

THE WILSONIAN CHIMERA: WHY DEBATING WILSON'S VISION HASN'T SAVED AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Woodrow Wilson saw the League of Nations as the embryo of a fuller global polity. To illuminate his vision, this essay turns to Wilson's elaborate theories of how national polities develop. The result significantly revises prevailing portrayals of Wilsonianism, both scholarly and popular. They emphasize Wilson's determination either to spread liberal democracy abroad or to support international law and organization. On both counts, however, Wilson's principles and actions betrayed deep ambiguities. Mixing Burkean organicism with a loosely neo-Hegelian teleology, Wilsonianism was a capacious set of ideas that, on principle, could and did cut either way on whether to implant democracy by force of arms. It gave Wilson a particular conception of liberal democracy, one that challenges Wilson's reputation as a champion of the rule of "global public opinion." Wilson meant "public opinion" non-literally. Statesmen in the League were supposed to divine the latent general will of international society through introspection, not to obey momentary mass preferences. Nor was Wilson the wholehearted advocate of binding international institutions that he might seem. His progressive, teleological vision allowed him to skate over the tensions between unilateralism and multilateralism, national interests and common concerns. Rather than decisively prioritize one value over the other, Wilson assumed there was no need, for national and common interests would draw ever nearer to one another. Moreover, Wilson in 1919 rejected popular proposals to strengthen the League's commitments to international law and collective security. He did so to preserve the League as a flexible and thus formally weak organization that would constantly remold itself around an organically growing world spirit. In sum, Wilsonianism is unintelligible except by understanding the categories Wilson employed himself. His assumptions are so unlike those currently popular in international-relations discourse that it is difficult to apply Wilsonianism to present dilemmas.

INTRODUCTION

Whether the latest president is honoring Woodrow Wilson's internationalist principles or defiling them, this much is clear: American intellectuals would like to know. Wilsonianism is talked about, constantly. As discourse, at least, it is alive and well. It is even its own category; Wilson has the most prominent internationalist -ism to his name. The terminology is

revealing, for one expects more from an -ism than a checklist of policy proposals. An -ism denotes a mode of being, an orientation to the world, something existential. Indeed, Wilson is widely credited with injecting moral considerations into American foreign relations. For this “liberal internationalists” cheer Wilson. For this “realists” decry him. They assume Wilson’s centrality all the same, notwithstanding the obvious moralistic rhetoric and conduct of presidents past, including Wilson’s contemporary Theodore Roosevelt, who, like Wilson, exalted U.S. colonial rule for disinterestedly “civilizing” Filipinos [1].

The latest round of Wilson talk was incited by the presidency of George W. Bush. Bush’s righteous language and crusading agenda could not help but recall Wilson’s own. Yet this surface similarity explains neither the prominence nor the vehemence with which Wilson has been invoked. The reason is that these debates were really about the extent to which Bush’s adventurism implicated liberals who saw themselves as carrying Wilson’s torch and extinguishing Bush’s, too. In G. John Ikenberry’s words, Wilson was “the founding father of the liberal tradition of American foreign affairs,” a tradition Ikenberry claims has retained its essentials over nearly a century [2]. If Bush is Wilsonian, liberals must be Bushian, whether they like it or not. Thus Tony Smith, alarmed by liberals’ contributions to the Iraq war of 2003, argues that Wilsonianism at heart demands democracy promotion: how Bush-like. Anne-Marie Slaughter, the kind of liberal hawk Smith fears, counters that Wilson prized multilateralism above all, so Wilson (and Slaughter) must be miles from Bush. And around they and many others go [3].

But why battle for Wilson’s mantle? What can uncovering the real Wilson promise present-minded analysts and architects of U.S. foreign policy? A hint is that “Wilsonianism” is at once ubiquitous in usage and deeply contested in substance: everyone affirms that it matters but few agree what it means. In large part the confusion comes from Wilson’s interpreters, who project onto the past concepts and aspirations forged in the present. Still, the ease with which a variety of conflicting ideas are attributed to Wilson begs the question.

It is Wilsonianism itself that is substantially to blame. Wilson did not resolve many central dilemmas that beset American strategizing today or even in his time. He saw no need to make the hard choices that vexed his successors, whether between multilateralism and unilateralism, national interests and common concerns, or disarmament and collective security. Most strikingly, despite preaching the virtues of international organization, he kept the design of the League of Nations intentionally indistinct. International obligations, by his lights, were loose suggestions rather than strict commands. In short, Wilson chose to be capacious. Both his first principles and his institutional plans for international reconstruction attest to this choice. He chose capaciousness because he grounded his thinking in an organicist, evolutionary theory of political development and a teleological faith in historical progress. Unless these philosophical foundations are recognized, one cannot make sense of Wilsonianism, much less draw from it genuine inspiration. Wilson must be seen on his own terms, not pressed into the service of unrelated political projects searching for either a pure-sounding provenance or the taint of original sin.

