

# The Wilsonian Moment?

How are we to balance the principle of national sovereignty and fundamental issues of human rights when the two are in conflict? The debate began in earnest after World War I and continues to this day.

*by James Chace*

Walter Lippmann, 27 years old and one of the brightest young men in Washington, was working in the War Department in 1917. A crusading progressive journalist at the *New Republic*, Lippmann had once been enamored of Theodore Roosevelt but had become an avid supporter of Woodrow Wilson. He joined the office of Secretary of War Newton Baker in an advisory group that included the future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter and Eugene Meyer, later the publisher of the *Washington Post*. Lippmann established himself in the department as a standard-bearer for liberal causes, in particular that of protecting the press from arbitrary censorship. Using Wilsonian language, he reminded Wilson's éminence grise, Edward House, "We are fighting not so much to beat an enemy, as to make a world that is safe for democracy." Though he was not, in his own words, a "sentimental liberal," he recognized that liberals were vital constituents in Wilson's search for consensus.

Lippmann's toughness recommended itself to the president and to House (who liked to be called "Colonel," an honorary Texas title). One day in September, six months after the United States had entered the Great War, Colonel House asked to see

Lippmann on a secret matter: Wilson wanted to assemble a group of experts who would draw up material for an eventual peace conference. Lippmann was to be general secretary to the group, which would meet in New York under the rubric of "The Inquiry." Burying themselves in the offices of the American Geographical Society at 155th Street and Broadway, the members of The Inquiry pored over books and maps that would be critical to redrawing the frontiers of Europe. Lippmann did not exaggerate when he called the group's work "huge, superabundant, and overflowing."

As Ronald Steel recounts in his biography of Lippmann, the effort to apportion territory was seriously compromised by top-secret documents that Secretary Baker revealed to Lippmann one October afternoon at the War Department. The sheaf of agreements, which the Allies had signed with one another, spelled out how Britain, France, Italy, Russia, and Japan planned to compensate themselves once Germany was beaten. To Lippmann, a war that had already cost the antagonists millions of casualties now seemed to have been fought for reparations and territories. That hardly embodied the ideals to which Wilson was





*Tumultuous crowds greeted President Woodrow Wilson in Europe in 1919.*

committed. France was to recover Alsace and Lorraine, the two provinces it had lost to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, as well as parts of the Saarland. Great Britain was to get African colonies. Italy would be awarded the Austrian-held territories of Istria and Dalmatia. Japan would get the Shandong Peninsula of China. Wilson knew of these treaties, but he believed, as he told Colonel House, that when the war was over, the Allies could be brought around to his way of thinking, “because then, among other things, they will be dependent on us financially.”

With that inducement in reserve, Wilson and House went to work drafting and redrafting the contents of the memorandum Lippmann gave them. What had emerged from weeks of discussion by The Inquiry was the rough basis for

eight of the 14 points Wilson would present in a speech in January 1918 as the foundation of an enduring peace. The first five points and the fourteenth—dealing with open covenants openly arrived at, freedom of the seas, lower tariffs, disarmament, respect for colonial peoples, and, last but hardly least in Wilson’s schema, a League of Nations—the president added himself.

Points six through 13 took up the territorial provisions that had been the concern of The Inquiry. Wilson struggled to resolve the provisions’ inherent contradictions. He wanted to grant all peoples the right of self-determination and to acknowledge the legitimacy of their national aspirations, for he believed that to deny the legitimacy of nationalism by drawing boundaries that reflected dynastic claims would almost surely lead to conflict. Had not the war broken out because a Serbian nationalist



Walter Lippmann

killed the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, a rickety empire that imposed its rule over a congeries of peoples who were neither Austrian nor Hungarian? At the same time, Wilson and House were aware of the danger of creating states whose populations did not share a common culture.

They called for restoration of Belgium as a neutral nation and the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France (but not for French annexation of Germany's Saar region). Re-establishing the status quo in those two cases was relatively easy. But their other attempts to grant the principle of self-determination—while recognizing the need for large states to provide a measure of stability in Europe—foundered. What did it mean to redraw the Italian frontiers “along clearly recognizable lines” when the lines were by no means clear? Even more difficult to fulfill was their promise that the peoples of Austria-Hungary would be accorded “the freest opportunity of autonomous development.” Because Wilson and House did not intend to destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire, some definition of what was meant by

autonomy for peoples who would presumably continue to live within it should have been provided. But it was not. Serbia was supposed to have frontiers that rested on national, economic, and historical rights. But what about those non-Serbian peoples who lived among the Serbs? How were their national and historical rights to be satisfied? Finally, a restored Poland was to have access to the sea, which meant that Poland would have to include lands that were inhabited predominantly by ethnic Germans.

