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OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Jul., 1961, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Jul., 1961), pp. 293-308

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs

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WOODROW WILSON AND THE IDEA OF THE NATION STATE

RICHARD W. VAN ALSTYNE

AT the beginning of this century the nation state was regarded in the United States, as in Western Europe, as 'the apotheosis of man', the most nearly perfect form which political society could reach. It was the Greek conception of the State, affirming in one form or another the Platonic belief in a virtuous citizenry governed by virtuous rulers. John W. Burgess, the political scientist of the day, who, like scores of other American professors, was a product of the German university, employed the language of Hegel and endowed the State with supernatural powers. At the other end of the intellectual ladder, William Jennings Bryan, the perennial candidate of the Democratic Party for the Presidency, framed his creed in the language of evangelical Christianity. 'Behold a republic,' he declaimed, 'increasing in wealth, in strength and in influence, solving the problems of civilization, and hastening the coming of an universal brotherhood . . . a republic gradually but surely becoming the supreme moral factor in the world's progress and the accepted arbiter of the world's disputes—a republic whose history "is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day".'[1] William Allen White, the revered editor of Kansas and friend of Theodore Roosevelt, affirmed his faith in 'the essential nobility of man and the wisdom of God', in democracy as 'a positive moral force, a good in itself'; and insisted that 'the way to have a golden age is to elect it by an Australian ballot'. Suiting the action to the word, many Western States wrote into their constitutions provisions for the initiative, referendum, and recall, which they borrowed from Switzerland and which, being the 'voice of the people', were confidently relied upon to bring about the millennium in government.

When we turn to Herbert Croly, the intellectual leader of the American Progressive movement, we discover doubts of the capacity of the masses and a reluctance to accept the principle of majority rule. The common citizen, Croly observed in his book *The Promise of American Life*, could at best only imitate the saints and heroes; he could not rise to their level; he must depend upon the ability of his exceptional fellow citizens to offer him examples of heroism and saintliness. 'Faith in the people,' Croly declared, 'and confidence in popular government means . . . an utter lack of faith in those personal instruments, whereby such rule can be endowed with foresight, moderation, and direction. Confidence in the average man, that is, means . . . distrust in the exceptional man, or in any sort of organization which bestows on the exceptional man an opportunity equal to his ability and equipment. He stands for the sacrifice of the individual to the popular average; and the perpetuation of such a sacrifice would mean ultimate democratic degeneration.'[1] Thus the ideal commonwealth could, and would, be achieved through the leadership of exceptional men. The virtue of democracy lay in its willingness to recognize and follow its exceptional leaders.

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[1] Quoted in Merle E. Curti, *Bryan and World Peace*, Smith College Studies in History, xvi (1931), p. 135.

Attracted by these ideas, Willard Straight and his wife, Dorothy Whitney, who were devotees of the gospel of wealth—the doctrine that it was the sacred duty of the rich to use their wealth for the public good—founded the *New Republic* magazine and put Herbert Croly in charge. The title of this periodical defined its object: the *new* republic to which the editors and their contributors would point the way—a co-operative commonwealth to be brought about through conscious planning and direction. The function of the *New Republic,* declared the editors, was to illuminate the weak spots in the body politic, to show what should be done, and then to expect confidently that their programme would be carried out.[2] The editors realized, to be sure, that they were dealing with the Great Society—the large modern state resting on industry, of which Graham Wallas was to write hopefully. And while Wallas, a Fabian Socialist, is not very definite—he offers no prescription for the cure of 'the social question'—he seems to be saying, with Aristotle (as I re-read him after nearly forty years), that the happiness of the community is in the hands of the gifted, and that what he calls the 'Will-Organization' of the Great Society depends upon the leadership of the exceptional. 'Democratic Government,' he writes, 'is sure to degenerate if we drift into a position in which the only, or the most effective, means by which the servants of the State can get their special ideas, or their special prospects, attended to is by canvassing indifferent electors . . .'[3]