WILSONIAN UNDERPINNINGS: ORGANICIST TELEOLOGY

Before he was a politician, Woodrow Wilson was an academic. His pedigree as a professor of politics and president of Princeton has surely enhanced his reputation as

American liberal internationalism's founding father. Alas, historians have too rarely integrated Wilson's early political thought with his later political career [4]. This gulf between presidential and pre-presidential coverage is widest with respect to foreign affairs. Wilson, the story typically goes, took office ignorant of matters international. "There is no evidence that he ever studied the details of any foreign issue," writes William Langer, "and it is hard to escape the harsh conclusion that the breaking of the storm in Europe in 1914 found the President of the United States woefully ignorant of, and still utterly indifferent to, the origins and issues of the cataclysm" [5]. No doubt Wilson's knowledge of international events was thin. He synthesized his internationalist tenets only during his presidency. He entered, nevertheless, as no blank slate.

Wilson was committed to a set of philosophical presumptions he had developed as a student, teacher, and writer. In fact, understanding Wilson's political thought is *especially* important to understanding his internationalism. Wilson saw in the international realm the rudiments of a global polity. The League was to be the embryo that would grow, inch by inch, to maturity. Therefore Wilson's writings on the early polity — on how nations initially form — reveal how he conceived of his internationalist program, by way of the analogy Wilson drew between domestic and international political development [6]. (Less illuminating are Wilson's writings on administration and even most of his domestic policy as president, for Wilson believed that a "constitutional" stage of development, whose principal feature was the forging of a united nation, preceded an "administrative" stage, in which a united nation like his United States turned to more mundane and mechanical tasks [7].)

Wilson's philosophical point of departure was a reaction against the abstract formalism of Enlightenment rationalism. Like many trans-Atlantic thinkers at the turn of the century, Wilson believed laws and institutions must never strangle the spontaneous growth of society. Polities were organic entities, natural and evolving. They must not be artificially constructed through the legislation and enforcement of abstract rules. Wilson derided the "mere *formal* idea of state existence" according to which constitutions, originally adopted by the mutual consent of free individuals in a state of nature, held society together. Neither paper contracts nor armed force made a nation; only thick bonds of solidarity among the people did. Indeed, Wilson drew extended analogies between the development of nations and that of families [8].

Wilson's organicist understanding of sociopolitical development drew heavily from members of the English Historical School such as Edmund Burke and Walter Bagehot [9]. "If I should claim any man as my master, that man would be Burke," Wilson remarked in 1893 [10]. Burke had attacked the French Revolution's invocation of the abstract Rights of Man, preferring to ground liberties in the traditions of particular communities [11]. Wilson laid out similar convictions throughout his writings but perhaps most clearly in *The State*, his book of 1889. In every society in history, Wilson wrote, "human choice" has been "altogether shut out from raw invention." What caused institutional and moral change was less human agency than "the almost imperceptible formation of habit." As Wilson put it: "Political growth refuses to be forced; and institutions have grown with the slow growth of social relationships; have changed in response, not to new theories, but to new circumstances" [12]. Politics should be guided by history, not theory — by the needs and spirit of each age, not some timeless dictum.

This view implied a significant critique of the Founders' theories of government. In a major essay, Wilson expressed his worry that the American system, with its formal Constitution and natural rights-enshrining Declaration of Independence, often struck his

countrymen as an “artificial structure resting upon contract only.” “Our national life has been made to seem the manufacture of lawyers,” Wilson complained. The “real foundations of political life in the United States” lay in the “deep reality of national character,” of which “the Constitution is but the formal symbol.” Those who reduced the American polity to the apparatus of the state overlooked the more important nation — the “heartblood of one people,” who, Wilson wrote, could discard and recreate the Constitution at will [13]. Accordingly, Wilson exhibited great fondness for the informal English constitution, perhaps more than for America’s parchment version.

Organicism alone did not structure Wilson’s philosophy of history. It accompanied a neo-Hegelian teleology, loosely conceived, according to which history brought inexorable progress and moved through linear stages toward a discernable end [14]. Wilson’s main teachers in graduate school were economist Richard Ely and historian Herbert Baxter Adams, both of whom had studied under the Swiss Hegelian state theorist Johan Bluntschli; another major influence was Hegelian philosopher George Sylvester Morris [15]. Not only did history inevitably bring progress, Wilson thought. It was also heading someplace identifiable, everywhere.

