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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patricia O'Toole. *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018. Illustrations. xviii + 636 pp. $20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7432-9810-0.

Reviewed by Ross Kennedy

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2019)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Patricia O'Toole's new book, ***The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and The World He Made***, lays out a critical interpretation of the statecraft of one of the most consequential US presidents of the twentieth century. A biography, the volume touches on Woodrow Wilson's family life, domestic politics, and several foreign and military policies of the Wilson administration. But overwhelmingly the book focuses on Wilson and World War I, so this review will limit itself to discussing that topic. O'Toole portrays the president's approach to the war and peacemaking as a product of his moralism (hence the book's title), his faith in American exceptionalism, and his isolated, self-righteous style of decision-making. Her case is engagingly presented; a prolific author of popular works of history, O'Toole is a good writer. She oversimplifies Wilson's policies toward the war and their underlying rationale, however, which makes her argument unconvincing.

This problem becomes apparent early in the book, in O'Toole's analysis of Wilson's neutrality policies. She argues that Wilson's goal was to stay out of the war so that the United States could mediate an end to it on the basis of a "peace without victory" and the establishment of a worldwide collective security organization (p. 240). This program was rooted in Wilson's belief in the moral superiority of the United States and his sense of duty; "he justified U.S. neutrality not on grounds of national interest but as a noble response to a senseless war" (p. xvii). According to O'Toole, Wilson's policy was naïve and "ethereal" because the belligerents never had any interest in the president's mediation efforts (p. 205). "Lost in dreams of peace" and too stubborn to accept the failure of his policy to produce results, Wilson persisted in his mediation attempts far too long, leaving America unprepared for fighting when Germany forced it into the war (p. 235).

Certainly few historians would disagree that Wilson had a moralistic streak and believed in American exceptionalism. But it is inaccurate to attribute Wilson's goal of international reform to these factors alone. Security considerations influenced the president too. To Wilson, the war revealed that the United States had lost its ability to isolate itself from the currents of international power politics. On several occasions, for example, he worried that if Germany won the war, the United States would have to expand its military defenses to a point threatening to its democracy. He also repeatedly observed that the war profoundly affected America's economy and politics and that its scale made neutrality almost impossible to maintain. O'Toole includes some of these statements in her descriptive narrative but does not comment on them. They reveal, though, that

Wilson saw the creation of a postwar peace league not just as morally good or as the fulfillment of America's mission to serve humanity but also as vital to US national security.

It is also problematic to characterize Wilson's pursuit of mediation as naïve and detached from European political reality. Various scholars have demonstrated that significant factions within the British and German governing class—the targets of Wilson's mediation efforts—recognized by 1916 that the war might not be winnable at an acceptable cost and that a compromise peace therefore might be worth exploring. Indeed, the months immediately after the United States entered the war witnessed a flurry of peace initiatives in Europe as the Allied military situation deteriorated and Germany's liberal and socialist parties challenged their government's war aims. O'Toole displays little interest in these events or the scholarship analyzing them, but they indicate that Wilson's quest to mediate an end to the war, while facing an uphill climb, was hardly quixotic.[1]

O'Toole's treatment of Wilson's policies after April 1917 is similarly cursory. After Germany's submarine campaign rendered neutrality impossible and Wilson accepted war with the Reich, the president, O'Toole asserts, dedicated himself to defeating its armed forces and destroying its autocracy. Once Wilson accomplished that goal, he still wanted to build a new world order based on a league of nations to provide collective security and on such principles as arms reduction and self-determination. This vision of peace included Germany, O'Toole emphasizes; Wilson's Fourteen Points Address and other statements "proposed a world order that rested on the equality of all nations" and promised "impartial justice for all," including Germany (pp. 307, 326). According to O'Toole, Wilson fought for this program at the Paris Peace Conference in the face of intense opposition from the Allies, who, unlike Wilson, thought of peace only in terms of national interest, spoils, and treating Germany "as history's greatest villain" (p. 392). Unfortunately, Wilson's moralism, vanity, and poor political skills crippled his ability to gain his ends. His moral self-righteousness was "made for oratory, not negotiation," O'Toole laments, so his agenda for international reform was "cut to the bone" at Paris (pp. 402, 401).