Belonging to this same school of cautious utopians was Norman Angell, to whom the *New Republic* opened its pages. Written with full knowledge of the existing arms race and of the dangerous Anglo-German trade rivalry, Angell's *The Great Illusion* is an impressive argument that war is no longer profitable—politically, socially, or economically. And while Angell does not say categorically that war cannot happen, he none the less creates the impression that it will not because man is too reasonable a creature to allow it to happen. It is a curious sensation that this book, first published in 1909, makes upon a reader who is only one generation behind Sir Norman. And I remember that, when I was first asked to read this book—I think it may have been in 1926—it was with the intent of 'proving' that a second World War could not happen. Re-reading this book in 1960, I am impressed by its author's lucidity, by his forceful and accurate use of historical facts and of sound economic principles to buttress his thesis. It all seems so logical, and so convincing—except that there have been two world wars since the book was written and that a third has been for fifteen years now lurking 'in the wings'. What, for instance, is a reader in 1960 to make of Angell's chapter on human nature written to 'prove' that human nature has changed steadily for the better? There is not a single statement of historical fact in this chapter that I, as a historian, could seriously challenge. But could we agree, with the author, that 'man's pugnacity though not disappearing, is very visibly, under the forces of mechanical and social development, being transformed and diverted from ends that are wasteful and destructive to ends that are less wasteful, which render easier that co-operation between men in the struggle with their environment which is the condition of their survival and advance. . . .'?[1]

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[1] *The Promise* (New York, Macmillan, 1912), p. 160. (First edition 1909.)

[2] Cf. David W. Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis, Minn., University of Minnesota Press, 1958), ch. 2.

[3] *The Great Society* (New York, Macmillan, 1923), p. 314. The first edition appeared in 1914.

Now, when we come to Woodrow Wilson, we immediately encounter a more elusive mentality. In 1889 Wilson published a book on *The State* which shows at once the influence of the historical school led by Sir Henry Maine. 'The probable origin of Government,' Wilson begins, 'is a question of fact, to be settled, not by conjecture, but by history.' Rationalist theories of government originating in a social compact are, like religious theories, rejected in favour of a view of society as an organism which changes only through an evolutionary process. The State began with the family, says Wilson. 'The efficient races who have dominated the European stage came into their place of leadership and advantage under the discipline of the patriarchal order of family life.' The father was chief and master, 'and the family showed that clear authority and close organization which was to serve in fulness of time as the prototype and model for the State'. This deference to authority, Wilson believes, is inherent in the race. The basis of the modern State, therefore, is not consent but authority—a power, however, which is controlled by custom. 'The real force in ancient and in modern society is custom, the common will, habit.'[2] The ruler is absolute, but his absolutism is 'bound by the prescriptions of custom'. This conservative, non-utopian conception of the social order is reinforced by an approving reference to Aristotle's classification: monarchy, aristocracy, polity, and their degenerate opposites. And since Wilson affirms that the history of Western Europe verifies the Aristotelian theory of inevitable political deterioration (from monarchy to tyranny, from aristocracy to oligarchy, from polity to democracy and anarchy), he identifies himself with the cyclical school of thought. The Aristotelian cast of Wilson's mind, in combination with his emphasis upon the force of slowly changing custom, sets him apart from his Platonist contemporaries, the Progressives.

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[1] *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (New York, Putnam, 1913), pp. 198–9. This was the fourth American edition.

[2] *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (Boston, Heath, rev. ed., 1911), p. 5.

Wilson, however, is on common ground with the Progressives to a much greater extent than might at first be supposed. He is wholeheartedly in accord with the Progressive emphasis upon the exceptional man. 'The best minds', he agrees, would save democracy. A civil service, he held, was required—a service 'cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought . . . as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question.' Here he forms an equation between morality and the duty of government to protect the freedom of the individual citizen. This is what government is really for, he says, but to perform its function it must be strong. It is the supremely disinterested party, but it must be independent, free of the baleful influence of rival interests. This is of the very essence of the Progressives' creed. The regulative tradition of the Presbyterian Church is present here, of course, too—the separation of the church elders from the congregation, and the authority vested in them; but Wilson, as a convinced Calvinist, could hardly join the Progressives in their imaginary march towards Utopia. No more than they, however, was he well disposed towards the great trusts and combines of the day. Bankers and speculators were linked together in his mind, and were objects of distrust. The latter were predators, and the former could be guilty too because of their association. But labour unions were no better: they encouraged laziness and lack of initiative. In 1909 Wilson declared himself 'a fierce partizan of the Open Shop and of everything that makes for individual liberty'.[1]

Against socialism he reacted instinctively: it meant mediocrity. Indeed, the very mention of certain terms—of which the word 'socialist' is a good example—aroused Wilson's antagonism. Emotional reflex to certain word symbols—a universal human characteristic—forms an important part of Wilson's make-up. The subjective side of his personality was constantly at war with the intellectual (as it is in all of us), and it could overwhelm his thought processes. Wilson possessed an ardent and combative temperament and, a man who schooled himself in the use of words and phrases, he could respond almost belligerently to terms that his subconscious had already repelled. The point is important, I think, because of the extraordinary weight he placed upon certain phrases that he was to develop later to symbolize the ideological and institutional conflict between America and Europe, between the 'New Diplomacy' and the 'Old Diplomacy'.

