
Necessity and Principle: Woodrow Wilson's Views

Author(s): Laurence W. Martin

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Jan., 1960), pp. 96-114

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) for the [University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1405268>

Accessed: 06/07/2012 11:50

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press and University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Politics*.

Necessity and Principle: Woodrow Wilson's Views

Laurence W. Martin

WOODROW WILSON continues to arouse remarkably sharp and sustained controversy among those concerned with the recent revival of interest in the problem of ethics in foreign policy. Much of this debate is joined over the apparent antithesis between ethical demands for amicable cooperation among states and a compulsion to adopt antagonistic policies in order to survive in the rough and tumble of international politics. One side in this debate regards Wilson as the exemplar of sane views; the other attacks him as the chief symbol of naive misunderstanding.

The conflict which persistently arises between the requirements of self-defense and the obligation or desire to behave benevolently toward other nations and accomodate their interests, is sometimes expressed as a conflict between state necessity and moral principle. This formulation is perfectly adequate for common sense discourse but it can give rise to arid verbal controversy in the prolonged and intense debates which this topic often provokes. For "principle" is a very capacious term and one can embrace necessity within it or even make a principle of necessity itself. This terminological nicety is not, of course, the real subject to which generations of political theorists have addressed themselves. The driving force has been the real difference between various patterns of practical policy, amiable or ferocious, which nations can pursue toward each other. In practical politics the choice lies between certain kinds of self-assertion which most workable codes of morality countenance under certain conditions of "necessity" and the amicable, cooperative relationships which the same codes prescribe as the ideal end to be sought. The important issue, then, is not whether "principle" overrides "necessity," but to what extent certain kinds of cooperative policy can be safely and consistently pursued.

Virtually no one has recommended foreign policies entailing the complete self-sacrifice of the state and, on the other hand, few have advocated a total disregard for the lot of other nations. Most Anglo-American thinkers have looked for a compromise which

would be closer to one or the other extreme according to the temperament of the individual in question. In that early "great debate" between Hamilton and Jefferson, for example, Hamilton, in the very process of warning against altruism and urging that American policy be based firmly on self-interest, felt obliged to add "as far as justice and good faith permit." At the same juncture, Jefferson, insisting that policy be guided by moral obligations to the rest of mankind, even at the expense of national interests, qualified his remarks by conceding that in circumstances of real danger, "the law of self-preservation overrules the laws of obligation to others."¹ Most Anglo-American observers have found themselves making similar compromises between the extreme alternatives of utterly unrestrained self-assertion and complete self-abnegation before the assertions of others.² It is the difficulty of striking a satisfying balance that occasions the endless debate, and it helps but little to dispute whether concessions to the demands of self-defense are within the moral system or encroachments upon it.

Woodrow Wilson never offered a systematic treatment of this problem, but his whole career—not merely his utterances—was inevitably concerned with it. Discussions of Woodrow Wilson's thought are misleading if one does not recall at the outset that Wilson made his mark on the world as a statesman, not as a political philosopher. Undoubtedly it is because Wilson was President of the United States during a world crisis that his views have exercised such a powerful influence on subsequent theories of international relations. For exactly the same reason Wilson was daily compelled to test his views in action and to perform those limitless calculations of policy-making which most political thinkers merely analyze from afar. Moreover, Wilson was a statesman who relied heavily on his public utterances as an instrument to achieve his objectives. Very many of

¹ Arnold Wolfers and Laurence W. Martin, eds., *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs* (New Haven, 1956), pp. 148, 157.

² David Hume offered an example of a particularly explicit compromise when he asserted that "there is a system of morals calculated for princes, much more free than that which ought to govern private persons . . . though the intercourse of states be advantageous, and even sometimes necessary, yet it is not so necessary nor advantageous as that among individuals, without which it is utterly impossible for human nature ever to subsist. Since, therefore, the natural obligation to justice, among different states, is not so strong as among individuals, the moral obligation which arises from it must partake of its weakness, and we must necessarily give a greater indulgence to a prince or minister who deceives another than to a private gentleman who breaks his word of honour." *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

his speeches were extemporaneous and all were delivered by a man who believed that great issues had to be simplified and dramatized if they were to strike home to the public. To Wilson, the task of mobilizing opinion was not simply that of rational persuasion. "Man," he asserted, "is much more than a 'rational being,' and lives more by sympathies and impressions than by conclusions." Consequently, as he observed on a later occasion, "men are not led by being told that they don't know. Persuasion is a force, but not information; and persuasion is accomplished by creeping into the confidence of those you would lead. Their confidence is gained by qualities which they can recognize, by arguments they can assimilate."³

This theory of rhetoric, combined with Wilson's involvement in day to day affairs, accounts for many of Wilson's pronouncements being confusing and contradictory if all of them are taken at face value. Many of his wartime utterances, quite naturally, were calculated to produce an effect which only partly reflected Wilson's own attitude to the question under discussion. Thus, at a time when he was making a series of exhortations extolling the use of force, the President privately confessed that he had understated the limitations of force because, "it is so difficult in any kind of a speech . . . to express two things that seem to be going off in opposite directions. . . ."⁴ In this way the task of evaluating Wilson's position is complicated but it is possible to discern the general tendency of his thought, which is what has made him symbolic of a distinctive approach to foreign affairs.

An exhaustive treatment of the substance and influence of Wilson's thought would, of course, be matter for a large volume. Here it is only intended to suggest an approach and framework in keeping with much contemporary speculation on necessity and principle in foreign policy.

In nearly all his utterances Wilson gave pre-eminent place to moral principle as the basis of policy. He made incessant use of the word "principle" itself, tirelessly avowing the need for enduring and stable moral standards as a basis for action. "Do not think," he warned, "that the questions of our day are mere questions of

³ August Heckscher, *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1956), pp. 56, 72.