The effort to fulfill Wilson's dictum that ethnic self-determination be the bedrock rule was a noble one. But more often than not, both the Americans who worked at The Inquiry and Wilson himself, who adopted many of their recommendations, pretended that the inherent conflict between ethnic and economic boundaries did not exist. If a relatively homogenous state were created to fulfill the requirements of cultural homogeneity, it might not have the economic wherewithal to prosper. But an empire or other large supranational grouping that offered a common market for states not otherwise economically viable, and that provided overall security for its subject peoples, might well violate the principle of self-determination. And yet, was the alternative—breaking up the empire—likely to offer more stability?

In a message to Congress a month after he set forth his Fourteen Points, Wilson appeared to recognize the danger that any blanket promise of self-determination might pose for European stability. He declared that “all well-defined national aspirations shall be accorded the utmost satisfaction that can be accorded them without introducing new or perpetuating old elements of discord and antagonism that would be likely in time to break the peace of Europe and consequently of the world.” But although Wilson seemed to understand the danger that self-determination

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posed, he never faced the implications of the issue. Much the same dilemma confronts the European Union and the United States today as they attempt to reconcile demands for self-determination by the disparate peoples of former Yugoslavia with the need to create states that are viable in both their political and economic dimensions.

Despite the hard examination of maps and ethnic peoples that The Inquiry had undertaken, Wilson was woefully unprepared to deal with the other victorious powers at Versailles. While sailing to Europe on the ocean liner *George Washington*, he was telling Assistant Secretary of State William Bullitt about the plan to merge Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia into Tomas Masaryk's Czechoslovakia. "Bohemia will be a part of Czechoslovakia," Wilson explained. Bullitt, taken aback, responded, "But Mr. President, there are three million Germans in Bohemia." Wilson looked puzzled: "President Masaryk never told me that."

When it became clear that there was no way to satisfy the strict requirements for self-determination, Wilson simply fell back on his proposal for a League of Nations. The League would resolve disputes and make whatever settlements needed to be made. But how to ensure against aggression the territorial integrity of the European nations, both old and new? Wilson argued that "the only method by which we can achieve this end lies in our having confidence in the good faith of the nations who belong to the League." He promised that "when danger comes, we [i.e., America] too will come, and we will help you, but you must trust us." Trust is hardly the common currency of nations. But the essential factor, Wilson believed, was that international misunderstandings would be subject, through the League, to "the moral force of public opinion in the world."

**A**t Versailles, Wilson insisted that Britain's prime minister, Lloyd George, and France's premier, Georges Clemenceau, demonstrate to him that what they wanted—territorial settlements based on the power realities of Europe, no matter what the fate of minorities—would conform to his lofty pronouncements. That

gave rise, in the words of John Maynard Keynes, then a young official in the British Treasury who was at Versailles, to "the weaving of that web of sophistry and Jesuitical exegesis that was finally to clothe with insincerity the language and substance of the whole Treaty."

Even many of his most devoted admirers have admitted that Wilson was overwhelmed at Versailles by the machinations of the European statesmen—in a Jamesian sense, by the very corruptions of Europe that he had sought to exorcise. At home, the U.S. Senate subsequently defeated his hopes for American membership in the League, a defeat born largely of his own intransigence. He absolutely refused to accept any part of the reservations proposed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In essence, the committee asserted that America would assume no obligation to preserve the territorial integrity or political independence of any country unless authorized to do so by Congress. Asked by the French ambassador whether he would accept the senatorial restrictions, Wilson retorted: "I shall consent to nothing. The Senate must take its medicine." The Senate refused. So the map of Europe was redrawn at Versailles, but the League, which was to implement Wilson's idealistic vision, was born an empty shell.

**W**ilson's ghost (the words provide the title of a recent book by former secretary of defense Robert McNamara and Brown University professor James Blight) has come to haunt the would-be peacemakers of the 21st century. McNamara and Blight acknowledge that Wilson "inadvertently set the 20th century on its chaotic and violent course of communal killing by failing to grapple successfully with problems of self-determination and ethnic and religious conflict." But they note as well that Wilson "believed in the power of human beings to change the course of history for the better," and thought that "the world's peace ought to be disturbed if the fundamental rights of humanity are invaded." His vision survives because it tapped into a deep strain of America's sense of itself: The United States

## Wilson's Moment?

was ordained for a special role in the world. In Wilson's words, "America was established in order to indicate, at any rate in one government, the fundamental rights of man. America must hereafter be ready as a member of the family of nations to exert her whole force, moral and physical, to the assertion of those rights throughout the round globe."