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[1] William Diamond, *The Economic Thought of Woodrow Wilson,* Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, lxi (1943), pp. 70–1.

Finally, Wilson, like the Progressives, pinned his hopes on the Presidency. He as well as Herbert Croly was fired by the success of Theodore Roosevelt in freeing that office from its long subservience to the legislative branch. In an earlier work, *Congressional Government*, Wilson had roundly denounced that body. Congress was 'nothing less than a big meeting of more or less idle people . . . a despot who has unlimited time, . . . unlimited vanity . . .' It was made up of selfish and warring elements, bent on making a servant out of the President. And Wilson showed scant respect for the *form* of government, which under the Constitution had degenerated into 'simply a scheme of congressional supremacy'. At a time when nationalism was beginning to exhibit ugly characteristics Wilson showed his courage and independence by open denunciation of Constitution-worship. 'The divine right of kings,' he asserted, 'never ran a more prosperous course than did this unquestioned prerogative of the Constitution to receive universal homage. The conviction that our institutions were the best in the world, nay more, the model to which all civilized states must sooner or later conform, could not be laughed out of us by foreign critics, nor shaken out of us by the roughest jars of the system.'[1]

But in 1908, with the example of Theodore Roosevelt behind him, Wilson writes in an optimistic vein. Reiterating his previous position that government is organic not stationary, Darwinian not Newtonian, he looks to the President as leader and guide of the nation. And he has a Tory view of the office and of the powers that the President should exercise. For the Constitution he seems to have little regard. Its makers, he said, intended the President 'to be a reformed and standardized king, after the Whig model; and Congress was meant to be a reformed and properly regulated parliament . . .'. But the Presidency is a personal office: it 'has been one thing at one time, another at another, varying with the man who occupied the office and with the circumstances that surrounded him'. It is therefore perfectly possible for the President, through his prerogative power, to reform and develop the whole structure of American federal government. 'It is extraordinary the influence the early Whig theory of political dynamics has had amongst us,' he concludes, 'and the far-reaching consequences which have ensued from it. It is far from being a democratic theory . . . All the peculiarities of party government in the United States are due to the too literal application of Whig doctrine, to the infinite multiplication of elective offices.'[2]

Now it becomes apparent that Wilson is by temperament and training an absolutist, that he is highly personal in his approach to the problem of authority all the way from the *paterfamilias* to the head of a great State, and that custom rather than a written constitution prescribes the limits and sets the pace for the application of authority. When he used the word 'democracy' approvingly, which he seldom did in his earlier writings, he did not equate it with Rousseau's General Will or with the notion of 'the sovereign people'. He defined it in his book on *The State* as 'self-controlled conduct'. Its 'only stable foundation is character. . . . Both institutions and character must be developed by conscious effort and through transmitted aptitudes.' And this concept of law and custom he sees equally applicable to international relations. He accepts the Grotian view of international law as 'unenacted principles of right action, of justice', a body of rules 'which *ought* to govern nations' (italics inserted). A sovereign nation is like a moral person.

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[1] *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (15th ed., Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1925), pp. 4–5.

[2] *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York, Lemcke, 1908), pp. 54, 57, 203.

But now we come not merely to a paradox, but to a series of inconsistencies in Wilson's thinking that seem inexplicable. It is common to find among writers on political theory, and of course even more among practising statesmen, a distinction, expressed or implied, between private morality and State morality. The *raison d'état* is historically acceptable as moral justification for the conduct of any State; a double standard of morals was the rule, one for the sovereign, the other for the citizens. To this school of thought Wilson ostensibly did not belong, either as a young scholar in the last two decades of the nineteenth century or subsequently as President of the United States. Indeed, his name stands as a symbol for the new and better world which is supposed to have come into being in 1918. Did he not say to the Congress in April 1917: 'We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states'?

With this sentiment before us, we might expect from Wilson a highly critical attitude on some of the burning issues with which he was familiar during the thirty or so years before he became President. One might expect from him a quickness to single out, and a readiness to condemn, any act of State that seemed arbitrary or Machiavellian. No such attitude, however, appears in his writings. On the contrary, we find a disposition to excuse, or rather to praise, acts of contemporary statesmen which Wilson himself recognized were designed to advance the selfish interests and ambitions of their respective nations. Statecraft such as Bismarck's drew his open admiration. Of the Iron Chancellor he wrote in 1880 that, although Bismarck had broken faith and disregarded justice, 'we can at least understand an occasional breach of honor, and, in the presence of so many . . . peerless qualities and . . . noble purposes, can perhaps forgive a want of integrity which so seldom exhibits itself'.[1] Thus morality, but morality tempered by the demands of the State. Wilson's enthusiasm for Bismarck, I venture to say, was widely shared by his generation in America. Germany was demonstrating what an efficient modern State could be.

