



Comments on Panel 54

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PANEL 54: Woodrow Wilson's World: Sociocultural Issues in Wilsonian Foreign Policy

Chair: **Mary Ann Heiss**, Kent State University

Papers by **Mark Benbow**, The Woodrow Wilson House (formerly), "All the Brains I Can Borrow: Woodrow Wilson and Intelligence Gathering in Mexico, 1913-1915;" **Matthew Phillips**, Kent State University, "Insanity, Civilization, and a Hun: Woodrow Wilson's Lens on Kaiser Wilhelm;" and **Robert Kane**, Niagara University, "An Imagined Axis: Visions of a Japanese-German Alliance in US and Japanese Political Discourse in the First World War Era.

Commentary by **Mark Gilderhus**, Texas Christian University

Happily in this session I caught a break. Normally when three papers are featured, the commentator has to struggle to find some common themes but not this time. We have commonalities already in the papers. They all concern attempts by leaders in the Wilson administration to gain accurate perceptions of the outside world and to interpret those perceptions in informative, effective, and useful ways. The endeavor is inherently difficult and risky, especially when the objects of study speak different languages, adhere to diverse cultural standards, and come from very different social backgrounds and also become the subject of caricature and stereotype. Here we have a conservative revolutionary nationalist in Mexico, an obsessional, erratic, and possibly delusional emperor in Germany, and an inscrutable coterie of inscrutable and aggressive expansionists in Japan. I am going to keep this short so we have ample time for discussion.

Mark Benbow examines some of these issues during the early years of the Wilson presidency. He recognizes properly that Wilson upon taking office had no experience in foreign relations and needed instruction—in his words, from “all the best brains I can borrow. Wilson found himself in a bind. He mistrusted the usual apparatus of statecraft, the State Department on grounds that it was shot through with pro-business, anti-reform Republications whose biases would skew understanding. In Mexico in addition, he encountered a confused and confusing situation of which he had scant grasp. He brought the usual gringo, racial stereotypes to bear. For him, Mexicans—largely unknown to him—behaved passionately and violently much as children. He would have to teach them to elect good men.

Benbow also argues correctly that HUMINT held the most important for Wilson, but not from State, military, or the newspapers. Instead he relied on special executive agents whose disparate interpretations “clouded the President's view of Mexican events.” [3]

William Bayard [not Bernard] Hale, a former Episcopalian priest turned progressive journalist, sent reports confirming Huerta's villainy and Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson's complicity in the murder to Madero and Pino Suarez. John Lind, a Swede, a former governor of Minnesota, and a graduate of my alma mater Gustavus Adolphus College, spoke no Spanish, embraced anti-Roman Catholic views, and understood little of what he saw or heard. While languishing in Veracruz with stomach problems—the dread turista, he prodded Wilson toward intervention and characterized Huerta as a pawn of British imperialists.

Such untrained and unperceptive observers reinforced Wilson's own arrogance, ignorance, and misperception and contributed to the invasion at Veracruz. Lind told Wilson that the people would greet the Marines as liberators. No so! The Wolfowitz/Cheney/Bush effect in an early version. In my own view, Wilson's botched up the Mexico caper abysmally, and part of the reason stems from his own inability to distinguish good intelligence from bad. Incongruously he conceived of himself as a champion of Mexican self determination while invading the country in 1914. Conclude with some bibliographical omissions: Meyer, Katz, Harris and Sadler

In the case of **Matthew Philip's** paper, the object of scrutiny and perplexity appears as Kaiser Wilhelm II. Drawing on the techniques of cultural history, Philips argues that Willy's failure to conform with Wilson's conceptions of sanity, rationality, and restraint made the emperor caused big problems. Before the war, US citizens saw the emperor as someone afflicted with a split personality—part good, part bad. Later as the war raged and Wilson chose to declare war, Willy became all bad or at least more bad than good. In Philip's words, "Wilson's culturally-relative categories predisposed him toward using force against the German state for the sake of liberal internationalism." [1]

Philips' definition of the word "sanity" has central importance in his analysis. In his words, "Sanity is a cultural category that was crucial in the Wilson era because of the progressive' faith in the power of the mind to solve social problems and bring order and progress to the world . . ." It "deals with an individual's ability to function in a particular society," and "it is not a clinical term." [2] As Philips explains, "once Wilhelm's sanity came into question . . . his military actions seemed barbaric . . . and his religiousness maniacal and a bastardization of the Christian faith." [4]

Philips works out the details of this analysis effectively by providing ample evidence while showing how Wilson's shifting perceptions of the Kaiser's character and psychological make up linked up with his disenchantment with neutrality and his growing readiness to oppose German aggression, all in the name of liberal capitalism.

This appraisal strikes me as convincing—an important part of the various reasons why Wilson chose to go to war. Given Wilson's convictions about the importance of sanity, reason, and sobriety, his perceptions of the Kaiser's bad behavior left him little choice.

Robert Kane's paper also deals with a question of linguistic confusion, in this case the distinction between democracy and autocracy and the implications for relations with Japan, specifically over the Shandong. Kane argues that "the dichotomy between promoting democracy and destroying Prussianism [autocracy] . . . was the common currency through which Americans justified their specific versions of the diverse array of policy prescriptions and perceptions that view for primary right after the war." [3]

Kane clearly lays out the debate and concurs with Burton Beers that Wilson was right to allow the transfer to Japan on grounds that the cession involved Germany, not China, and that such a move might move Japan more comfortably into the international community. US diplomats and soldiers objected, viewing the cession as a sell out of China and a betrayal of democratic principles. Republicans similarly raised hell and depicted Wilson as an autocrat.

Much as with the current discussion of Middle East issues, this debate consisted of bluff, bluster, and misconceptions. As Kane notes, these men "knew little about East Asian affairs, Japanese politics, or the Mikado [viewed as a kind of teutonic Gilbert and Sullivan caricature], and their confusions, misperceptions, and lies contributed to the defeat of the treaty.

As Kane makes clear, high level debates carried out with words that have no precise meaning was risky enough, and then Wilson compounded the difficulty by his own unbending, uncompromising—yes, autocratic—behavior. The treaty failed, and troubles with Japan would haunt US policy makers in the future.

How does Thorstein Veblen get involved with this?

To conclude, as these papers make clear, the Wilson's policies and practices in foreign relations remains a fertile area for research. These papers focusing on intelligence, perception, and language open new insights and contribute significantly to the ongoing effort to understand the enigmatic and sometimes baffling personality of Woodrow Wilson.

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