Wilson understood that Americans are, after all, most comfortable with a foreign policy imbued with moral purpose. Even when the pursuit of justice has led to unintended consequences, even when our ideals have concealed, from ourselves and from others, motivations of a darker and more complex nature, we have preferred a policy based, at least rhetorically, on moral purpose rather than on self-interest. This vision of America as the redeemer nation was perfectly expressed by John Adams when he wrote in his diary, 11 years before the Declaration of Independence, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."

Wilson himself might have written those words. But Adams's paean to American exceptionalism should be set against the cautionary but no less eloquent words of Alexander Hamilton, who warned Americans to reject "idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exception from the imperfections, weaknesses, and evils incident to society in every shape." In *The Federalist* 6, Hamilton asked, "Is it not time to awaken from the deceitful dream of a golden age and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue?"

Hamilton went unheeded. The Wilsonian assertion that America's role in World War I reflected divine will was a resonant echo of American exceptionalism: "It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way." After World War I, after World War II, and after the Cold

War, America proclaimed a new world order by applying its stated domestic values to the world beyond its shores.

With the Cold War over, Wilson's view that the worldwide spread of democratic institutions is the key to peace has been adopted by both major American political parties. His appeal to American exceptionalism resonates in the triumphalist era that has marked the emergence of the United States as the most powerful imperium since ancient Rome. But the problem of reconciling a respect for sovereignty with intervention in states that scorn any commitment to democracy and violate fundamental norms of human rights remains as knotty as ever. What, in fact, are the American canons for intervention?

Some interventions can be defended easily on realist grounds, as matters of national interest. Thus, the United States would surely intervene to protect its national territory or its dependencies—for example, Puerto Rico or Guam. It would also honor its commitments to allies in the Atlantic Alliance and to Japan. And trouble in other countries closely aligned with the United States, such as South Korea and Israel, would likely trigger some form of intervention.

Additional situations might also bring intervention by the United States and other powers, whether under the rubric of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the European Union, or simply as a coalition of the willing: (1) aggression that threatens regional stability, or (2) massive or systemic violations of human rights. Such situations force us to confront the central issue of sovereignty—that any intervention by one (or more than one) nation necessarily involves violation of the sovereignty of another. The principle of sovereignty remains as problematic as it was in Wilson's day. So under what principle is the violation of other nations' sovereignty to be justified?

The global economy provides strong incentives for states to limit their sovereignty. But intervention to prevent a nation's withdrawal from, say, the World Trade Organization is highly unlikely. If a country such as Myanmar (the former

Burma) chooses to isolate itself from global economic and political organizations, no one will mount an invasion to force the government to end its isolation. But if Myanmar were to attack Thailand, intervention by other powers to curb the aggression would be a distinct possibility.

Political economist Stephen Krasner has pointed out that “the struggle to establish international rules that compel leaders to treat their subjects in a certain way has been going on for a long time.” The Congress of Vienna in 1815 guaranteed religious toleration for Catholics in the Netherlands. Successor states of the Ottoman Empire, beginning with Greece in 1832, had to accept civic and political equality for religious minorities as a condition for international recognition. Peace settlements after World War I included extensive provisions for the protection of minorities, but because those provisions were not backed by a credible threat of force, many of them failed. During the post-World War II period, the United Nations endorsed both human rights and the principle of sovereignty. Yet, as we have seen in the former Yugoslavia, human rights violations ceased there only when an external authority controlled the domestic structures of the states, as in Bosnia, or when a state became a virtual protectorate, as with Kosovo, many of whose affairs are overseen by NATO. Therefore, we should not only examine the conditions under which great powers intervene but evaluate the means by which a military intervention can succeed. When UN peacekeepers were first sent into Bosnia, they were ineffective because their guns were muzzled. Unable to fire first or credibly threaten to fire to repel an attack, they suffered numerous casualties without bringing peace to the



A 1915 poster solicited American dollars to aid the Serbian cause.

region. Only when the United States joined the conflict was peace restored. Similarly, in Kosovo, NATO was able to operate without shackles on its use of firepower.