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[1] Harley Notter, *The Origins of the Foreign Policy of Woodrow Wilson* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1937), p. 16.

During the next decade we find Wilson running with the current of American jingoism. He rejoiced in what he described as the 'diplomatic triumph' of President Cleveland, the strong man, over Great Britain in 1895; and he endorsed Secretary of State Olney's militant application of the Monroe doctrine. 'Today', said Olney, 'the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition.' Thus Olney stripped the Monroe doctrine of all its previous ambiguities and attempted, by a stroke of the pen, to bring all Latin America inside the United States sphere of influence. This doctrine, noted Wilson approvingly, gave the United States 'the right of intervention in all questions between South American states and European powers'.

By this time another Cuban revolution was in full swing, bringing with it the makings of a crisis between the United States and Spain. Occasionally one still hears in America the sentimental argument that the ensuing war in 1898 was a humanitarian crusade precipitated by righteous indignation over the sufferings inflicted upon the Cubans by their cruel masters, the Spaniards; and it is true that ink was spilled on this theme by the American press, and that the Spanish side of the story was completely ignored. In general, Wilson accepted this version uncritically and without insight into the aggressive forces within the United States which produced a popular demand for war. But his interpretation of the results of the war is highly interesting because it shows him full of the pride of empire. When the Philippines were taken, we recall, the question of their retention aroused controversy. A protest group calling itself the Anti-Imperialists publicly agitated against annexing the islands. The philosopher William James and the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie were prominent among others in this fight. Presently the Filipinos rebelled against their new American masters and proclaimed their right to independence. The rebellion was suppressed, but it raised fresh doubts of the wisdom and righteousness of the conquest.

Far from supporting the Anti-Imperialists, however, Wilson viewed the conquest as the gift of Providence. The war, he asserted, had awakened us 'to our real relationship to the rest of mankind'. We had tasks to perform in the Philippines and in Puerto Rico. The Orient was to be opened and transformed, Western standards imposed through commerce and religion. This is 'the market for which statesmen as well as merchants must plan and play their game of competition, the market to which diplomacy, and if need be power, must make an open way. The United States could not easily have dispensed with that foothold in the East which the possession of the Philippines so unexpectedly afforded them.' And Wilson continued to train his mind upon the national mission and upon the means by which it might be realized. 'The spaces of their own continent', i.e. North America, he wrote in his *History*, 'were occupied and reduced to the uses of civilization; they had no frontiers wherewith to "satisfy the feet of the young men": these new frontiers in the Indies and in the Far Pacific came to them as if out of the very necessity of the new career set before them. It was significant how uncritically the people accepted the unlooked for consequences of the war, with what naïve enthusiasm they hailed the conquests of their fleets and armies.'[1]

The possibility of clashes with other Powers does not seem to have deterred Wilson as he moved on to ever loftier heights of ambition. America, he insisted, was 'born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scriptures'. She must prepare herself for the many sharp struggles for foreign trade that lay ahead. And, 'since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused. Peace itself becomes a matter of conference and international combinations.'[2]

And so, in 1912, when the Panama Canal was at last completed, Wilson welcomed it as a means for releasing American energies for 'the commercial conquest of the world'. In that year Congress, ignoring the plain language of the Hay–Pauncefote Treaty,[3] passed a law exempting American vessels from paying tolls. The measure was popular; it drew the support of the leaders of both parties and, 1912 being an election year, it forced its way into the presidential campaign. President Taft justified the measure on the basis of a legal quibble; Wilson and Bryan, the Democratic candidates, endorsed it unquestioningly. But after they were in office, Wilson the President and Bryan the Secretary of State reversed their opinion. In 1914 Wilson, by holding the familiar club of the patronage power over the heads of congressmen, coerced the legislative branch into repealing the Act. It would take more space than I have here at my disposal to explain his change of mind; and if I attempted it, the explanation would be neither complete nor satisfactory. Wilson's first position, in favour of the discriminatory tolls, was automatic: it was consistent with his declared ambition for 'the commercial conquest of the world'. It was also in accord with his plan for a subsidized government merchant marine. Elihu Root, the conservative Republican former Secretary of State, regarded the Tolls Act as a dishonourable measure and pressed his views upon the President. But whether it was this moral imputation, or whether practical considerations bearing on the current crisis in Mexican affairs were the determinant, is something which no historian has yet been able to ascertain satisfactorily.[1]

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[1] *History of the American People*, 5 vols. (New York and London, Harper, 1912 ed.), Vol. v, pp. 255, 274–5, 294–6.