Wilson wrote that all polities pass through four stages of development. They culminate in mature democracies, in which the people are self-conscious and self-directive, finally able to think and act as a “whole” [16]. Such a democracy was, if not the final end of history, then at least the end of history so far, the evolutionary pinnacle attained by advanced nations (principally England and America) and awaiting every other [17]. “The present trend of all political development the world over towards democracy is no mere episode in history,” Wilson wrote. “It is the natural resultant of now permanent forces which have long been gathering” [18]. Wilson’s teleology made his Burkean organicism not conservative but progressive, for the future direction of society could be known and its realization in effect hastened.

Wilson’s organicist teleology was not idle philosophizing, disconnected from practical politics. To him organicism and teleology exalted the practical, placing front and center society’s actual conditions and needs. If they did this, they also meant there was little else to go on. What should be done depended wholly upon interpreting what existed and where it was heading. When it came to formulating principles, one had always to avoid that *bête noir*, “a priori speculation,” just as in designing institutions, one must eschew the rigidity that might stifle inevitable growth [19].

WILSON’S INDETERMINATE INTERNATIONALISM

Wilson’s philosophical underpinnings infused his internationalist thought in the most fundamental ways. They render nonsensical the recent debate over whether Wilson more ardently championed the spread of liberal democracy or the authority of international institutions. Did Wilson want the United States to install liberal democracy abroad? The best that can be said is yes and no. His logic could, and did, cut either way on whether democracy should be transplanted through military force. More important, his notion of liberal democracy differed deeply from current conceptions, so much that even his advocacy of the rule of “global public opinion” has been taken far too literally. The same goes for the idea of Wilson as an exponent of a rule-based international system. This papers over his vexed

relationship with formal international obligations and his faith that national interests would not, in the future, seriously contradict global ones.

Wilson and the Semi-Promotion of “Liberal” “Democracy”

Wilson put forth a certain kind of “liberal democratic internationalism,” but he did not invent a creed that only grew during the twentieth century, remaining philosophically consistent throughout [20]. Leaving aside for a moment how Wilson conceived of democracy, he had — on principle — no decisive position about spreading it at gunpoint. What he knew was that democracy had to emerge “organically,” from a long process of maturation through the accretion of social habit. Disaster befell impatient revolutionaries who “have adopted democracy instead of cultivating it” [21]. This conviction seemingly, and sometimes actually, gave Wilson strong grounds for opposing the implantation of democracy from abroad. During his intervention in Mexico, Wilson wrote his Secretary of War that there were “no conceivable circumstances which would make it right for us to direct by force or by threat of force the internal processes of what is profound revolution, a revolution as profound as that which occurred in France.” European intervention within revolutionary France, Wilson added, had been mistaken, “no matter what the excesses then committed” [22].

Strong words, until one considers that Wilson’s organicism often pointed in precisely the opposite direction. If Wilson imagined U.S. troops would not seek permanent power for themselves but rather support an organically rooted, progressive faction against forces of reaction and revolution, intervention could look consistent with Wilson’s principles and even seem to be demanded by them. Moreover, where foreign peoples appeared too undisciplined for immediate self-government, high-minded American administration could fit them for democracy by molding their character. Partly on this logic, Wilson ordered military intervention in Mexico and long-term occupations of Haiti and Santo Domingo to establish stable constitutional democracies [23]. “I am going to teach the South American Republics to elect good men!” he famously declared [24]. More dramatically still, Wilson cheered America’s conquest and colonial occupation of the Philippines, where the American goal was, Wilson said, not just to install institutions of self-rule but also to reshape Filipinos’ inner character. America must teach habits of civility, the prerequisite of self-government, and this, he predicted, could take three or four generations [25].

Wilson, then, had one clear policy prescription regarding intervention to spread democracy: for “uncivilized” peoples it would take an awfully long time. Otherwise his principles were too capacious to underpin a coherent position. An outside intervention should not direct internal processes — but it could help them along. What was the difference? Only the intuitions of enlightened men like Wilson could tell. And where the pure motives of Wilson and America were on offer, it was easy to pull the trigger. Wilson, after all, launched seven armed interventions, more than any other American president [26].

But even if Wilson had been starkly for or against spreading democracy by force, his idea of democracy differed from conceptions now prevalent. His administration harshly repressed civil liberties during wartime and imposed racial segregation in the federal government. These actions accorded with Wilson’s decades of scholarly writings, whose thrust was away from individual rights-based liberalism and toward a notion of national freedom that held

individual self-realization to be possible only through membership in a like-minded collective.

