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Robert W. Tucker. *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914-1917.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. xv + 246 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2629-2.

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The Irony of American Neutrality

American foreign policy at the time of the First World War is largely overshadowed by the events of the century that followed it. The Second World War, the Cold War, Vietnam, and the collapse of the Soviet Union capture the attention of historians. Yet, important threads of U.S. policy for the century that has just past, as well as the one that we are now beginning, are rooted in the policies of Woodrow Wilson's administration. Wilson's vision of what the world should be has persisted in American foreign policy. The changes brought about in international law during his administration have continuing implications in international affairs. Robert W. Tucker's *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War* is a vital study for those interested in the changes in U.S. policy and the international system during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Tucker has written a solid scholarly book examining the neutrality policy of the Wilson administration from 1914 to 1917. That policy, conceived by the president, stimulated unintended change in the international system. Tucker writes, "it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the law of neutrality–or rather Woodrow Wilson's version of this law–constituted almost the whole of his foreign policy toward the war during the fateful years 1914-17" (p. x). The Great War brought substantial changes to the policy of neutrality as it had been practiced since the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Wilson's failure to enforce American neutrality rights equally between the Allied and the Central powers hastened those changes. Tucker explains that failure from the vantage point of the president and his advisors.

Even though this period is important to historians of American foreign relations, this subject has been largely overlooked. Apart from John W. Coogan's *The End of Neutrality*, published in 1981, few historians in the last generation have spent much, if any, time on the subject. Tucker has corrected this oversight. It is a timely study for historians given the state of the current international system. The growing multipolarity of the present world invites comparisons to the international system as it existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. The persistence of the thread of Wilson's idealism in American foreign policy makes understanding this period of added importance.

Historians of the Wilson administration inevitably have to deal with the complex personality of the president. Explaining Wilson's unique approach to policy decisions is a strength of this book. The president made his foreign policy decisions from a place of isolation "without parallel among American presidents" (p. 21). In a speech in 1916, the president referred to Abraham Lincoln's "very holy and terrible isolation" in ways that were revealing of himself. This is often overlooked in studies on Wilson. Historians try to make sense of the policies by describing a "Wilsonian" consensus in the administration. Assuming a consensus among a group as diverse as Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, Walter Hines Page, Edward M. House, and Robert Lansing, men who often had their own agendas, is highly problematic. *Woodrow Wilson and The Great War* avoids that mistake and notes the singularity of Wilson's influence on foreign policy. Whatever other forces may have acted on the president, and whatever social forces added to or shaped American policy, it was only "Wilsonian" if it mattered to the president. This was more than just an accident of personality. As a young professor, thinking about the function of government and the role of the president in diplomacy, he had written that the president's power was "very absolute" in the making of treaties and conduct of foreign policy (p. 18). Once the president acted in foreign policy, Wilson believed the Senate would be forced by honor to ratify the president's actions. Isolated, and equipped with this intellectual justification, the president

conducted a lonely balancing act between competing internal convictions that often confused his advisors. Yet, the president always maintained that he was absolutely impartial in his neutrality and tried to be so, even as American policy favored the Allies. While a clearer policy might have had a different influence on the conflict, Wilson remained a mystery to the belligerents in Europe. The notes following the *Lusitania* incident demonstrate how the antinomy of Wilson's thought processes produced a policy that was coincidentally contradictory and firm. His advisors and leaders in Europe (as well as later historians) were able to read their own biases into the president's words.

The breakdown of neutral rights on the seas was partly the result of changes in naval technology. The inability to adapt the practice of the law to the submarine led to the breakdown of international rules for search, seizure, and blockade. The shocking carnage and deadlock of trench warfare on the battlefields of Europe made the belligerent governments desperate and inflexible. The submarine had no precedent in maritime law but was seen by the Germans as the only way to counter the blockade of food and munitions bound to Germany by the British. The British blockade of neutral ports, also outside of the accepted laws pertaining to belligerents' treatment of neutral shipping, was seen by the British as the only way to use their naval advantage effectively. The uneven enforcement of neutral rights by the United States in the face of these violations reinforced the unneutral situation on the seas. The insistence by Wilson of assuring the safety of all American lives from submarine attacks, no matter what ships they traveled on, made the United States the de facto protector of all Allied shipping. A German submarine could never know for sure if an American citizen might be on board. Thus, each sinking was a possible act of war against a neutral. At the same time, the toleration of British seizure of neutral ships going to neutral ports strengthened the near total British blockade on Germany.

