Wilsonian Slaughter

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Woodrow Wilson’s transformation of American domestic and foreign policy casts a long shadow over the United States. Between 1913 and 1921, he reinvented the old Democratic Party into an agent of unlimited government. In the name of the people, he created the regulatory and administrative machinery at the heart of America’s version of social democracy. He considered the Framers’ system of separation of powers and checks and balances an outmoded contraption; appropriate to the Newtonian 18th century but hardly suited to the Darwinian world of organic development and “living” constitutions. Likewise, he ventured to replace balance-of-power diplomacy in the wake of World War I with an international “concert of power” designed to end war for all time, foster national self-determination, and promote global prosperity and social justice.

As the centennial of the First World War and of Wilson’s presidency approaches, it is worth taking stock of the Wilsonian project. When we speak of Wilsonianism, we typically mean a particular orientation in foreign affairs—a faith in America’s capacity and moral mandate to remake the world. Wilson famously promised to “make the world safe for democracy,” and whatever those words may have meant in 1917, his heirs today among Democrats and Republicans believe that American goodwill, expertise, and military might can make the world more democratic and therefore automatically more cooperative, prosperous, just, and safe.

Two recent books raise urgent questions about whether this understanding of America’s role in history and world affairs can or ought to serve as a model for current policy. One casts its eye directly on the new Obama administration, the other delves into the theology underlying and animating Wilson’s global agenda.

The Crisis of American Foreign Policy features essays by Princeton’s John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, the historian and Wilson specialist Thomas J. Knock, and political scientist Tony Smith. This short book warrants close attention by anyone concerned about Obama’s foreign policy and the meaning of his Inaugural Address. In 2006, Ikenberry and Slaughter co-directed the bipartisan Princeton Project on National Security. And Slaughter, until last month the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton, recently became Hillary Clinton’s choice to head the State Department’s Office of Policy Planning. What until a few days ago had been the musings of Ivy League academics are now the policy proposals of an administration insider. Slaughter gets the last word in this book and offers nothing less than a blueprint for 21st-century Wilsonianism.
The “crisis” of the book’s title refers to the state of American foreign policy after the Bush presidency. The authors agree that America has lost or severely damaged its credibility in the world thanks to Bush, but they disagree about the cause. Apart from Tony Smith, all the contributors distance Bush’s “debacle” in Iraq as far as possible from their idea of Wilsonianism. They reject any suggestion that Bush and his advisers deserve to be considered true heirs of liberal internationalism. Indeed, they blame Bush for undermining the authority of international organizations, the keystone of historic Wilsonianism. Knock and Slaughter argue that, at its core, Wilsonianism is not about exporting democracy, rather it seeks to foster multilateral institutions to resolve conflicts and prevent war.

By contrast, Smith, drawing largely on his 2007 book, *A Pact With the Devil*, ranks the spread of liberal democracy as first among Wilson’s objectives. He rejects his fellow contributors’ claim that multilateralism predominated the president’s thought. But his real point of contention concerns paternity claims for the Bush Doctrine. Smith connects the “neoliberals” (a label Slaughter dismisses as a misleading “neologism”) to the neoconservatives within the Bush administration and traces the Bush Doctrine directly back to Wilson’s quest for open markets and global democracy. He argues that the only substantive difference between Left and Right camps in foreign-policy matters is their preference either for unilateral or multilateral action. He fears that both sides are “wedded to a self-perpetuating and self-defeating framework for action more dangerous than any other initiative ever undertaken in the history of American foreign policy.”

Smith’s evidence for the Left’s long love affair with military interventionism in the name of humanitarian causes serves as a reminder that President Obama endeavors to remove troops from Iraq not to bring them home but to deploy them elsewhere. “Winning the war” in Afghanistan may well be followed by deployments in Darfur. Obama himself, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 2007, spoke grandly of America’s “mission” and “historic purpose” and promised to build a system of “common security” and to “export opportunity” in the form of “access to education and health care, trade and investment” and “steady support for political reformers” and democracy in other nations. If his campaign promises will be matched by deeds, he leaves no doubt as to his global agenda.

Obama’s call to increase the size of the Army and Marines, strengthen NATO, reform the UN, and build a new cooperative community of democracies echoes every point made here by Slaughter. Given her move to the State Department, her policy proposals demand careful attention. She seems to write with her fellow true believers in mind, those who already know that Wilson’s domestic and foreign policies are right for America and the world. She might protest that exporting democracy has never been at the heart of true Wilsonianism, but she says flatly that the “United States can and should stand for democracy around the world” by encouraging the growth of the “political, economic, and social institutions necessary to support liberal democracy on a country by country basis...” During World War I, Wilson sought to replace balance-of-power diplomacy with a “concert of power.” Slaughter, restating the Princeton Project’s recommendations, calls for a “common counsel” and for the creation of a new “Concert of Democracies” to take action when the UN fails.