[2] Quoted by Diamond, *op. cit.*, p. 141, from an unpublished essay written by Wilson in 1907.

[3] Sen. Ex. Doc. (6582), 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, No. 474, pp. 292–4.

The point which I wish to stress here concerns the reception of a British offer to arbitrate the question. President Taft had been an ardent advocate of international arbitration. The Hague treaties, we recall, had made an exception of questions of 'national interest' and 'national honour'; but in 1910 Taft declared himself in favour of arbitrating all international disputes. Oblivious to his own inconsistency, he then proceeded to reject the British offer. His Majesty's Government then renewed the proposal to the Wilson Administration and received a similar rebuff. Bryan had surpassed Taft in his enthusiasm for the cause of arbitration: during the preceding decade he had been a perennial frequenter of peace congresses; and no sooner did he become Secretary of State in 1913 than he busied himself with the negotiation of some thirty arbitration treaties which made no exception of questions of 'national interest' or 'honour'. As for Mr Wilson, he had never shown any interest in the organized peace movement, nor had he devoted any thought to the problems of international arbitration. He allowed Bryan complete freedom to indulge himself in his peace treaties. But when they were confronted with the question of arbitrating the tolls dispute, both Wilson and the Secretary evaded the issue, the President choosing the alternative which I have already mentioned.

The tolls dispute aroused passions in the United States. It was another incident in the long tragi-comic record of 'twisting the lion's tail' in American domestic politics. Arbitration was probably impossible. Wilson's preference for repeal of the statute was probably the only practicable course, but, had he been in a position to exercise a free choice, it seems unlikely that he would have submitted to arbitration. He had a stiffly absolute conception of national honour, as unbending as his own personal character. He was a man of insatiable ambition. The lessons of the war with Spain taught him to look upon the United States as the world's greatest Power. Soon he was to see and proclaim America as the moral arbiter of the universe, the 'only disinterested nation' which alone could demonstrate 'unselfish leadership'. Such a nation, of course, could do naught but be right. It partook of the Divine. Its voice was the Judgment itself.

The reception given to the British request illustrates the basic fallacies in the movement for international arbitration: its naïve faith that the nations were about to submit to the reign of law; its under-estimate of the power of passion and national bigotry; above all, the illusion that so righteous a nation as the United States could stand in need of arbitration when its honour was affected. Theodore Roosevelt, it is time now to say, advocated that the tolls question be arbitrated—he wrote expressly to Sir Edward Grey to say so. Moreover, he declared himself in favour of unqualified arbitration with Britain, but drew the line in the case of other Powers. With fine scorn Roosevelt satirized the attitude of Taft and Bryan.

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[1] Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910–1917* (New York, Harper, 1954), pp. 90–3. But this episode will stand further investigation.

> The man who fights for the universal arbitration treaties of the kind that the Administration sought to pass two years ago [he wrote to a friend in February 1913] . . . is like the man who, however personally honest, fights for prohibition in New York City. Those treaties were nothing whatever but promises. They did not contain one ounce of performance. They were promises which in my judgement it would have been imperatively necessary to break, and which in any event would certainly have been broken, the instant there was any question of keeping them. . . . The action of the (Taft) Administration has borne out literally what I say. This action has exposed us to international derision. Nothing is more demoralizing than to break promises. Two years ago Taft was proposing to arbitrate everything. . . . Then comes the question of the canal tolls, as to which we have made a specific promise. He goes back on the promise. . . . He was anxious to make a foolish promise two years ago. He now declines to keep a specific promise which we have actually made, and he furthermore has the effrontery to propose that instead of keeping that promise England and ourselves shall agree to make a new, and I may add exceedingly foolish, promise and then see whether or not we would keep that! . . .[1]

And commenting on Wilson and Bryan, Roosevelt wrote derisively to his friend Arthur Lee on 4 September 1914: '. . . They have passed a procession of idiotic universal arbitration treaties with Paraguay and similar world Powers, and all the apostles of the utterly inane scream joyfully that this shows that the United States does not need any battleships and that if Europe had only had these treaties there never would have been any war! . . .'[2] Bryan, I may add, regarded his treaties as the greatest contribution of his life.