Tucker takes up the challenge of explaining how Wilson applied his complex intellectual and personality traits to international law. Wilson called for "impartiality in thought as well as action" (p. 59). The book argues that he did maintain neutrality in thought but supported a system in which American action was not neutral. American neutrality, "in action," created a de facto Anglo-American blockade in respect to Germany. Drawing largely on Wilson's papers and those of his close advisor House as well as Lansing, the secretary of state, Tucker argues that Wilson did remain neutral in heart. On this point, it seems that the portrait of the president does not quite fit Tucker's evidence. The documents point to evidence of Wilson's own self-deception. While Wilson certainly did believe he was neutral, he had a long-standing well-documented bias in favor of Britain and against Germany. Wilson was predisposed to be an Anglophile. He admired British political institutions. His Presbyterianism came from the British Isles. His mother had been born in Britain. Before becoming president he often took his holidays in Britain. His view of Britain caused him to interpret information in a way that favored British interests and penalized Germany, even as the war progressed and he grew irritated at British violations of American neutrality. He referred to his ambassador to Germany, James Gerard, as "an ass" in the margin of a dispatch passed on to his future wife Edith Galt. He told his friend, House, in 1914 that the Kaiser had built a war machine and then lit the fuse. He referred to the Germans as "selfish and unspiritual" in conversations with House (E. M. House, *Diary*, August 30, 1914). Finally, the very acts of the administration's diplomacy indicate a bias. There was a House-Grey memorandum, never a House-Zimmerman memorandum. Despite this, Tucker believes that the president was able to overcome that bias in his desire for peace, and he differs with those who argue that he did not. Part of this revolves around the evidence presented by the *Lusitania* crisis, which precipitated Secretary of State Bryan's resignation. Indeed, the crisis did not bring about war with Germany and in a few months became an apparent nonissue. But the crisis itself, as Bryan noted, was rooted in a U.S. position that favored Britain. The president, falling in love with his soon to be wife Edith, was happily distracted and disinclined toward going to war. Wilson believed that he was neutral, desired to be neutral, but was biased against Germany, and that ultimately made a difference in how he responded to neutral claims. In the end, however, this is a minor issue. This book does a good job of illuminating the way Wilson thought.

Tucker also tries to determine what Wilson was attempting to accomplish with his balancing act. At times, it seems that the president was not sure. Wilson often held contradictory ideas while claiming to be acting from a single principle. He was convinced that he was neutral while, in fact, being un-neutral. House, in London, found difficulty applying the president's words to policy. On the face of it, House and Wilson differed very little on the wording of the House-Grey memorandum other than Wilson's addition of the word "probably" in the commitment to enter the war on the side of the Allies if a peace conference with Germany proved unsatisfac-

tory (p. 168). Since Wilson could not commit Congress to declaring war, it was a realistic addition. This small difference, however, did not reflect the major differences in House's and the president's interpretations. "Intervention" simply meant something different to House than to Wilson. Wilson wished to remain out of the war if at all possible. Instead, he intended to find some manner of intervention that would allow the United States to bring a peaceful ("spiritual" was the word Wilson used) mediation of the conflict (Wilson, *Speech to Ohio Chamber of Commerce*, December 10, 1915).

Tucker's sources are largely limited to Wilson and his few closest advisors. Considering the singularity of Wilson's decision making, this is not a flaw, but it does narrow the focus. A broader consideration of the larger forces at work internationally on this issue of neutrality would have enhanced the study, but that would have been a different book. Another addition that would have been helpful, in light of Wilson's specific manner of thought, is a more explicit consideration of the president's religion. Wilson's religious upbringing and thought patterns influenced the approach he took to language and action. His sense of divine calling explains his feeling of isolation. (Or, perhaps, his sense of isolation explained his feeling of divine calling.) Wilson used religious language and followed a Presbyterian pattern of thought. To Wilson, words were expressions of contradiction held together in mystery. He did not ultimately feel that he was accountable to his advisors but to a higher authority, and he could not fully rely on his advisors as they were not privy to his inner truth. This explains Wilson's approach to language, an approach that involved a sense of reality that transcended the precise legal meanings that House or Lansing were reading into them.

The strengths of the book outweigh the minor criticisms. Tucker has written a good book examining Wilson and his senior advisors. The term "Wilsonian" has become a common term in scholarly circles. Tucker actually looks at Wilson. Some readers may have wanted a different book, one that focuses on gender, domestic politics, or, in this review, religion and broader international issues. While these may be important aspects of Wilson's foreign policy, they are not what this book is about. It is unfair to criticize the author for a book he has not written. This is an important study that will, I hope, generate a new look at the foreign policies of the United States at this definitive juncture in history. Historians who want to add to their understanding of the international relations of the Wilson administration and American involvement in the world at the end of the Progressive Era will be well served by Tucker's work.

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