



Robert E. Hannigan. *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-24*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 368 pp. 69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4859-3.

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In the book *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-1924*, Robert E. Hannigan makes the case for a fundamental continuity in the viewpoint and policies of executive branch officials from the 1890s into the early 1920s. From the William McKinley through the Warren Harding administrations, US leaders identified with the “essential elements” of the British-centered international order that had emerged over the previous decades (p. 4). They thought that so long as this order continued, eventually the United States would dominate Latin America and China and, consequently, displace Britain as the leading power of the world. Concerned that war between the industrialized nations could disrupt the existing international system and lead to “rearrangements of power” threatening to the expansion of US influence in Latin America and China, US leaders prior to 1914 also promoted reforms, such as treaties of arbitration and mediation, designed to settle disputes peacefully (p. 6). Woodrow Wilson continued this policy during World War I, with his scheme for a League of Nations, and it persisted after the war as well. Although the “distinctive qualities and style” of each administration differed, these basic policy goals of expansion and international reform did not change (p. x).

Hannigan’s book has many strengths. It is well written and deeply researched. Hannigan’s

narrative of the Wilson administration’s policies during World War I, which makes up the bulk of the volume, is clear, concise, and thoughtful. This quality makes the book attractive for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses on US foreign relations. Much of the substance of Hannigan’s interpretation is also cogent and convincing. He skillfully demonstrates the continuity of American policies toward Latin America and the Far East over the course of four administrations. He likewise effectively challenges the now-standard portrait of Wilson as neutral toward the belligerents from 1914 to 1917 and as a practical idealist dedicated to principles such as self-determination. As Hannigan rightly asserts, scholars advancing this argument “take largely at face value the president’s own descriptions of his actions” (p. xi). Hannigan stresses the need to compare Wilson’s rhetoric with his actual policies. Such an examination, he argues, reveals a president consciously biased in favor of Britain in the neutrality period, contemptuous of the rights of small states in Latin America, and little concerned with the principle of self-determination in Europe, Russia, and the Far East. What mattered most to Wilson was propping up Britain against a Germany he deemed threatening to American interests, stabilizing an international order dominated by the great pow-

ers, and expanding US influence in the Western Hemisphere and Asia.

In some ways, though, Hannigan overstates his argument. It is certainly true that Wilson and Republican elites largely agreed on US policy toward Latin America and China. They also viewed Britain more favorably than Germany. It is misleading to claim, though, as Hannigan does, that after 1914 they both wanted to preserve the “essentials” of the international system that existed prior to the war (p. 30). Soon after the war started, Wilson became convinced that the preexisting international order was deeply flawed. More so than Republican leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson believed that arms races and secret alliances—what he called “balance of power” politics—fundamentally caused the war and, if allowed to continue unchanged, would likely cause another catastrophic war in the future.[1] To be certain, the president was willing to threaten the British with a naval arms race to extract diplomatic concessions from them and he had no problem with conducting diplomatic negotiations in secret. But he insisted that the Versailles Treaty include provisions that all treaties be publicly registered with the League of Nations, that the League formulate plans for arms reduction, and that German disarmament be designated the first step toward general arms limitation by all the powers.[2] Most Republican foreign policy elites, in contrast, rarely if ever described armaments as a cause of the war and appeared unconcerned with the alliance system that had operated prior to 1914.

Wilson’s doubts about balance-of-power politics as a means of preserving peace helps explain why he, in contrast to most Republicans, wanted collective security provisions written into the Covenant of the League of Nations. Hannigan notes this disagreement between Wilson and Republican leaders but he has trouble accounting for it. He appears to attribute Wilson’s commitment to collective security, expressed in Article 10

of the Covenant, to the president’s belief that it asserted American leadership in the world and that the public would only accept security commitments expressed in “universal, internationalist, as well as altruistic, terms” (p. 236). But Wilson also believed in collective security because he thought it was central to transforming the existing international system. A collective security pledge such as that in Article 10 promised to deter aggression because no state would risk provoking a collective response against it, which meant that states would no longer feel compelled to engage in arms races and alliances to protect themselves. Republicans opposed collective security not only because they wanted to preserve America’s freedom of action in the world, as Hannigan notes, but also because they had more faith than Wilson did in alliances and armaments to keep peace. Indeed, many of them preferred that the United States pursue its postwar security not through the League, but through military preparedness and some kind of entente with the Allies. These significant differences in outlook between Wilson and the Republicans unfortunately are washed out of Hannigan’s analysis.

Wilson’s perception of Europe’s relationship to US security also differed from that of his Republican successors in the 1920s to a greater degree than Hannigan indicates. Wilson thought that the United States had a vital stake in peace in Europe. As Hannigan argues, this conviction stemmed in part from Wilson’s concern that any war in Europe would bring about changes in the international distribution of power threatening to the United States. Wilson also feared, however, that modern warfare had a disastrous impact on civilization as he defined it and that the United States would almost certainly get dragged into any future European war between the major powers. In the early 1920s, Republican policymakers disagreed with these views. They tended to discount the importance of peace in Europe to the United States. To be sure, they thought the United States had an important economic stake in Eu-

rope's peace and prosperity. But they did not see that interest as vital. As Herbert Hoover argued in 1922, the United States could "reestablish its material prosperity and comfort without European trade."^[3] Consistent with this perspective, Republican leaders steadfastly refused to make any security commitments overseas.^[4] Hannigan argues that domestic political considerations drove this policy, as Republican leaders recognized the public's aversion to political entanglements with the European powers. But he does not acknowledge that Republicans also had security calculations behind their approach.

As these disagreements with some points in Hannigan's interpretation indicate, this is a provocative book that raises important questions about the character of Woodrow Wilson's statecraft and its relationship to the policies of his Republican contemporaries. It is a significant contribution to the literature on US foreign policy during the era of World War I and I strongly recommend it to students of the period.

Notes

[1]. Quote from Woodrow Wilson, "Address to the Senate," January 22, 1917, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link et al., 69 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966-94), 40:536. See also 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), 11-15.

[2]. See Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 2007), 372; and "The Covenant of the League of Nations" in Link et al., eds., *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 58:195.

[3]. Hoover quoted in Melvyn Leffler, *The Elusive Quest: America's Pursuit of European Stability and French Security, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 81, and see also 78-79, 172-173.

[4]. On the Republican refusal to make any security commitments abroad, see Leffler, *Elusive Quest*, 219, 314.

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