Using the Monroe doctrine, Robert Lansing, the Counsellor for the Department of State, created for the benefit of Wilson and Bryan a frame of reference for the exercise of a benevolent despotism over the affairs of Latin America. In June 1914 Lansing composed a memorandum on the 'Present Nature and Extent of the Monroe Doctrine, and its Need for Restatement'; and he followed this memorandum with another in November 1915, repeating the arguments of the previous one and adding others which related directly to the countries of the Caribbean. By this time Lansing had himself become Secretary of State. 'Should not a new doctrine be formulated,' he queried, 'declaring that the United States is opposed to the extension of European control over American territory and institutions through financial as well as other means, and having for its object, not only the national safety and interests of this country, *but also the establishment and maintenance of republican constitutional government in all American states*, the free exercise by their people of their public and private rights, the administration of impartial justice, and the prevention of political authority from becoming the tool of personal ambition and greed. . . .?'[1]

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[1] Unpublished letter, photostated in Harvard University Library.

[2] Elting E. Morison, *et al.* eds., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1951–54), Vol. VIII, pp. 817–18.

Both Wilson and Bryan found these ideas entirely to their taste, having already in fact set them in motion in Mexico. During the years 1913–17 Wilson made persistent efforts to control the forces of revolution in that country and to lay down rigid rules of conduct for the Mexican politicians to follow. 'We intend to teach the Mexicans to elect good men,' he told the British Ambassador. American warships hovered off the Mexican coast during 1913–14; the port of Vera Cruz was captured on a pretext as flimsy as that which induced the Germans to seize the port of Kiao-Chow in China in 1897; and in 1916 a punitive expedition entered Mexico from the north and stayed long enough to be regarded as an army of occupation. The imminence of war with Germany forced its withdrawal in 1917. The Mexicans then proceeded with their new Constitution providing for the expropriation of foreign property rights, something which the Wilson Government had tried in vain to prevent. Now there was nothing it could do. 'Although it may be impossible,' Lansing commented, 'to accept those provisions of the new constitution which are in contravention of the international obligations of Mexico, it is desired for reasons of high policy not to force an issue on these questions. They will be met when they arise.'[2]

To draw comparisons between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson is to lead inevitably to irony: the gap between the myth and the reality is so wide. The historical symbol of Roosevelt is his famous 'Big Stick', which he is alleged to have laid vigorously about him. Actually the record of Roosevelt's actions in the Caribbean is one of caution, discretion, even reluctance. The symbol of Wilson is the god-like man of peace who hates war and loves justice. The phrase 'Wilson's ideals' is a tiresome historical stereotype which still clutters the pages of the history books. 'Interest does not tie nations together,' he told the public in a speech which is still often quoted. 'Sympathy and understanding . . . unite them. . . . It is a very perilous thing to determine the foreign policy of a nation in the terms of material interest. . . .'[3]

Wilson did not carry a stick; he carried a club. His record in the Caribbean is readily available. He strengthened the stranglehold his predecessor, President Taft, had already obtained over Nicaragua. A puppet

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[1] *The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, 2 vols., Dept. of State Publication 1421 (Washington, D.C., 1940), Vol. II, p. 464. Italics mine.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 567. For a narrative of Wilson's interventions in Mexico see Howard F. Cline, *The United States and Mexico* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 139–88.

[3] Sen. Doc. (6593), 63rd Congress, 2nd session, No. 440, pp. 5–8.

Government, protected by American Marines, was kept in power in that country. Its principal opponent was deported. Haiti and the Dominican Republic were anarchic and their finances hopelessly chaotic. The Marines assumed control of the former in July 1915 and set up an obedient native government. In the Dominican Republic occupation took place in July 1916, followed shortly by the creation of an American Military Government which took orders from the War Department in Washington. The Military Government preserved the fiction of the sovereignty of the Republic, and the Department of State carried on diplomatic relations with it. In this same year 1916 a fraudulent presidential election occurred in Cuba; but on this occasion the American Government took time by the forelock by occupying the island before an insurrection could break out. On the ground that he was the 'constitutional' President, it kept in power the man whose party had practised the fraud. Meanwhile, acting on a suspicion that Denmark or her islands in the West Indies might fall victim to Germany, the Wilson Government moved aggressively to purchase the Virgin Islands, warning the Danish Government that otherwise it might be necessary to take them. The transfer was consummated at the end of March 1917, just as Wilson was preparing for a declaration of war on Germany.[1] It is fair to add that the monetary compensation subsequently paid to Denmark was exceedingly generous. The new satellite status of the Caribbean and Central American republics was soon demonstrated when all of them, with the exception of El Salvador and of course Mexico, still a thorn in American flesh, joined in the war against Germany.

