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## Woodrow Wilson The Law of Unintended Consequences

By Richard Norton Smith

When a German U-boat sank the passenger line the *Lusitania* in 1915, Wilson wrote a stiffly-worded note to Berlin. Publicly he declared that there was such a thing as a man or nation being "too proud to fight." Many Americans disagreed. Two years later, in the face of continuing submarine attacks, he did an about face. Avenging maritime losses was not enough for Wilson's crusading spirit -- "the world must be safe for democracy," the president told Congress. Then, as now, that's a tall order.

So what had happened to the man that kept us out of war? This is Wilson speaking to Congress two months after his reelection on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War":

*[T]he right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts, for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.*

Close your eyes and in that verbal trumpet blast you can at least hear a faint echo of George W. Bush's missionary proclamation of freedom as a universal birth right, and America as a divinely-inspired agent of liberation. Wilson still matters. Wilson still speaks to us. Wilson still speaks through us, for better and worse. But there are cautionary notes in this music. Wilson raised public expectations with his eloquence even when he roused his countrymen to forsake their traditional isolation and rescue the old world from itself. That is another way in which the Wilson experience is relevant to our own time.

Wilson's first term was marked by a concerted assault on economic monopoly. Wartime, well, it's a whole new agenda. Ironically, the man who invented the *New Freedom* presided over the greatest centralization of power in the history of this nation, with himself practicing virtual one-man rule. He and his allies in Congress created a host of economic planning agencies to fix prices, establish priorities, allocate materials. There was an Emergency Fleet Corporation, a Fuel Administration, even a National Screw Thread Commission. There was "Food Will Win the War" -- a voluntary campaign for Americans to go without wheat and meat so there would be more food for the allies. The president's own son-in-law ran the nation's railroads, consolidating them into a single system. There was something called the Trading With the Enemy Act, which enabled Wilson to seize any and all enemy property in the United States. Four million workers were placed in war-related jobs, another two million were shipped overseas courtesy of the Selective Service Act.

The White House led by public relations gesture (by this man who said he didn't care so much for public relations). They junked the White House automobile and the Wilsons rode around Washington in a horse-drawn carriage. Because of the labor shortage they got rid of the garden workers at the White House and replaced them with a flock of sheep. In fact, one wag started referring to the first lady as "Little Bo Peep." The problem with the sheep was they ate the shrubbery and the flowers, and in the end they turned out to be more expensive than the gardeners.

Thanks to the war, government engaged in behavior modification on an undreamed of scale. First, the army prohibited intoxicating drinks from areas enjoyed in hastily-constructed training camps. Then a grain shortage led Congress to outlaw the use of crops in distilling alcohol. If the red-faced patrons of tonic beer holes protested the sudden prosperity, so much the better. Cincinnati went a step further banning the consumption of German pretzels at the lunch hour. Sour crout was renamed liberty cabbage. In Iowa, the legislature passed a law making it a crime to speak on the telephone in any language but English. Daylight savings time was created by the Wilson administration -- it's still with us. One White House chef told to have dinner ready at seven o'clock asserted irritably, "by whose time -- Wilson's time or Christ's time?" It was said that everyone in the room laughed, although the president cracked a smile until he said "that is irreverent."

Wilson tragically justified his own prophecy. This is Wilson's own prediction about what would happen if the United States went into war: "Once lead this people into war and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance... the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into every fiber of our national life." Before the end of 1917, Wilson jailed a socialist candidate for president, a man named Eugene Debbs. He deported an anarchist named Emma Goldman for verbally impeding the draft. Hundreds of others were prosecuted under the Espionage Act, or hounded by jingos who smashed Beethoven records and banned German courses from the campus.

Wilson was in the end an orator intoxicated by his own eloquence, but words have their limits. "Sometimes people call me an idealist," he said. "Well that is the way I know I am an American. America is the only idealistic nation in the world." The Versailles Peace Conference at the end of the war exposed the limits of his glittering phrases and his idealism. Pitted against cynics like George Clemenceau of France and Lloyd George of Britain, America's sermonizing president didn't stand a chance. The "Fourteen Points" were wildly impractical, said the French leader. "God himself was content with Ten Commandments."

