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James D. Startt. *Woodrow Wilson, the Great War, and the Fourth Estate.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2017. 416 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62349-531-2.

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Historians of the United States during the First World War and of Woodrow Wilson's presidency tend to concentrate their attention on Wilson's relationships with fellow politicians, the German government, or the Allied leaders in Paris. In this authoritative and exhaustively researched study, James D. Startt shows that Wilson's most consequential relationship may have been with the American press. In this valuable book, Startt focuses his attention squarely on the relationship between the Wilson presidency and the press, arguing that Wilson shaped press coverage of his neutrality and wartime policies while, at the same time, his relationship with the press directly influenced his policymaking decisions.

Most previous scholars of Wilson's interactions with the press have attempted to place him in the broader context of his predecessors. These studies are valuable in that they show how the evolution of news media—driven mostly by technology—changed the ways presidents communicated their policies and worked to influence public opinion. But Startt's more myopic approach is perhaps more valuable in that it reveals not only how presidents could manipulate the press but also how the press in turn could influence the policies and ideals of a president. This symbiotic relationship between the White House and the press was particularly critical because of the war waging in Europe.

Through sixteen chronological chapters starting with American neutrality and ending with the failed struggle over the ratification of the Versailles Treaty, Startt lays out in significant detail the president's regular interactions with the press, Wilson's thoughts on the press, and the press's thoughts on the Wilson administration. In the process, Startt provides a tremendous amount of insight into Wilson's personality, his decision-making processes, and the somewhat limited framework within which he made those decisions. Most Wilson biographers have noted his severe stubbornness, especially later in the president's life as his health began to rapidly decline. Startt's portrait, however, indicates that Wilson's inability to endure contrary opinions was a major obstacle to clear decision-making long before his cardiovascular issues became severe in 1919. For instance, Startt reveals that Wilson's personal secretary Joseph Tumulty daily presented the president with selected news clippings from the very few newspapers Wilson trusted. At the same time, Wilson's special advisor Edward House frequently invited reporters to his apartment to ensure the White House effectively got its message across to newspapers that the intractable Wilson deemed unworthy of his attention. His aides' censorship provided Wilson with a

skewed understanding of press and public opinion and, as Startt suggests, only increased Wilson's distrust of editors and reporters whose views did not match his own.

Startt also clearly shows Wilson's understanding that the press could be a valuable tool in preparing the public for certain policy decisions and assessing—as much as possible—the public's sentiment about those in place. As Startt explains, Wilson's weekly press conferences early in his presidency "allow[ed] him to shield himself from" distrusted reporters "while engaging them collectively" (p. 4). Yet these press conferences reflected Wilson's mistrust of the press. Most reporters left them incredibly dissatisfied, often criticizing Wilson for saying little of substance during them. Wilson came to loathe them as well. Startt argues that Wilson's decision to discontinue his regular press conferences in June 1915—out of fear that he would be misquoted, which could lead to dire diplomatic consequences—was a colossal mistake. By doing this, Startt rightly contends, Wilson had created the situation he had wanted to avoid, which was a press that drew its own conclusions about the motivations behind the president's actions.

As Startt shows, Wilson's decision to distance himself from the press would have devastating consequences for his vision of the postwar peace and the world. Startt's explanation of the press's role in the political battle over ratification of the Versailles Treaty (and, consequently, US entry into the League of Nations) is perhaps his most valuable contribution to our understanding of Wilson's wartime presidency. During the peace negotiations in Paris in 1919, Wilson rarely spoke with American reporters, leaving most communication with reporters to his press bureau and the members of his entourage. Startt contends that Wilson's relative inaccessibility "ranks among his major mistakes at the conference" (p. 260). Public and editorial opinion would be critical to overcoming Republican opposition to the final treaty, but Wilson again had turned away many potential allies in the press. Consequently, few editors outside of his trusted few were willing to help him in the critical task of persuading the public to support the treaty and the League of Nations. An American president's relationship with the press, Startt clearly demonstrates, can have global ramifications.

If I have a bone to pick, however, it would be that

too often, Startt accepts—without reservation—the published opinions of newspaper editors as direct reflections of public opinion at large. During Wilson's presidency, widely circulated opinion journals such as ***Literary Digest*** and ***Current Opinion*** frequently evaluated editorial opinion on important issues and government policies. And Startt, reasonably, turns to those sources, which are among the few available means of gaining even the slightest sense of broad public sentiment (public opinion polling would not exist until the 1930s). Yet these sources are, at best, flawed measures of genuine public opinion, being largely expressions of white male elite or middle-class views on the topics of the day. Presenting editorial opinion as a direct expression of public opinion, then, provides a somewhat skewed impression of how Wilson's relationship with the press affected Americans' views of his peace initiatives and wartime policies.

Taken as a whole, however, Startt's in-depth analysis of Wilson's dealings with the mainstream press during American neutrality and wartime is an important work that scholars of Wilsonian diplomacy, the United States during the First World War, and presidential historians cannot afford to ignore.

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