This is a familiar narrative of Wilson's wartime goals and peacemaking, echoing one famously put forward by John Maynard Keynes in 1920 (***The Economic Consequences of the Peace***). It does not accord with the evidence, however. Wilson's policy toward Germany during the war was complicated and it was not static; it changed over time. In the summer of 1917, the president hoped that the combination of military setbacks and promises of a peace of equality to a democratic Germany would induce Germany's majority parties in the Reichstag to take power and begin peace talks. He made this nuanced policy clear in his reply to the Vatican's peace initiative in August 1917—a statement that O'Toole does not mention. By late 1917, however, Wilson began to perceive that Germany's democratic parties and its autocratic leaders shared a commitment to driving Russia out of the war and expanding the Reich's power in eastern and southeastern Europe. Beginning in his December 1917 annual message (another key statement that O'Toole does not address) and continuing in subsequent speeches, including the Fourteen Points Address of January 1918, Wilson indicated he did not trust Germany's democratic parties and would not genuinely negotiate with them if they took power. Instead, prior to any end to the fighting, they had to accept Wilson's Fourteen Points. While this program included general principles of a new world order and promises of a place of equality for Germany, it also implied Germany would lose some of its 1914 territory and would have to pay reparations to Belgium and France—key parts of Wilson's peace program that O'Toole leaves unmentioned. Moreover, Wilson suggested that although Germany probably would be allowed into a league of na-

tions whether it democratized or not, it would be subjected to economic coercion to ensure it carried out the terms of the peace treaty.[2]

This shift to a more punitive orientation in Wilson's German policy did not mean that he had abandoned his goal of international reform; O'Toole is correct in arguing that Wilson remained committed to that objective during and after the war. But the German policy that emerged in December 1917 indicated that the means to attain international reform had changed. In 1915-16, the pathway to a world without power politics lay through a peace without victory; in 1917 it lay through a peace of equals with a democratic Germany. Now, in contrast, it lay through inflicting defeats on the German army not so much to trigger a democratic revolution at home as to show the German people the futility of aggression that they themselves had willingly supported. Ideally, this would lead them to acknowledge their crimes, to work to repair the wrongs they had committed, and to accept some limits on their future power to do harm again. Only through this process could they "redeem" their character, as Wilson put it, and then be welcomed into a new world order.[3]

Consequently, at the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson strove not for lenient treatment of Germany, as O'Toole argues, but for terms that would punish and weaken the Germans while leaving open the possibility of future reconciliation with them. At times this posture did lead to friction with the Allies, as Wilson wanted to avoid terms that he considered excessively harsh and likely to lay the seeds for another war, such as detaching the Rhineland from German sovereignty. Much more frequently, he had no problem imposing penalties on the Germans. He readily supported the treaty's disarmament provisions, the permanent demilitarization of the Rhineland, France's annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, the creation of the Polish corridor, the banning of Austrian unification with Germany for the foreseeable future, and the transfer of Saarland coal to France in reparation for Germany's destruction of French coal. Even before the peace conference began, Wilson decided to exclude Germany from the League of Nations until it had a "decent" government and a demonstrated willingness to observe its international obligations. By weakening Germany's disposition and capability to pursue aggression while holding out the promise of league membership to it if it behaved—"justice" for Germany in Wilson's eyes—he could foster an international environment conducive to the new world order he wanted to build.[4]

The last part of O'Toole's volume, covering Wilson's failed effort to secure Senate ratification of the Versailles treaty, is more compelling than her interpretation of Wilson's diplomacy. Here she provides a vivid description of the president's political miscalculations and health problems, rightly placing the blame for the treaty's defeat on Wilson himself more than anyone else. Especially after his massive stroke in early October 1919, Wilson became more hostile than ever to the notion of compromising with his opponents, despite the fact he did not have the votes to get the treaty ratified without reservations attached to it. Convinced he was morally right to stand firm, he "held his adversaries in contempt" and let the treaty fail rather than shift course to accommodate political reality (p. 435).