Modern democracy, Wilson argued, was “not the rule of the many, but the rule of the *whole*.” By this Wilson meant that dissenting minorities were habituated to acquiesce in laws effected by the majority (he did not mean, as several scholars argue, that all modern democratic citizens thought exactly alike under the surface) [27]. Instead of rebelling, minorities cooperated. They did so because in the course of organic evolution they had developed a self-controlled moral character, nurtured by “common love of the country and warmth of patriotism” [28]. Mutual respect and affection, not the state’s armed forces or its formal legislation, kept social order. It both protected minorities and, far more important to Wilson, forever neutralized their will to rebel. When Wilson listed “several all-important conditions” for democracy, the first was “homogeneity of race and community of thought and purpose among the people” [29]. Or as he put the distinguishing characteristic of mature democracy, citizens were “not *separate*, but standing fast in a vital union of thought and of institutions, conceiving themselves a corporate whole: acting so, and so accepted by the world” [30].

For this reason the danger of majoritarian excesses rarely troubled Wilson. The Founders, whom it preoccupied, imposed checks and balances on governmental power, wrote a Bill of Rights, looked askance at organized political parties that might create permanent minorities, and hoped the republic would constantly expand in order to add new states whose particular interests would balance against those of other states. Wilson, by contrast, valued the expansion produced by the Spanish-American War for the way it seemed to unify the nation around strong leadership [31]. America had grown out of the antagonisms of the founding period; a fundamental harmony bound individuals with society and society with the state. Now power and authority could be embraced. Conventional wisdom, lagging behind the times, contained a “false tendency of reaction against authority,” Wilson complained [32].

Among the culprits was the doctrine of the “natural rights of man.” Wilson himself put the phrase in quotation marks, and one of his students recorded that Wilson “spoke of the Inherent Rights of Man and he indicated his disbelief in such rights when written in capitals” [33]. Thomas Jefferson’s political thought elicited Wilson’s censure for being “abstract, sentimental, rationalistic, rather than practical . . . Liberty, among us, is not a sentiment, but a product of experience; its derivation is not rationalistic, but practical” [34]. If Wilson was indeed arguing against the idea of natural rights, it was perhaps not only because that idea was abstract and timeless. In a modern democracy, with citizens already accustomed to respect rights, talk of natural rights might have struck Wilson as unnecessary and atomizing. In any case, his priority was less to guard individual liberties against state power than to strengthen the unity of citizen, society, and state.

The appeal of Wilson’s concept of corporate democracy in his time becomes intelligible when viewed against the alternatives he perceived: autocracy in Europe and classical liberalism of the recent past. Wilson criticized autocrats for pursuing private gain and thus war and for stifling organic development with top-down diktats. Classical liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the other hand, wrongly assumed man was forever egoistic. They fixed political principles and institutions for all time. They missed that historical development molded man’s character and that the march of progress necessitated political change.

If Wilson's understanding of state authority seems disturbingly open to excess, that should not be surprising. Fascism and state communism were not yet around, and on their advent they commanded significant appeal in America and Britain precisely because their premises and programs resonated with turn-of-the-century Anglo-American efforts to make liberalism more "social," efforts in which Wilson was only typical [35]. Somewhat like Wilson, Benito Mussolini reacted against the abstraction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal doctrine to posit the state as a "living, ethical entity" with "an objective will transcending the individual and raising him to conscious membership of a spiritual society" [36]. The point is not that Wilson's political thought was the same as Mussolini's or somehow pointed in the direction of fascist corporatism. But neither was Wilsonian democracy pointing toward the individual rights-centered theories of liberal democracy dominant since the 1970s. To a Rawlsian liberal, for instance, Wilsonian democracy would look illiberal.

In fact, Wilsonianism was not pointing anywhere. Wilson's project was his own. He would have disagreed with future "liberal democrats" and "liberal internationalists," who would have disagreed with him. So it is an abuse of history to cast Wilson as an exponent of what is now known as the "democratic peace theory," except through a genealogical approach aware of how distant Wilsonian "democracy" is from liberal democracy today [37]. Likewise, although Ikenberry claims that the introduction of human rights into international politics after World War II "expanded and deepened" Wilsonianism, this is ahistorical [38]. Wilson likely would have reviled the human-rights movement for exalting transhistorical principles and attempting to foist them on societies at varying stages of development [39].

If Wilson was no deontological liberal, he came only somewhat closer to current notions of electoral democracy. Within mature democracies, citizens should, he stressed, engage in deliberative "common counsel" [40]. In foreign affairs he is known for espousing the reign of global public opinion. Yet what did "public opinion" mean in an age before scientific opinion polling? How would the League capture global public opinion when the Covenant contained no provision for a supranational public to elect League representatives or vote on League resolutions?