The essential preconditions for any humanitarian intervention must be that it is the last feasible option to stop mass slaughter and that the intervention is likely to do more good than harm. Kenneth Roth, the director of Human Rights Watch, acknowledges that “in war some unintentional killing of noncombatants may be unavoidable. Humanitarian law provides the best standard we have for distinguishing unfortunate but unintentional loss of civilian life from the deliberate targeting of civilians or their killing through indiscriminate warfare.” But even if that standard applies, no major power today will countenance any violation of its own sovereignty—although a Wilsonian appeal



A 1920 cartoon evokes Americans' ambivalence about the effectiveness of the League of Nations.

to world public opinion, amplified by international media attention, might persuade a great power to modify its policies and curb its persistent and excessive violations of human rights. And if the major power is a nuclear power—as is, for example, Russia, committing atrocities in Chechnya—there is a risk that the use of military force would, in Roth's words, “trigger accelerated or broader killing that the intervenor is unable or unwilling to prevent.”

Are the humanitarian criteria for intervention nonetheless so compelling that the great powers will act even when action involves a clear violation of the sovereignty of others? Great powers that habitually vio-

late human rights, such as China and (in Chechnya, at least) Russia, can hardly be expected to endorse interventions elsewhere that might help to legitimize the practice of compromising sovereignty in the name of human rights. Nor can one imagine that the United States would accept any violation of its own sovereignty, including the sphere-of-influence sovereignty it holds in the Caribbean-Mexican-Central American region.

If it should prove impossible to assemble a coalition of the willing, would the consequence be an America whose hegemony allows it to act as it chooses? And would we then see, in the new century,

the exercise of American unilateralism linked to and justified in the name of human rights—a neo-Wilsonian attempt “to make the world safe for democracy”? Implementing Wilsonian goals at a time when the United States enjoys such a preponderance of power will almost certainly prove a near-impossible task, for a hegemonic power such as America is bound to be resented. Other big powers, such as Russia and China, are unlikely to endorse the view, put forward by America, that the principle of sovereignty can be violated in the name of humanitarian goals as defined by Washington.

No less difficult to implement will be the doctrine (which Wilson would have endorsed) that international politics should be submitted to extranational judicial procedures, such as the workings of the International Criminal Court, and that some crimes, such as genocide, are so heinous that their perpetrators should not be able to escape justice simply by invoking the sacred principle of sovereignty. The concern is that enforcing the doctrine would lead to a global gendarmerie headed by the United States—even as the United States insisted on being exempt from any prosecution by an international judicial body on the grounds that it would never commit such heinous crimes. But there is little reason to believe that a global police force will come into being. A more realistic scenario would have America, and the other great powers, applying pressure on countries that shelter war criminals. That was done successfully when the United States used economic coercion to persuade the new Serbian government to surrender Slobodan Milosevic to the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

If the United States still harbors Wilsonian dreams, it would do well to muzzle its unilateralism and conduct its foreign policy in concert with other powers. In a sense, that has already occurred. The recent interventions in the former Yugoslavia and the Horn of Africa have been mounted under the banner of multilateralism. But as political scientist Tony

Smith, one of the most eloquent spokesmen for neo-Wilsonianism, has observed, “‘Multilateralism’ may be little more than a polite way of camouflaging what in practice is unilateralism with allies. The degree of U.S. power is so great relative to that of America’s often disunited allies that we should not be misled by labels.” The United States should continue to seek a concert of powers whose shared values—the practice of democracy and the integrity of the judicial system—will permit coalitions of the willing to intervene across borders to call to order those states that violate any reasonable norms of human rights. In the pursuit of justice, America will simply have to pretend that it is only first among equals, its ideals tightly fastened to the realities of power among nations.

Wilsonian ideals are being invoked by Europeans with renewed enthusiasm at the dawning of the 21st century, but in the United States at least, the Wilsonian moment has not arrived. The Bush administration has refused to adhere to an array of agreements that its closest allies have approved. It has refused to seek ratification of a treaty that would require industrialized nations to cut emissions of gases linked to global warming. It has refused to endorse a draft accord to ban biological weapons. It will not become a member of the International Criminal Court. It will not send back to the Senate for reconsideration the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty.

Though the United States guards its sovereignty these days to a degree that would have horrified Wilson, the Wilsonian vision of a more just world has not evaporated. The individuals who made up The Inquiry in 1917 struggled to acknowledge the legitimacy of a people’s need for national identity, even as they demanded loyalty to a higher standard than the national interest narrowly defined. The issue is as paramount today as it was then. The new inquiry into these matters may well have to take place without government sanction, but in time its findings will almost surely be reflected in American foreign policy. □