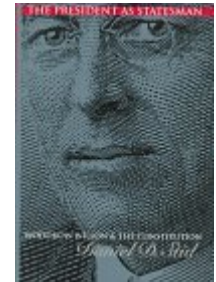


Daniel D. Stid. *The President as Statesman: Woodrow Wilson and the Constitution.*
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In *The President as Statesman*, a brief, well-written book, Daniel Stid argues that Woodrow Wilson's political thought was often at odds with his political ambitions and that this basic tension ran through Wilson's career. As a political theorist, Wilson was inventive and often pointedly clear in his views on American governmental structure, which revolved around his contention that the separation of powers made for inefficient and ineffective governing. This intellectual decisiveness pushed Wilson into more than a few delicate places once he ventured into public life, for he not only ascended to executive power but came to believe that the executive should have latitude in some matters. Wilson, Stid maintains, tried to reconcile ideas and action, a difficult task under the best of circumstances.

Having come of age as a genteel Southerner at the end of Reconstruction, Wilson became caught up in the mugwump reformism then decrying the nation's political lassitude. He convinced himself that the separation of powers was responsible for the nation's torpor, because, in the absence of strong leaders, Congress had accumulated the preponderance of power and arrogated

responsibilities and perquisites to which it had no legitimate claim. To Wilson, congressional self-aggrandizement was not dangerous because it concentrated power but because it created a fragmented government, with individual congressmen doing the bidding of particular interests and acting with general contempt for the national good.

Wilson's general antidote was to revive responsible government by uniting the executive and legislative branches beneath the banner of party principles. At one point, Wilson recommended that the U.S. adopt the parliamentary system; at another, he called for the less drastic measure by which the president would choose his cabinet from among sitting congressmen of his own party and thereby solidify the relationships between the executive and the legislature, party and leader.

Beginning in the 1890s, as his academic career took him back to Princeton and to some minor academic fame, Wilson began to put more emphasis on the importance of singular leadership. Partly this shift was an indication of Wilson's own growing ambitions; partly it was a response

to national politics. While at first he was uncomfortable with the idea of Grover Cleveland taking a second term, by the mid-90s he had adopted "a decidedly different interpretation of both man and office" (p. 37). Cleveland's strength, in Wilson's estimation, was not his leadership of the Democratic Party but his principled defiance of it--or at least its silver wing. Stid rightly sees this assessment of Cleveland as a turning point in Wilson's thinking, for thereafter Wilson began to see the president as more than a party leader, a shift that entailed "no small revision of his program" (p. 41).

Much more important, however, was the Spanish-American War, which brought America into the realm of great-power relations and in so doing elevated the importance of the presidency in Wilson's mind. The founders might have had it all wrong when it came to the wisdom of separated powers in domestic affairs, but international affairs heightened, at least to some extent, the importance of an independent executive. So much was this so, Stid points out, that Wilson predicted in the preface to the fifteenth edition of his *Congressional Government* that the book, which had been the fullest statement of his opposition to the separation of powers, might soon be out of date.

How to reconcile his older convictions with this new appreciation for executive power became an increasingly urgent question as Wilson himself emerged as a public figure, first as Princeton's president, then as New Jersey governor, and finally as president.

Stid argues that Wilson attempted to do so in a work that is often overlooked by Wilson scholars, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908). Stid so firmly believes in the importance of this book that he devotes an entire chapter to it, even though Wilson's most famous book, *The State*, commands barely a few pages. I doubt the work deserves that sort of disproportionate treatment. But Stid must stress it, because in it Wilson argued that it was the president alone

who could "interpret" both party principles and national opinion. Stid writes that Wilson "believed that the president's position as the sole representative of the people as a whole and as the administrative head of the federal government made it possible for him...to provide the sort of public, principled leadership that the parties needed to survive the challenges of antipartisan reformers" (p. 50). The parties served essential functions in spite of their tendency toward patronage and institutional self-interest, yet national opinion had to be reckoned with; the president's role was to apprehend the latter to save the former. "In stressing the necessity of principled leadership for the redemption of partisanship," Stid notes with a touch of irony, Wilson reconciled the tensions between his old suspicions of divided government and his new affection for presidential power (p. 52).