The "public opinion" Wilson prized did not mean what it means now, namely the momentary preferences of aggregated citizens, as expressed in opinion polls or votes. To an extent "public opinion" was even defined *against* such a meaning. Wilson echoed Bluntschli's view that the will of the state is "the one national will, which is different from the average will of the multitude" — in other words, emphatically not summed mass preferences [41]. Wilson called it "ridiculous" to think the people had a well-formed, prevalent opinion on each political issue. For one, they lacked the time. But the masses were also too fickle and thoughtless simply to be followed.

History proved "that a nation is an *organic* thing, and that its will dwells with those who do the *practical* thinking and organize *the best concert of action*: those who hit upon opinions *fit to be made prevalent*, and have *the capacity to make them so*" [42]. That is, the general will was discerned through the introspection of enlightened men more directly than through the analysis of public preferences. Wilson shied from such elitist-sounding phrasings, but his view amounted to just this. Leaders, as he wrote, had to "distinguish the firm and progressive popular *thought* from the momentary and whimsical popular *mood*, the transitory or mistaken popular passion."

What separated thought from mood, firmness from whimsy? Wilson offered no objective criteria. It was up to the leader, decided by his special intuition. The leader “must have such sympathetic and penetrative insight as shall enable him to discern quite unerringly the motives which move other men *in the mass*.” Wilson clarified that this ideal leader “need not pierce the particular secrets of *individual* men: [he] need only know what it is that lies waiting to be stirred in the minds and purposes of groups and masses of men” [43]. Had scientific polls been available to Wilson, he would have found them valuable but not decisive. Reading true public opinion required “sympathetic and penetrative insight” more than knowledge of individual preferences. The leader tapped the latent, potentially unexpressed desires of the nation. These were desires of the mass psyche, construed as more than the sum of individual minds. And at the end of the day, the leader could stand confident that he discerned this public opinion — however intangible — “quite unerringly.”

Wilson’s vaunted “public opinion” was therefore shot through with paternalism. In his view, leaders had wide latitude to shape public desires and ignore the public’s actual preferences (as well as follow them). “Men are as clay in the hands of the consummate leader,” Wilson wrote [44]. “How we *cheat* ourselves by living in subjection to public opinion when we *might make it!*” [45]. As a matter of fact, the people wanted to be told what to think. The public sought “a President whom it trusts can not only lead it but form it to his own views” [46]. To devise those views, the leader did two things: he “interpreted” the general will and he foresaw the future (“across the mind of the statesman flash ever and anon brilliant, though partial, intimations of future events,” wrote a young Wilson). Then he had to educate the people to inform and persuade them of society’s will [47]. Framing leadership as an act of “interpretation” rather than creation, Wilson either sought to disguise his paternalism or, more likely, revealed his blindness to it. Either way, he denied normative significance to momentary public preferences, the main exception being in the election of leaders.

Importantly, Wilson’s convictions were compatible with extraordinary efforts to canvass public sentiment. The most remarkable perhaps was Wilson’s sending the King-Crane Commission to survey occupants of formerly Ottoman territories in 1919 [48]. The King-Crane survey might have been intended to inform Wilson’s “interpretation” of local peoples’ latent will. Indeed, there can be little doubt Wilson saw himself as a farsighted world-historical leader, speaking for all humanity. When Wilson claimed the Paris peace conference was “the first conference in which decisions depended upon the opinion of mankind” — even though most decision-making occurred in secret rooms, shut off from reporters, excluding delegates from small states and colonial peoples — one suspects the “opinion of mankind” really meant Wilson’s own [49].

Wilson’s guiding light was “the spirit of the age,” as he sometimes termed it [50]. But this provided slight guidance. What did the spirit demand? For what measures were the people “organically” ready? These abstractions could be filled in only through the introspection of Wilson himself. The all-important spirit became roughly whatever Wilson’s intuitions and prejudices said it was. At the same time, Wilson, a good positivist, believed the spirit — singular — was out there and capable of discovery. His personal intuitions appeared not as intuitions but as objective truth. At the end of 1889, Wilson reflected in his confidential diary on how and why he chose to analyze politics. It is a task, he wrote, “not of origination, but of interpretation. Interpret the age: i.e. interpret myself. Account for the creed I hold in politics.” Wilson envisaged himself the perfect embodiment of his age. “Why may not the present age write, through me, its political *autobiography?*” [51].

Beneath its egalitarian veneer, Wilsonian global public opinion meant intuited will, not public preferences. It would make no sense if Wilson thought international affairs or the League of Nations should be guided by the momentary preferences expressed by publics around the world. Even mature, “civilized” Americans depended upon wise leaders to show them the way. That Wilson spoke of democracy, liberalism, and public opinion does not mean Wilson was engaging in the equivalent of liberal-internationalist (or neoconservative) projects that came long after his death.