Overall, however, ***The Moralist*** is a disappointing book. Attributing Wilson's statecraft during World War I fundamentally to his personality quirks can make for an entertaining story. But such an interpretation ignores much of the scholarship written on the war and on Wilson in recent decades. It also reduces Wilson to a one-dimensional, almost cartoonish figure. Whatever one's assessment of the wisdom of Wilson's approach to the war and peacemaking, it was a complex sequence of policies reflecting a variety of factors, including specific views of US national security, the balance of power between the belligerents,

and the character of Germany's people. To get a grasp of those policies, one also has to pinpoint their connections to Wilson's overarching goal of international reform and to be alert to how they changed over time. O'Toole's book does not do that, which makes it of limited value to those interested in learning what Wilson was trying to do and why he did it.

Notes

[1]. David Stevenson, ***Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*** (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 105-6, 108-11, 212-14, 229-30; Alexander Watson, ***Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria Hungary in World War I*** (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 257-64, 416-24, 455-58; Karl E. Birnbaum, P***eace Moves and U-Boat Warfare: A Study of Imperial Germany's Policy towards the United States, April 18, 1916-January 9, 1917*** (New York: Archon Books, 1970); Daniel Larsen, "War Pessimism in Britain and an American Peace in Early 1916," ***International History Review*** 34, no. 4 (December 2012): 795-817; David Stevenson, "The Failure of Peace by Negotiation in 1917," ***The Historical Journal*** 34, no. 1 (March 1991): 65-86; and Brock Millman, ***Pessimism and British War Policy, 1916-1918*** (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

[2]. For the key Wilson statements on Germany, see Woodrow Wilson, "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," April 2, 1917, in ***The Papers of Woodrow Wilson***, ed. Arthur S. Link, vol. 41, ***January 24-April 6, 1917*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 519-27; Wilson to Edward Mandell House, with enclosure (reply to the Vatican), August 23, 1917, in ***Papers of Woodrow Wilson***, ed. Link, vol. 44, ***August 21-November 10, 1917*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 33-36; Wilson, "An Annual Message on the State of the Union," December 4, 1917, in ***Papers of Woodrow Wilson***, ed. Link, vol. 45, November 11, 1917-January 15, 1918 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 194-202; Wilson, "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," January 8, 1918, in ibid., 534-39; and Wilson, "An Address in the Metropolitan Opera House," September 27, 1918, in ***Papers of Woodrow Wilson***, ed. Link, vol. 51, ***September 14-November 8, 1918*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 127-33.

[3]. Wilson, "An Address in the Metropolitan Opera House," September 27, 1918, in ***Papers of Woodrow Wilson***, ed. Link, vol. 51, ***September 14-November 8, 1918*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 129. For another, somewhat different interpretation of the changing character of Wilson's war aims, see John A. Thompson, ***A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 56-109.

[4]. Wilson quoted in Ross A. Kennedy, ***The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security*** (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009), 186. On the general point of Wilson's punitive orientation at the peace conference, see Klaus Schwabe, ***Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919: Missionary Diplomacy and the Realities of Power*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 393-402; N. Gordon Levin, Jr., ***Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution*** (New York: Oxford University Press), 123-82; Manfred G. Boemke, "Woodrow Wilson's Image of Germany, the War-Guilt Question, and the Treaty of Versailles," in ***The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after Seventy-Five Years***, ed. Manfred G. Boemke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elizabeth Glaser (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute), 603-14; and Marc Trachtenberg, "Versailles after Sixty Years," ***Journal of Contemporary History*** 17, no. 3 (July 1982): 487-506. For good overviews of the Paris Peace Conference, see Alan Sharp, ***The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking in Paris, 1919*** (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); and Margaret MacMillan, ***Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*** (New York: Random House, 2003).

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Citation: Ross Kennedy. Review of O'Toole, Patricia. *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2019.

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