Wilson clung to his hopes and his ideals long after he destroyed his health, and in a supreme irony his own country's chances to enter the League of Nations, by which he had justified our entry into the war. He came back from Versailles, he realized that the Senate was not going to adopt the treaty -- that the United States would not go into the League -- so he decided to do what came naturally. He decided to go over the heads of the Senate, to get on a train, to go all over the country for several weeks and make speech after speech after speech. This is, of course, pre-radio, pre-television -- nothing like this had ever been done before. Wilson would single handedly convince the American people that if the war was to have any purpose, any meaning at all, it would have to be in a League of Nations to prevent future war.

Well, he destroyed his health in doing it. On the way back to Washington he suffered a stroke. It was the end of the tour. He came back and then two weeks later, in the middle of the night, suffered a crippling stroke. It effected not only his health, doctors now believe, it effected his mind in ways that made him absolutely unwilling to even entertain the possibility of compromise. The United States could have entered the League of Nations. They could have entered a League very close to the one that Woodrow Wilson had negotiated. In the end, it was Wilson himself who was absolutely unwilling to compromise -- not once but twice -- and as a result he was swept out of office in 1920. It became a referendum on the League, on what was called Wilsonism. There was a landslide in favor of a Republican from Ohio named Warren Harding.

Now Wilson in the last meeting of his cabinet said that he was going to teach ex-presidents how to behave. At the same time he said he was going to have real problems with Mr. Harding's English. Remember, he was a former professor. Someone once asked him to describe Harding's mind and he said "Warren Harding has a bungalow mind." Someone asked what did that mean and he said "no upper story."

He did not leave Washington. He and Edith retreated to a house in the Colorama neighborhood of the nation's capital. And there he became forgotten, or at least he thought so until something quite extraordinary happened at the very end of his life. On Armistice Day 1923, he made a brief radio speech -- it was the only time he spoke on the radio -- and the next morning to his astonishment he looked out into the street and there were twenty thousand people, many of them kneeling irreverently before this man who was seen as the great pilgrim of peace, the great wartime leader who justified war to end war, to make the world in fact safe for democracy. He had a walking stick, he called it his third leg, and he hobbled out to the front porch of the house and everyone fell quiet.



September 3, 2008: President Woodrow Wilson departed on a tour of the United States 89-years ago today, during which he gave speech after speech to win popular support for U.S. entry into the League of Nations. Part way through the tour, Wilson collapsed after a devastating stroke. He never recovered, and the Senate rejected the League.

He spoke a few words, common-place words about his pride and about the young men he had commanded as commander-in-chief. And then he said "I can't go on," and he turned around and he began to go back into the room. But then a band in the street began playing the old Protestant hymn "How Firm a Foundation," and it was as if someone had flipped a switch. Wilson said "stop the music I have something else to say." He hobbled back to the front of the house and then in a voice that people had not heard in three years, a voice that was firm and clear and absolutely convinced of its own righteousness, he told the twenty thousand people, "I have seen fools resist providence before and I have seen their destruction. That we shall prevail is as sure as God reigns."

He went back into the house. He was not seen again. Three months later another crowd gathered outside kneeling in the street because in the third of the four-bedroom house, Woodrow Wilson was dying. He died in February 1924. His last word was "Edith," and ever since there's been a debate raging about Woodrow Wilson and his legacy. Is the war in Iraq part of Woodrow Wilson's legacy? Is the notion that the United States has an almost divine mission not only to civilize the world but to democratize the world? Are we in fact a missionary nation? Is that Wilson's legacy? It's also the notion of collective security, of the world coming together and talking out its differences in the League of Nations -- what the United Nations was suppose to be and sometimes is. That is part of the Wilson legacy. In any event, Wilson has been gone for eighty years but I can't think of another president -- including Lincoln, including Washington -- of whom it can be said eighty-years after his death that he still lives, that he still influences policy-makers, for better or worse, and that he is still being debated about.

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*This essay was adapted from a lecture Richard Norton Smith delivered at the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies in 2006.*