Wilson and the League of Nations: The Limits of Multilateralism and Law

Still, there is the League. Scholars who do not see Wilson’s hand in recent democracy-promotion efforts locate Wilson’s contemporary significance here, in his supposed commitment to international institutions, multilateral cooperation, and international law. The problems are twofold and severe. First, a neo-Hegelian faith in historical progress infused Wilson’s vision for the League such that he found no need to choose decisively between multilateralism and unilateralism or between international obligations and national interests. Wilson did not put forth a solution; he denied the problem, in effect. Second, Wilson spurned prominent schemes for the League that would have privileged the development and enforcement of international law. His thoroughgoing organicism made him wary of legalism, unsure international obligations were truly binding, and — paradoxically — suspicious of the machinery of international institutions.

The importance of Wilson’s teleology to his vision for the League is difficult to overstate. The assumption that history was moving somewhere ever better helps make sense of why Wilson, like many others, detected no incompatibility between disarmament and collective security, which would require overwhelming armed force [52]. So, too, Wilson did not squarely confront the tension between multilateralism and unilateralism. Though he made concessions to signatory nations and the U.S. Senate for the pragmatic purposes of obtaining agreement on the League Covenant, he seems not to have taken seriously the prospect that once the League launched and habits of cooperation accumulated, national interests might compel states to break with the League. History, he thought, would eliminate the gap between multilateralism and unilateralism by transcending contradictions between national interests and common interests.

Wilson articulated this idea as president. He called it the “community of power,” first announced in a January 1917 speech [53]. “There must be,” he said, “not a balance of power but a community of power; not organized rivalries but an organized, common peace.” A community of power would exist “when all unite to act in the same sense and with the same purpose, all act in the common interest and are free to live their own lives under a common protection” [54]. The demise of narrow national self-interest became Wilson’s refrain by 1918. “The common will of mankind has been substituted for the particular purposes of individual states,” Wilson proclaimed in the past tense in September 1918, even before the League was born [55]. Clearly, Wilson believed national and common interests would come into harmony, increasingly over time.

Less clear is whether this was supposed to happen for materialist or idealist reasons — or both equally. Would the League work because it would furnish material incentives, through the threat and delivery of collective force, so as to make the pursuit of national interests redound to the common good? Or was it mainly the organic growth of sentiment that would

cause national interests to be construed more expansively? Wilson thought the material dimension was important, insisting upon Article X. On the other hand, his pre-presidential writings on the development of national polities suggest the idealist dimension might have been more fundamental. Regardless, though, he anticipated the conflict between national and common interests would be surpassed. Much as citizens gradually evolved a unity of sentiment that knit together their mature nation, so conflicting national interests would synthesize into a common will, expressing the interest of humankind. Likewise, as national leaders were responsible for divining and acting on the general will of their society, so statesmen in League councils would take their cue from the latent desires they imagined the world's civilized peoples to share. The destiny of each nation was to unite its people and abolish war from its land. Would not history also arrive at global federation and world peace?

Back in 1886 Wilson had already identified supranational confederation as a historical *telos*. There was, he wrote, "a tendency as yet dim, but already steadily impulsive and clearly destined to prevail, towards, first, the confederation of parts of empires like British, and finally the great states themselves" [56]. Wilson was hardly alone in believing such things; he was, as he sought to be, representative of many trans-Atlantic intellectuals of his age. Bluntschli, for instance, had written that history itself brought about increasing unity of sentiment first within nations and then between them, "awakening the universal consciousness of the community of mankind" [57]. In Wilson's eyes, then, the community of power was the object of the League of Nations. It was the reason the League would work. Wilson's support for international organization cannot be cleaved from the community of power that grounded it. If no one today believes the purpose of international organization is to bring about or superintend the transcendence of conflicting national interests, then the relevance of Wilson's vision for the League must be limited to marginalia. Wilson's confidence in historical progress toward ever-wider corporate unity lay at the heart of his scheme.

This point — and Wilson's broader ambivalence about international obligation and machinery — becomes clearer upon examining the intellectual alternatives Wilson actually faced. He stealthily rejected an alternative scheme for the League of Nations because it was too legalistic, mechanistic, and rule-based. From 1914 to 1917, the most popular proposal that circulated in American society called for what might be termed a "legalist-sanctionist" league [58]. This body was intended to develop international legal code and obligate and enforce judicial settlement of disputes. Former presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft, along with Republican Senator Elihu Root, were the league design's main architects and promoters. Like Wilson, they aimed to create an international polity without supranational authority. Unlike Wilson, they insisted on the necessity of physical sanction without exception: the league had to enforce its every word or not speak at all.