All this shows that the United States, like other imperial States, is the creature of certain blind forces. Under Wilson the century-old tendency to make an American lake out of the Caribbean reached its climax. Wilson and Bryan might talk the language of idealism, but when the chips were down they did not hesitate to use the tools and devices of superior force. Mexico was too much for them, and the Germans in 1917 attempted without success to capitalize Mexican hostility by the offer of an alliance. Mixed motives lay behind the American forward thrust. The sheer will to power was, I think, foremost among them. And President Wilson embodies this national will. The ultimate goal, we remember, was the extension of a benevolent empire over *all* of Latin America, but for understandable reasons the movement spent itself in the Caribbean.

This brings me to my next consideration: the relationship between the American advance into the Caribbean and the war in Europe. The ghost of Germany was ever present in the minds of Washington officialdom. The papers of Robert Lansing are an open book in their repeated expressions of jealousy and fear lest Germany gain a foothold in the Caribbean;

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[1] See the *Lansing Papers*, Vol. II, pp. 801–11, for documents relating to the acquisition of the Virgin Islands.

and Wilson himself talked frequently in private about what he called this threat to America's 'regnant position' in the western hemisphere. German agents were suspected of subversive activity in Colombia and Mexico, in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The extraordinary thing about this is the complete lack of tangible evidence. Not one shred of proof is to be found in the American documents. Not even in the case of Denmark and the Virgin Islands is there any reason to justify suspicion of German intentions. Herr Zimmermann's false step at the end of February 1917 in proposing an alliance to Mexico—a proposal which could not have carried conviction—is the first known move attempted by the Kaiser's Government. Actually this move was so extravagant that Wilson and Lansing treated it with contempt.

But the fear of Germany was constantly in their minds. It shows a high degree of national morbidity, but it is of immense importance in throwing light on the psychology of the American approach to war with Germany. Germany was supposed to be plotting against America's 'regnant position' in the western hemisphere. 'A triumph for German imperialism must not be,' wrote Mr Lansing in July 1915, shortly after the disaster to the *Lusitania*; and the secretary's rationale behind this assertion is that otherwise Germany would threaten liberty everywhere and would move in upon the United States in the western hemisphere. Automatic response is a characteristic of United States foreign policy, as it is that of other great Powers. The United States was a self-conscious member of the constellation of great Powers; it had a sphere of influence to defend; and under Wilson, as under other administrations, it responded instinctively to threats, and to fears of threats, to its security. Hence it moved against Germany in 1914–17, even as it moved to tighten its grip on the Caribbean.

Let us not suppose that security against an imaginary foe in the western hemisphere constitutes the sum total of causes for American entry into the first World War. It is, however, a cause of very great significance which few, if any, historians seem willing to recognize even forty years after the event. With more than a half century gone by, one has a right to expect of historians a better perspective regarding the first World War than they have shown. The participation of the United States in that war meant a revolution in American foreign policy, and therefore a revolution in the relationships of the other great Powers one to another. But when we turn our attention to President Wilson, we should expect to be baffled. We are struck first of all by his amateurishness, by the vagueness and incoherence of his ideas, and by his lack of contact with European or world affairs. He is in every respect the antithesis of Theodore Roosevelt. Wilson was virtually uneducated in European history and international politics, and he shared the anti-Europe prejudices common to the vast majority of his generation. Furthermore, he reacted automatically against such concepts as the 'balance of power'; he had no comprehension of them, and he took no more interest in the practical side of world affairs than he took in the cause of international arbitration. He was, during the pre-war years, ignorant of the growing tensions abroad; and the outbreak of the war took him completely by surprise.

In 1915 Norman Angell published a book which he called *America and the New World State*. America, he argued, should set out to make herself 'the Capitol of the world'. The war had placed her in a better position than that of any European Power. Although Angell roundly denounced the 'balance of power' (as Cobden had done many years before him) and all such 'unworthy' motives that had animated British diplomacy in the past, he was really resorting only to a different vocabulary and constructing a different frame of reference in order to persuade the United States to take up this historic function. The peace terms would probably be settled in Washington, he declared. Something like a torrent of literature expanding upon this theme and composed by journalists and men of letters both at home and abroad descended upon the reading portion of the American public during the war years. None were more expressive and indefatigable than were the well-known British liberals and socialists of the day—H. G. Wells, H. N. Brailsford, Gilbert Murray, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, and so on. The *New Republic*, founded on the theme of improving mankind, welcomed to its pages idealists such as these who could depict the international utopia that was to follow 'the war to end wars'. Even the conservative Senator Henry Cabot Lodge caught the spirit and let himself go in one of his numerous letters to his friend, Sir George Otto Trevelyan. Catch-words and phrases such as 'open diplomacy', 'community of power', 'opinion of mankind', disarmament, free trade, self-determination became current, while their opposites—secret diplomacy, power politics, balance of power, arms race, trade wars, colonial rivalries, annexations—became convenient verbal explanations for all the wars that had gone before.