Most strikingly, Slaughter seeks to replace the traditional notion of sovereignty as a nation’s control over its own security and destiny with a new “sovereignty of responsibility.” That responsibility includes a duty to ensure the rule of law and end humanitarian crises within erring nations. President Obama spoke in his Inaugural Address of a “new era of responsibility” and warned leaders “who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the
silencing of dissent” that they “are on the wrong side of history.” Obama may not have drawn these ideas directly from the Princeton Project and Slaughter, but he used the same language and logic. The new president and his director of policy planning at the State Department believe that this standard of responsibility will bring greater security to the world. By striving to reorder the “political and economic microfoundations of individual societies,” Slaughter writes, America can “make the world safe for democracy,” even if that project requires the U.S. to compel another nation “to protect its own citizens.” Slaughter’s formulation of liberal internationalism goes so far that it can properly be called “deep Wilsonianism.” The United States has never seen a foreign-policy agenda of this magnitude and potential cost in American lives and wealth.

Ikenberry, Knock, and Slaughter insist on a particular definition of Wilsonianism. Clearly a great deal hinges on getting that definition right. Ikenberry draws mostly from Wilson’s Fourteen Points, announced to the world in January 1918. Global order and peace had to be based on democratic regimes that respected the rule of law and government by consent; international free trade; the civilizing influence of international law; a “community of power” acting through such agencies as the League of Nations; a faith that a “new order” would end antiquated systems and ways of thinking; and the United States’ unique position and responsibility to help change the world.

This dream of a world transformed looks radically different, though, if we impose a different template. Wilsonianism, not as imagined but as experienced in the 20th century, meant something more ominous than what most of the contributors to The Crisis of American Foreign Policy would have us believe. An alternative set of characteristics might temper the current enthusiasm for a revitalized progressive internationalism. Wilson left a legacy of paternal, interventionist statism built on a centralized bureaucracy; faith in administrative, managerial solutions to what appear to less enlightened people to be intractable problems of the human condition; a gnostic longing for a universal and permanent end to war, poverty, and injustice; a self-righteous consciousness of America’s mission to end the “old order” and bring in the new; a tendency to simplify world history into “reactionary” and “progressive” forces; and what sociologist Robert Nisbet called “moralization of foreign policy,” leading to the unprecedented size and use of America’s military.

In foreign affairs, it is possible that this Wilsonianism gets the prize as the most destabilizing force in the 20th century. Historian John Lukacs once argued that the principles of “national self-determination” have reshaped the world more profoundly than the principles of “proletarian revolution.” Wilson, not Lenin, “turned out to be the real revolutionary,” he wrote. In both domestic and foreign policy, perhaps the most disturbing legacy of Wilson and the progressives has been the widespread loss of the fear of power. Even conservatives, especially if they are young, seem to forget that the fear of power once animated our constitutional Republic and helped restrain U.S. foreign policy.

Wilson concentrated tremendous power in the hands of the executive, making FDR and Lyndon Johnson possible, and Democratic and Republican presidents alike still imagine doing great good in the world with that power. There is more than a little truth in Ikenberry’s claim that “we are all Wilsonians now.”

While no one with any knowledge of history would imagine that it is possible to return to a “pre-Wilsonian” realism, conservatives ought to think seriously about how to build a post-Wilsonian foreign policy. George W. Bush missed an opportunity after Sept. 11, 2001, to
reground American policy on something other than ideology and abstraction. Faced with such tangible threats to their lives and property, ordinary Americans might have been ready to hear justifications for military action based once again on national interests and safety. Instead, the president leaped into the rarified world of global democracy and ideological crusading.

Yet taking ideology out of foreign policy and dethroning Woodrow Wilson will mean challenging principles that lie deeper than most historians and policy analysts would expect, namely, Wilson’s theology. Historian Malcolm Magee’s *What the World Should Be* provides a way to begin reckoning with Wilson’s Christianity and its impact on his foreign policy. Magee argues that religion—more specifically, Presbyterianism—provides the key to Wilson’s way of thinking and his efforts to reconstruct the world. He rightly notes that too few scholars have taken Wilson’s faith seriously enough, some minimizing it as merely conventional evangelicalism, some dismissing it as a rhetorical cover for policies driven by more mundane motives, and others acknowledging how formative religion was but failing to connect it explicitly to his foreign policy.