Roosevelt in 1910 became the first American president to propose the creation of an international organization [59]. When World War I began, he revived his plan. The great powers, he urged, should covenant to submit international disputes to a league court, abide by the rulings, and punish defiance by force. Roosevelt was the most explicit and passionate proponent of creating realizable league commitments, never exceeding what states would likely uphold when the time for action came. International organization could do good, he wrote, "only on condition that in the first place we do not promise what will not or ought not to be performed" [60]. Therefore Roosevelt narrowed the scope of league obligations. In

Roosevelt's proposed covenant, unlike Taft's and Root's, member states would name matters of vital interest and honor they wished to reserve from the court's purview [61].

Similar ideas animated the League to Enforce Peace, founded in June 1915 under Taft's leadership and soon the world's largest pro-league organization [62]. In its conception of postwar organization, member states would submit all legal disputes arising between them to an international court, submit all non-legal disputes to an arbitral council, and apply economic and if necessary military sanctions against members that initiated war before submitting the disputes to the court or council [63]. They would also summon periodic conferences to formulate and codify legal code. By the end of 1916, the organization had branches in every U.S. state except three and boasted \$240,000 in pledges [64]. The only publicly prominent opposition came from anti-militarists such as William Jennings Bryan and William Borah [65].

Wilson, well aware of legalist mobilization, stood aloof. When the draft of the League Covenant came back from Paris in 1919, Root, one of the country's most influential voices in international affairs, gave Wilson another opening and an opportunity to attract Senate Republicans. Root proffered amendments that did more than dilute existing provisions like Article X's guarantee of territorial integrity: he also added stronger, legalist provisions. Under the first, member states would agree to submit all justiciable disputes to an international court and obey the ruling. The second required international conferences to meet regularly to update codified law. Because Wilson's League failed to make the judicial settlement of legal disputes obligatory — states could seek the judgment of the League's political counsels rather than courts, even on legal matters — Root exposed Wilson's anti-legalism. The League of Nations "practically abandons all effort to promote or maintain anything like a system of international law," Root concluded. The Covenant "puts the whole subject of arbitration back where it was twenty-five years ago. Instead of perfecting and putting teeth into the system of arbitration provided for by the Hague Conventions, it throws those conventions upon the scrap heap" [66].

For Wilson, that was the point. "I don't want lawyers drafting this treaty," he said in Paris [67]. Wilson at first fought the Covenant's simply mentioning an international court. Eventually, under French and British pressure, he bent that far, but he dismissed anything substantial, including French legalist-sanctionist proposals, similar to American Republicans' [68]. Wilson's position flowed from more than a facile disdain for lawyers connected to his own unhappy stint practicing law, as one historian speculated [69]. It was out of settled intellectual conviction that Wilson designed the League of Nations to center on the expedient proclamations of political councils, not legal rulings backed by automatic sanctions.

His evolutionary understanding of historical development demanded that the League be an anti-institutional institution — never too fixed, constantly remolding itself around the spirit of global society. As Wilson proclaimed, the League "is not a strait-jacket, but a vehicle of life. A living thing is born, and we must see to it that the clothes we put upon it do not hamper it — a vehicle of power, but a vehicle in which power may be varied at the discretion of those who exercise it and in accordance with the changing circumstances of the time" [70]. It was wrong to judge the feasibility of League commitments by imagining concrete future scenarios. This assumed historical development was static. Instead, the enlightened statesmen who designed the League and sat on its councils should detect the movement of history and create obligations that would be fulfilled under changed conditions, in which, Wilson said, "national purposes have fallen more and more into the background and the common purpose

of enlightened mankind has taken their place” [71]. Strict legal commitments were too confining, disruptive of history’s trajectory toward democratization and fellow-feeling.

Of that much Wilson was certain. But in reducing his organicist ideals to practice, Wilson faced an intractable question: for what kind of league obligations were the world’s peoples “organically” ready? Lacking a firm answer, Wilson spent little time formulating detailed designs for the League until the peace conference. There he largely rubber-stamped British proposals, also promoting a flexible version of Article X’s promise of political independence and territorial integrity [72]. (Wilson’s scheme had “practically no new ideas in it” and “almost entirely” combined earlier British plans, observed Robert Cecil, a British representative at the peace conference [73].) Wilson wanted one thing most of all: that the League stay plastic enough to hew to the world’s unfolding moral spirit.