It is not surprising that the American national ego was flattered by such arguments, that it was ready to believe what it had always believed—that the rest of the world was about to copy the American form of government, and that democracies thus developed on the American pattern would 'save the world'. Nor is it surprising that President Wilson, considering his extraordinary egoism, accepted his role as the Messiah of the New Order. The Russian Bolsheviki forced the pace: they published the texts of the Inter-Allied secret treaties in November 1917, and thereby set in train the movement for a violent counter-revolution, a bitter disillusionment among Western liberals; and they announced their 'firm intentions to conduct all negotiations absolutely openly before the entire people'. Wilson's speech containing the famous Fourteen Points was his response to this challenge, urged upon him by British as well as by American liberals. The Fourteen Points succeeded in doing their work too well. Liberals and Christians accepted them as gospel, so that any disagreement or disposition to disregard them was instantly looked upon as unworthy and as a breach of faith. Unfortunately, historical writing still relies on the 'Fourteen Points' as the basis for judging the work of the Paris Peace Conference.

Phrases like 'New Diplomacy' versus 'Old Diplomacy' now became current, the former symbolic of the U.S.A., the latter symbolic of Europe. Wilson, even before he left Washington, was pitted against Clemenceau, the embodiment of the Old World; Germany, where the revolution that Wilson desired had broken out, was for the time being forgotten. Lloyd George has satirized this new antagonism in his humorous way. The French Premier, he writes, followed Wilson's movements 'like an old watchdog keeping an eye on a strange and unwelcome dog who has visited the farmyard and of whose intentions he is more than doubtful'.[1] Thus at Paris it was not so much the Allies vis-à-vis Germany as it was the Allies vis-à-vis the United States. Wilson, we remember, had always insisted that Britain and France were only associates. The ancient formula of American isolationism was back again with a new Leader to denounce Europe for its 'evil' ways. 'This was the first conference,' Wilson told the assembled American delegates on shipboard, 'in which decisions depended upon the opinion of mankind, not upon the previous determinations and diplomatic schemes of the assembled representatives.'

It is a remarkable fact—one, I think, of tremendous historical significance—that the concept of the 'New Diplomacy' emerged simultaneously from Washington and Petrograd. Although only dimly realized at that time, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. were already rivals in 1918. Wilson and Lenin are the prophets of the new international order.[2] Each in his own way, but in fulfilment of the peculiar mission of his respective nation, struck a mortal blow at the classical system of nation States. Lenin conspired to extirpate the nation State and erect a wholly new type of society resting on the Communist revolution. Wilson was a Christian crusader, the author of a creed for a vague new international order wherein America would interpret the rules and the other nations merely signify their assent. He revealed as much when he declared his intention of applying the principles of the Monroe Doctrine to the whole world. Europe, he assumed, would henceforth subordinate herself to the United States; and the world at large, including Russia, would fall under American influence. It was a new dream of universal empire, allegedly confined to the exercise of moral influence but backed up by the new position of dominance attained by the

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[1] *Memoirs of the Paris Peace Conference*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1939), Vol. 1, p. 140.

[2] Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1959), passim.

United States as a result of the war. Wilson is the prototype of the medieval Papacy as it grew conscious of its power. He was an absolutist, holding to the most rigid rules of sovereignty when applied to himself and the United States. Or, to re-phrase the point in terms of a paradox, he was the nationalist leader bent on destroying the independence of the nation States.

The benevolent despotism of which Wilson dreamed does not exist. But neither does the State system of the nineteenth century. Many, perhaps most, of the established rules of international law and diplomacy have been whittled away. The nineteenth century ideal of the rule of international law seems remote in this age of war, revolution, and spreading chaos. The first World War brought to an end one epoch in history—the epoch of the liberal nation State born of the American and French revolutions. We are still only a few steps into the new epoch of the twentieth century.

Address at Chatham House,
24 January 1961

ERRATUM

In Sir Charles Webster's article, 'Munich Reconsidered' (*International Affairs*, April 1961), p. 151, line 20 from bottom should read 'In the year before the war 16–17 per cent' [*not* 35 per cent] 'of German production was devoted to armaments'.