Wilson, then, was neither hypocrite nor ideologue; rather he was flexible yet principled. In describing Wilson this way, Stid is surely right. Stid's Wilson wisely adjusted his positions to take account of the momentous changes going on around him, not the least of which was the rise of the imperial presidency. As a man of principle, he could not permit too large a gap between what he had written and what he had come to think about the world he was moving in.

The value of Stid's book is that he takes this effort at personal reconciliation seriously. As both New Jersey governor and later as president, Stid maintains, Wilson behaved in ways remarkably consistent with his intellectual vision of the "interpretive leader." He prodded and fought--but he also built consensus. He was far more ready to heed varied counsel than many writers have concluded. Above all, he struggled to "interpret" the common will. And, in large measure, his efforts paid off, as with the great wave of reforms that Wilson realized in his first two years as president.

Wilson's great test, of course, was in wartime diplomacy, and here his intellectual convictions

raised serious practical problems. He believed that the president could be a party man at home, but when conducting foreign affairs he had to act scrupulously as the leader of the nation.

This conviction put him on a collision course with Congress once war was declared. Clearly not everyone in Congress supported the war, and still fewer liked the idea of a massive federal mobilization program under the control of the president. While the reflections on Wilsonian diplomacy and the sections on the war are the weakest of the book, Stid handles Wilson's wartime relations with Congress well. Here the war forced him into an obvious flip-flop: Where he once bemoaned the separation of powers, in 1917 he resisted congressional efforts to assert control over wartime production and managed to keep the administration of the war under executive control.

Meanwhile, he continued to act as party leader and struggled to mend divisions over prohibition, the suffrage, and various other reforms. Wilson, according to Stid, even struggled to reform the Democrats into a left-leaning progressive coalition, a dubious claim to my mind. Wilson was temperamentally unsuited to any real progressivism, though he might well have been willing to embrace bits and pieces of the social imperialism that Herbert Croly and the New Republic liberals were selling; this is why, incidentally, Wilson could advocate a sort of corporatist economic policy while winking at the suspension of civil liberties.

In any event, Wilson assumed that in leading the nation to war and in trying to lead in the peace, he was acting on behalf of the common will, and the more he was convinced of that, the more determined he was to resist the efforts to amend the treaty. In *Constitutional Government*, Stid points out, Wilson had seen that it might be necessary for a president to seek the counsel of the Senate in treaty making. And yet when it came time for him to do just that, he refused, on the grounds, Stid writes, that he believed "unqual-

ified American participation in the League of Nations [was] essential to the nation's well-being, not to mention the world's....The irony, or rather the tragedy, of Wilson's defeat was that he could have predicted it himself" (p. 161).

This is a savvy book, but all along Stid ignores another way of seeing how Wilson's thought and action might have been united through less give and take. The great theme of Wilson's thought was the same as that of his active political idealism: he sought an organic democracy, in which the common good was embodied in far-sighted leadership. Obviously this framework took from the standard Enlightenment themes, but it also drew from the Germanic school of organicist history that permeated American social studies in the latter nineteenth century. (Stid ignores this connection and tends to mistake Wilson's use of organic metaphors as a sign of Darwinian influence.) There was really very little in his public career that ran at odds with this basic conviction of how a liberal society should function.

The real irony of Wilson's life, then, was that he had indeed convinced himself that the nation's common good rested on a Wilsonian peace. But who was he to say that he could discern, much less enact, the common good? Wilson's tragedy was that he continued to carry the conceptions of an organic liberalism around in his head at the very moment when those abstractions were melting under the heat of the most profound ideological and social attack. Wilson paid dearly for his lack of intellectual creativity, for he clearly failed to understand that the direction of modern events was, in general, running away from the harmonious polity of reasonable citizens that he always presumed existed. Against this sea-change in Western life, Wilson's "congressional government," his calls for a parliamentary system, his schemes for encouraging "interpretative leadership," were so much academic nonsense and much of his intellectual life was depressingly banal.

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