Accordingly, Wilson’s League comprised looser kinds of commitments than those of the legalist-sanctionist league — even in theory. Wilson dubbed them “moral obligations” in his defense of Article X before the Senate. The guarantee of political independence and territorial integrity was “a moral, not a legal obligation,” “binding in conscience only, not in law,” Wilson said. This moral obligation was “very grave and solemn” yet left “our Congress absolutely free to put its own interpretation upon it in all cases that call for action” [74]. For Wilson, Article X was less a legal agreement than a declaration of moral intent.

Wilson preferred an international organization consisting of loose moral norms to one of definite legal obligations. Organicist teleology gave him a deep ambivalence toward mechanistic institutions and formal obligations. It blinded him to the tensions between disarmament and collective security, multilateralism and unilateralism, national interests and common concerns. If one ignores Wilson’s actual beliefs, one can find him uttering words that resonate with today’s most prominent political projects. But why invoke history at all if only as mythical justification for ideas forged by living through the present?

CONCLUSIONS

The common image of Woodrow Wilson is an illusion. Instead of seeing Wilson through his own eyes, scholars have projected onto him ideas and preoccupations that emerged afterward. In this regard, the current round of Wilson talk is only the most recent. It was realists of the middle of the twentieth century who set up Wilson as a foil for themselves and thereby elevated a crude dichotomy between power politics and Wilsonian “idealism” in the discourse of postwar international relations. Realists wrongly understood idealists like Wilson as classical liberals and committed formalists. In his influential *Twenty Years’ Crisis*, E.H. Carr pinned the failure of the League of Nations on its foundational belief that “the unruly flow of international politics could be canalized into a set of logically impregnable abstract formulae inspired by the doctrines of nineteenth-century liberal democracy.” Wilson struck Carr as especially naïve for thinking that “public opinion,” assumed to mean momentary mass preferences, was always effective and always right [75]. The real Wilson believed none of these things. Unwittingly, Carr was recapitulating Wilson more than refuting him.

Yet presentist readings of history are not the whole story. Mischaracterizations of Wilson have proven sustainable because Wilsonianism itself is elusive and indeterminate. It destructs more readily than it constructs. Wilson’s philosophy of history ruled out the grafting of artificial structures onto progressively evolving society, but it gave Wilson little guidance for

what, positively, to favor. In 1924, his final year of life, the father of the League of Nations, the man who fought tooth and nail to get America in, decided it was better after all to have failed. "Now, when the American people join the League it will be because they are convinced it is the right thing to do, and then will be the *only right* time for them to do it" [76]. The outcome was just because history knew best. To those less willing to trust progress to history and more willing to make history themselves, Wilsonianism has little to prescribe.

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- [10] Wilson to Caleb Thomas Winchester, May 13, 1893, in *Wilson Papers*, vol. 8, 211.
- [11] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993 [1790]).
- [12] Wilson, *The State* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1889), 575.
- [13] Wilson, "The Modern Democratic State," in *Wilson Papers*, vol. 5, 68-69.
- [14] The characterization "neo-Hegelian teleology" suggests the influence on Wilson of Hegelian thinking, broadly conceived, and situates Wilson in the context of contemporary Anglo-American neo-Hegelian idealists. Compared with Hegel, Wilson's understanding of the nature of social dynamics and the direction of history was significantly less systematic, comprehensive, and precise.
- [15] Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years*, 103; John Mulder, *Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation* (Princeton, 1978), 75; Ronald Pestritto, *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 34-40, 67-94; Niels Aage Thorsen, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson, 1875-1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 69-70, 94; on Bluntschli, see Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 46-49.
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- [18] Wilson, "The Modern Democratic State," in *Wilson Papers*, vol. 5, 70.
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- explained. Wilson, "The Modern Democratic State," in *Wilson Papers*, vol. 5, 76. Contra Pestritto, *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism*, 7; Scot Zentner, "Regimes and Revolutions: Madison and Wilson on Parties in America," in *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science*, ed. John Marini and Ken Masugi (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 122.
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- [35] John Diggins, "Flirtation with Fascism: American Pragmatic Liberals and Mussolini's Italy," *American Historical Review* 71.2 (January 1966), 487-506; Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 104-137; Jeanne Morefield, *Covenants Without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- [36] *Twentieth Century Political Theory: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 219-222.
- [37] Wilson appears as an expositor of the democratic peace theory in Smith, *America's Mission*, among other places.
- [38] Ikenberry, "Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism," in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy*, 14.
- [39] More generally, the language of "human rights" was an advent of the 1940s and the idea that human rights conflict with state sovereignty and have supranational value emerged only in the 1970s. Even contemporaries of Wilson who believed all people should enjoy individual liberties regarded rights and sovereignty to be mutually implied: rights were to be secured through the creation and operation of the nation-state, not demanded against the state from outside. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), ch. 1.
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