, although 128 American citizens were among the deceased.

The behavior of the European belligerents is important to note, because it had a further effect on Wilson’s moral perspective: Britain successfully made small gestures to pacify its relations with Washington, which remained seriously disturbed by London’s ongoing infringement of neutral trade. Germany vice versa did not apologize for its use of submarines even though it stopped the policy until 1917 as for Berlin the core premises of the war remained unchanged: neutral trade kept the Allied powers going and was essential for the German war effort, too. In the end, the Lusitania incident was not the cause for America’s entry in the war, but Floyd convincingly argues that it led to a ‘drift away from neutrality’ (p. 147).

In the summer of 1915 America’s entry in the war on the side of the Allies became a reality while the contest between political and ethnic factions in the United States abated. The forces of political economy were driving the national security agenda. Secretary of State Bryan resigned with the knowledge of never having had any real influence on Wilson. It would be too easy to assume that from that point forward advisers like House would exert more influence on American foreign policy, but Floyd shows that economics remained the driving force for America’s future course in the war. Surprisingly, the war did not diminish American cotton industry profits. In 1915 production went up and American businessmen went on to sell and smuggle to both sides during the war.

The culmination of this growing economic alliance was reached when Britain, nearly bankrupt, asked for American loans to pay for its war effort and informed Washington of its decision to include cotton in its contraband list. To placate the fears of United States industry, Britain made a promise to buy the cotton surplus that would have gone to Germany. In addition projections showed that domestic and other international markets would absorb the cotton production. When Wilson allowed loans to Britain but not to the Central Powers, America became an accomplice to the Allied war effort on the basis that British and American ‘financial interests were tightly bound together’ (p. 170).

Contrary to the Wilson historians might know from Robert Tucker or John Cooper’s works, Floyd portrays him as a conflicted but nuanced leader. (3) His idealistic quest for peace and his pragmatism in seeking to secure the prosperity of the United States look at first to be in conflict, but Floyd recognizes that though Wilson found himself between these poles, it did not interfere with his priority - to secure American interests. Although he tried as long as possible to offer mediation, in the end his affinity to Britain backed by serious trade interests guided his political path.

Floyd, who lays bare the global trade system of the First World War, derives important historical insights from this economic interdependence of American exports and financial loans to Europe. In his State of the Union address on 7 December 1915 Wilson demanded an expansion of the military and navy to secure American prosperity against trade infringement or other acts caused by the global war. The German-American protests faded after the sinking of vessels containing United States citizens and were replaced by
fear of German saboteurs at home.

Floyd’s concise study recognizes economic interests as the core driving force for America’s abandonment of neutrality and entry into the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century. Moreover, based on a strong command of historical context, he shows that Wilson worked for peace as long as economic pragmatism allowed. In the end he protected American interests while still pursuing mediation between the belligerents, but neither side tended towards peace. Many and well researched books have been written about the underlying causes of the war and Christopher Clark has recently delivered a masterful book on that subject. Yet, historians and interested readers alike are well advised to read *Abandoning American Neutrality* to learn from the most recent and insightful study on America’s entry into the First World War.

Notes


Author's reply: ’I truly appreciate the thorough assessment of my work and feel that it provides a good overview of my arguments and the content covered in the book’.

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