

## Woodrow Wilson: The Folly in Europe and the Future of Foreign Policy

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Dr. Eastby's presentation on Woodrow Wilson's life, career, and actions during World War I addressed topics that would seem to fit seamlessly together but in fact are hard to correlate in anything short of a full biography. The best question to address at short hand is Woodrow Wilson's impact on modern foreign relations, detailing the relevance of his impact and whether it is positive or negative. This piece intends to broadly examine Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy and to determine how applicable it is, as well as how much it has been applied, to current international politics and America's foreign relations.

The defining trait of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy is that it still exists; that is, Wilson brought the United States out of its isolationist tendency, which had been set forth as early as George Washington's farewell address to the nation. Living in today's global and completely interdependent world, we can easily appreciate this decision as one of great foresight. Wilson saw that the United States could not remain isolated for long and also that the nation was finally powerful enough to have a significant impact on the world. Coming quickly from isolation to turning the tide of World War I and then being at the center of the peace negotiations was a gigantic first step out into the world for the United States, and Wilson masterminded it.

Unfortunately, the hallmark of this entry into global politics was that it ended in failure. Wilson was able to convince Europe of the validity of his peace terms and of the need for the League of Nations but was not able to convince his own country. America's failure to sign the Treaty of Versailles was a huge blow to its validity, and America's refusal to join the League of Nations was ultimately a large part of the League's undoing. The collapse of this multi-nation endeavor due to the absence of American participation mirrors the current dependence of the

international community on America's military and resources, suggesting that early in the twentieth century, the United States of America was already growing into its role as a "superpower," something Wilson undoubtedly recognized as he desperately peddled the idea of the League of Nations to the American people.

An interesting point about Wilson and his treaty is that although he called for a "victorless peace," one of the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles was that the Germans claim full responsibility for having started World War I (Eastby). Wilson's self-contradiction and the fact that this stigma later contributed to the mentality that sent Germany on the warpath to World War II suggest that Wilson either had not fully formed his vision or could never master its implementation. Of these two possible interpretations, the latter is the more probable, as failures to convince others of the worth of his ideas seemed to mark Wilson's endeavors during this phase of his political career. It is easy to imagine that Europe's demand for a scapegoat for the war that had torn it apart could overwhelm Wilson's highly idealized vision of a perfect peace. Even if the League of Nations had endured, it was a proto-United Nations that was even more susceptible to the problems that now plague the United Nations Organization.

This problem with translating an idea to a practical application is the stereotypical dilemma of those who are considered "academics" in any field with practical application, and Wilson is certainly the most academic of all the American presidents. He is beloved by many political scientists because he is the only person ever to emerge from this field of study to take on the highest position in American politics. Wilson is certainly not at fault in this regard as in his speech, Dr. Eastby lauded many of Wilson's academic achievements, including his term as president of Princeton University, during which he revolutionized American college education by promoting the widespread acceptance of many practices that are now cornerstones of current

curricula (Eastby). Furthermore, Wilson enacted many positive domestic measures, such as anti-corruption, anti-trust, child labor, and workday limit laws. However, none of these laws or their outcomes are really hard sells to the average American. Nobody likes giant greedy corporations, corrupt politicians, children working themselves to death, or excessive workdays. Although in an ideal world the best ideas would always win out, our world is not ideal, and it must be acknowledged that greatness as a political leader comes as much from one's ability to push ideas on others as the actual greatness of the ideas themselves. In this regard, Woodrow Wilson was a successful leader.

Despite all their failures to come to fruition, Woodrow Wilson's ideas on foreign policy were significant in a number of ways. First, Wilson warned against the "balance of power" approach to international relations, which had already caused the conditions that brought about World War I (Eastby). This "balance of power" very much characterizes the great international relations crisis that defined the second half of the twentieth century, the Cold War, in which the Soviet Union and the United States were in an unrestricted race for power to counterbalance each other's supremacy. Second, Wilson warned against the "entangling alliances" that typified Cold War politics (256). His accompanying insistence that larger nations stay out of the affairs of smaller nations and allow them to govern themselves still applies today. Though Wilson was referring to the imperialist tendencies of his own time, this concept extended into the way the Cold War was fought out via such nations as Cuba and Vietnam. Even in our own time, it is perhaps an apt warning as we eye Iran while we sink our resources more and more deeply into the mires that Afghanistan and Iraq have become.

Quite possibly, Woodrow Wilson's disappointment in his own lifetime might be similar to the disappointment he would take in our current approach to foreign relations. Dr. Eastby

wondered if we had outgrown the Wilsonian terms we use to describe international relations, but it appears that in many ways, we have actually not yet grown into them. Wilson's Presidential Library sits secluded in a historic neighborhood in Staunton, Virginia, in an understated structure that one would not notice if it were not for a modestly sized sign indicating the building's purpose; there is no more fitting summary of his legacy and flaws.

#### Works Cited

Eastby, John. "Woodrow Wilson and the Life of Politics." Senior Symposium Lecture, Lynchburg College, 19 Mar. 2007.

Wilson, Woodrow. "Essential Terms of Peace in Europe." *War, Peace and Empire*. Lynchburg College Symposium Readings. Vol. V. Ed. Daniel G. Lang. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. USA: Xlibris, College, 2007. 250-256.