



Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today by Tony Smith.

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Like so many Americans who came of age after World War II, political scientist Tony Smith (Tufts Univ.) has been frustrated and dismayed by the flagging fortunes of US foreign policy. In the Korean peninsula, Vietnam, Libya, or the Middle East, the United States' aims have seemed somehow destined to fail, whether it has deployed military forces and conducted occupations or supplied weapons and "advisors" to locals. But from 1945 to 1992, Smith writes, America enjoyed unrivaled supremacy around the globe, successfully rehabilitating both Japan and Germany and triumphing over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. These victories, according to Smith, resulted from a steadfast dedication to the laudable principles of "liberal internationalism" or "Wilsonianism." Specifically, he argues that US foreign policy in the period was solidly based on four principles that Wilson had shaped into the New Freedom at home and the Fourteen Points overseas.

One of these principles was an embrace of international free trade and open markets (read globalization). Second, and most essential, was vigorous promotion of human rights and democracy (that is, nation-building). Third was a series of multilateral security pacts, for example, the United Nations and NATO. A catalyzing fourth principle ensured the effect of the other three: an unstinting, deeply rooted faith in America's providential "mission." These, Smith argues, were the pillars of the classic, later, hegemonic Wilsonianism that served the United States so well right up to the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower (never mind the 1920s). Since then, however, this foreign policy philosophy has devolved into an aggressive, militaristic liberal internationalism espoused by both political parties. In the first half of *Why Wilson Matters*, Smith seeks to uncover, clarify, and reanimate the original Wilsonian brand of foreign policy (xvii-xviii). The second half of the book concerns the "neo-" and "imperial" Wilsonian years, from the Second World War to the present.

One or two synoptic paragraphs cannot do justice to the many astute shadings and subtleties of the book's argument. Unfortunately, Smith's addiction to a pedantic and reductionist quantitative technique of analysis saps the force of his narrative; too many schematic diagrams and prescriptive devices evoke dreary power-point presentations and professorial lecture notes. Beyond format and tone, a more serious problem is the failure to capture the true complexity and textural richness of the historical period under scrutiny. Granted, Smith is a political scientist seeking valid generalizations, not a historian interested in specific, telling details. Still, the book's arid prose style and over-reliance on abstract analytical categories are more than mere matters of literary taste.

The most glaring and significant example of narrative flattening is Smith's treatment of the man at the heart of his story—Woodrow Wilson. In his telling, the president was a man devoid of personality or even humanity, a dedicated theorist or ideologue rather than a flesh-and-blood politician and actor. Unsurprisingly, then, his Wilson is an advocate of consistent policies during the war and subsequent treaty negotiations, a stern Calvinist with Anglophile sensibilities. Absent here are the many twists and turns in Wilson's diplomacy in 1914-20, which reveal just how hesitant and opportunistic he really was. To wit: at the start of the war, Wilson espoused strict neutrality "in thought as well as in action," but

that soon gave way to a benevolent tilt when he permitted the British to borrow huge sums from American banks. In 1915, the United States was “too proud to fight,” even though the sinking of the *Lusitania* killed 128 Americans, the greatest loss of American lives in the prewar period. A series of binding strictures in “notes” to Germany finally trapped Wilson into declaring war in 1917—the only “honorable course”—despite his repeated claims that doing so would preclude the United States from mediating an impartial armistice.

As for the postwar settlement, Wilson’s visions of “peace without victory” and “peace among equals” do not begin to describe what he eventually agreed to in Paris. Of course, none of these inconsistencies necessarily besmirches Wilson, faced as he was with the terrible muddle of the First World War. They do, however, convict him of abandoning his transcendent vision of a new world order by acquiescing to the stubbornly punitive demands of David Lloyd-George, Georges Clemenceau, and isolationist Republicans in the US Senate. Nor did Wilson stay true to any set of idealistic historical principles distilled in the Fourteen Points (the standard textbook interpretation).

On the other hand, Smith’s omissions of and justifications for Wilson’s policies, especially in the Western Hemisphere, downplay unpleasant aspects of his foreign policy. Several overseas episodes, overshadowed by the momentous events of the Great War, undermine the author’s depiction of Wilson as a sort of martyred altruist. Inarguably, Wilson subscribed to America’s “exceptional” status among nations, firmly believing in its special “mission to redeem the world” (126). This conceit, Smith avers, may be traced to John Winthrop’s image of a “shining city on a hill” (137). Free trade and collective security also have taproots in America’s past. What distinguished Wilson’s version of the myth was his eagerness to play the mentor, if not taskmaster, to “lesser” nations and “backward” peoples, often resorting to military invasions and administrative coercion. “Discipline,” Wilson warned America’s colonial wards, “must precede [liberty], if necessary [even] the discipline of being under masters... We must govern with a strong hand that will brook no resistance” (74).

No previous president, not even Theodore Roosevelt or William Taft with their “dollar diplomacy,” compiled a longer or uglier record of interventions.¹ Two clearly and consistently enunciated motives underlay all these adventures: to foster representative government and to secure US strategic and economic interests. Smith argues unpersuasively that Wilson’s “progressive imperialism” was a benign effort to bring “stability” to (mostly non-white) nations. In fact, his true perspective is most evident in his florid pronouncements about “teaching” poor, underdeveloped peoples and governments a “lesson.” It is embedded in his declaration of America’s indispensability in an unruly world and in his arrogation of decisive and universal police powers that he handed down to his presidential successors.

The magnitude of such an undertaking required a massive mobilization of natural resources, industrial capabilities, and workers. Smith portrays the wartime regulatory state Wilson created as an extension of his domestic New Freedom program to international affairs. We may note that, in the process, Wilson also ushered in the American national security state. On his watch, any criticism of the war invited a long jail sentence; conscientious objectors were detained in concentration camps; political radicals were deported; and all anti-war material was barred from the mail. Civil liberties were unconstitutionally suppressed or curtailed. Vigilante groups were encouraged, pro-war propaganda was ubiquitous, and the nation embraced its first “Red Scare.” Wilson fed the flames with speeches decrying ethnic disloyalty (he coined the term “100 percent Americanism”), and stressed the nation’s duty to “make the world safe for democracy.” He tacitly endorsed all the regrettable measures of cen-

1. Including the incursions at Vera Cruz (1914) and across the Mexican border (1916–17); the extensions of Philippine and Puerto Rican dependency; unilateral military takeovers in Nicaragua (1914), Haiti (1915), Cuba (1916), and the Dominican Republic (1916); and the ill-fated Siberian expedition of 1919–20.

sorship and regimentation, including the Espionage and Sedition Acts (still on the books today). Yet his reputation never suffered for this unparalleled record of intolerance, emulated by later generations of Americans.

Nevertheless, criticisms of Wilson's failings and Smith's hagiography do not exclude him from the pantheon of great presidents, for reasons outside the purview of this review. Wilson's complicated legacy has endlessly perplexed historians; it is a very mixed story of successes and failures, heady aspirations and dismal defeats, lasting achievements and tragic outcomes. The same may be said about the "Wilsonianism" (a clumsy academic term) that Tony Smith so enthusiastically touts in *Why Wilson Matters*. Is the American ascent in the twentieth century really so uniformly admirable? A better question for intelligent readers to ask is "*which* Wilson matters?"