Magee makes a strong case for the centrality of Wilson’s theology to the development, implementation, and faltering of his foreign policy. He follows the evolution of Wilson’s thought from his childhood to his presidency, uncovering discernable patterns and habits of mind. He uses Wilson’s letters, books, speeches, conversations, and behavior to reconstruct the contours and workings of the man’s mind, a supremely difficult challenge for any historian. Magee draws attention to the way Wilson divided doctrine from faith, his head from his heart. The pastor’s son rejected orthodox interpretations of his denomination’s historic standards but at the same time claimed to be orthodox in his faith. Character counted more than creed, virtue more than dogma. On the other hand, Wilson broke down the distinction between the sacred and the secular. He was no Augustinian. He spiritualized politics and politicized his faith, believing that America could be Christianized and the whole world reconstructed politically, militarily, and economically according to the divine plan. With these views, he combined a powerful faith in human progress guided by a superintending Providence and a conviction that order and coherence underlay all the seeming contradictions of life. Magee recognizes the influence of Hegel and Darwin but properly foregrounds Wilson’s Christianity.

Magee gets Wilson largely right, but one further refinement of his analysis would have been helpful in connecting American Christianity and the “faith-based foreign policy” of the subtitle. It is not enough to say that Wilson was a Calvinist or a Presbyterian. Wilson, as Magee’s evidence makes clear, was a particular kind of Calvinist and Presbyterian. He adhered to a branch of Calvinism that tried to reorder every institution by bringing it under Christ’s dominion. Magee refers to “the Presbyterian tradition,” but it is doubtful there ever has been anything so unified in American history. Wilson owed his view of the church and the world not to confessionalist Presbyterianism but to the transformationist strand of evangelicalism that came to dominate mainstream Presbyterianism in the late 19th century. Wilson imbibed an activist faith that in many ways distorted historic Presbyterianism. He rejected creedal, confessional Presbyterianism. In order to understand his foreign policy, then, we must understand not his Presbyterian roots in general, but the fact that he emerged from a branch of Protestantism that had more in common with low-church, sentimental, meliorist evangelicalism than with historically Reformed Christianity. Magee fills in an important dimension of Wilson’s thought and personality, but finding the precise faith on which Wilson based his foreign policy requires that the story of American Christianity be told a bit differently.
This story matters because culturally dominant, politically connected, activist evangelicalism unites Wilson, Bush, and Obama. Rather than simply seeking ideological kinship between Democrats and Republicans, or liberals and neoconservatives, we ought also to look for theological kinship—or at least for the remnants of theology. Doing so makes clear why Obama aligned himself with Rick Warren and why, in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Slaughter favorably quotes Warren’s claim that “the only thing big enough to solve the problems of spiritual emptiness, selfish leadership, poverty, disease, and ignorance is the network of millions of churches all around the world.” The transformationists in church and state have a common cause. And this is not a recent development. Throughout American history, the purpose-driven church has worked hand in hand with the purpose-driven nation.

Any effort to build a post-Wilsonian foreign policy will have to deal honestly with American evangelicalism’s historic role in reorienting the church and the state toward social activism and global meliorism. Righteous interventionism appeals to our national vanity and piety. We have to face the fact that there is something deeply and authentically American about Wilsonianism. We cannot pretend that the transformationist impulse is something alien to our history and nature, or that it has been thrust upon us. Even Ronald Reagan frequently quoted Tom Paine’s boast that “we have it in our power to begin the world over again.” To some, an America without the impulse to do good seems like no America at all. And this makes realistic foreign policy a hard sell. Wilson labeled realism “selfish.” He replaced it with a “service” ethic that continues to dominate the American temperament. Faced with these realities, conservatives will have to figure out how to rehabilitate the language of national interests, safety, and modesty.

In 1793, Alexander Hamilton began his defense of President Washington’s neutrality proclamation by warning against “the treacherous phantoms of an ever craving and never to be satisfied spirit of innovation; a spirit, which seems to suggest to its votaries that the most natural and happy state of Society is a state of continual revolution and change—that the welfare of a nation is in exact ratio to the rapidity of the political vicissitudes, which it undergoes—to the frequency and violence of the tempests with which it is agitated.” If even Hamilton, one of the prime architects of the energetic executive in foreign affairs, saw the dangers of “change we can believe in,” how much harder ought today’s conservatives work to curb the enthusiasm of international zealots and busybodies?

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Wilsonianism or Wilsonian are words used to describe a certain type of ideological perspective on foreign policy. H.W. Brands: "We're All Wilsonians, Whether We Like It or Not." Woodrow Wilson (pt.1) | Historians Who Changed History. Transcription. David Steigerwald chronicles the legacy of Wilsonian idealism from its emergence during World War I through its recent resurgence during Desert Storm. Through the American internationalist movement, these Wilsonian liberals defended the proposition that decisions based on enlightened self-interest would lead to political harmony, and they strove to institutionalize their principles through the formation of the League of Nations.