⁴ Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson, Life and Letters* (New York, 1939), VIII, 80.

policy and diplomacy. They are shot through with the principles of life. We dare not turn from the principle that morality and not expediency is the thing that must guide us. . . . ” “The world is becoming more complicated every day. . . . ” he declared, “And, therefore, I am glad that there are some simple things in the world. One of the simple things is principle.”⁵

Wilson drew the basic content of his principles from the Biblical exhortations to good will toward all men. Over the years Wilson bestowed the title of principle on a bewildering range of precepts and rules for foreign policy, ranging from justice, liberty, and equality to open diplomacy and the freedom of the seas. But the centerpiece was always a conviction that nations were under exactly the same obligations as individuals to act in ways conducive to the welfare of their neighbors. This assertion that state conduct must follow the patterns laid down for individuals in a stable Western society was one of the ideas most highly prized by Wilson and his advisor, Colonel House. It is an idea which recurs frequently in the history of liberal thought on foreign affairs. Oversimple, if taken literally, it reflected a genuine longing for a relaxation of tension in international relations and the establishment of conditions in which mutual trust is strong enough to permit generous behavior.

A nation should not only seek “nothing that can be had only at the cost of another people,” but also try to perform whatever positive services it can render, “to serve and not subdue the world.”⁶ Wilson was deeply anxious that America’s own new world power should be well used. He explained this most clearly in an address on Independence Day, 1914, when he demanded,

What are we going to do with the influence and power of this great nation? Are we going to play the old role of using that power for our aggrandizement and material benefit only? . . . We set this nation up, at any rate we professed to set it up, to vindicate the rights of man. . . . We cannot, with that great ideal set before us when we were a young nation and numbered only a scant three million, take upon ourselves now that we are a hundred million strong any other conception of duty than we then entertained.⁷

Wilson developed the notion of national duty while giving his first cursory attention to foreign affairs, before his political career began.

⁵ Ray Stannard Baker and Williams E. Dodd, eds., *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (6 vols., New York, 1925-27), III, 69, 145.

⁶ *Ibid.*, V, 3; I, 442.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 142.

At that time he seems to have thought of the positive obligations largely in terms of an ill-defined share of the white man's burden, aimed at the ultimate spread of democracy. But the idea of a broader national obligation to undertake the "tasks and duties of neighborhood"⁸ formed the background of his efforts as President to recompense Colombia for the seizure of Panama, of his concessions on Panama tolls, of his "missionary diplomacy"⁹ in Mexico and the Caribbean, and persisted even after the World War made Wilson a leading prophet of America's total involvement in international politics, with correspondingly more arduous obligations.

Wilson derived the national duty of refraining from policies detrimental to other countries from his religion and his firm belief that men could in no way dilute or submerge their responsibility by membership in a group. In his eyes men could not "compound their conscientious scruples on the ground that they are not free to move independently; that they are simply parts of a great whole, whether they wish to or not."¹⁰ National service to the welfare of others was therefore morally required, even at the cost of real sacrifice. Thus, for example, Wilson hoped to "prove to the Mexican people that we know how to serve them without first thinking of how we shall serve ourselves."¹¹ The reward would be a sense of duty well done.

But Wilson obviously did not believe that real sacrifices would often be required. "The disinterested course," he explained, "is always the biggest course to pursue not only (*sic*), but it is in the long run the most profitable course to pursue."¹² Apparently, he meant that objectives inimical to the best interests of others would in any case be illusory, and would be more than outweighed by the opposition they would provoke and the effort that their realization would consume. Giving up such ambitions would earn good will and release corresponding energy for more worthwhile pursuits.

In other words, policies detrimental to the interests of other nations were costly as well as immoral. Wilson believed that the fruits of such policies would normally be more than offset by their

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 412. The accent on neighborhood is an echo of his mentor Edmund Burke, who had asserted a "law of neighborhood which does not leave a man perfect master on his own ground."

⁹ The phrase is taken from Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York, 1954), p. 82.

¹⁰ *Public Papers*, II, 179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III, 35-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, III, 196.

direct costs and by the liabilities indirectly incurred by helping to perpetuate tension and struggle as an international system. The true interests of a state, he implied, could be most effectively sought by amicable procedures. Thus conduct guided by Christian good will would ensure the most genuine and permanent success in this world as well as the next. On the broadest interpretation, then, Wilson's foreign policy may be viewed as a bold attempt to develop and apply a code of national behavior which would resolve the tension between altruism and national security. This suggested a harmony of interests, at least to the extent that in disputes it was theoretically possible to work out a peaceful settlement which would be more profitable for all parties than any forced solution, perhaps arrived at by violence. Policies designed to accomodate the welfare of other nations could therefore be materially as well as morally satisfying.

Assuming, in this fashion, that the fundamental interests of people everywhere were reconcilable, Wilson did not confine his hopes to the establishment of an ethical foreign policy for America alone. He was confident that the rapid and irresistible spread of democracy was creating the conditions for a virtually universal readiness to adjust differences by peaceful means according to principles of mutual benefit, or, as Wilson very often put it, of right and justice. He realized that this called for drastic changes of attitude but he saw no reason why growing appreciation of the long-term compatibility of national interests and the establishment of governments with those interests at heart should not produce what he termed "a new international psychology." "National purposes," he rejoiced, during the war, "have fallen more and more into the background and the common purpose of enlightened mankind has taken their place."¹³ Controversies which continued to defy settlement by direct negotiation could be handled by institutionalized methods akin to those employed in domestic society. Thus the League of Nations, to which Wilson devoted his final energies, was to embody a long-cherished concept of mutual accommodation: "a definite tribunal of opinion to which all must submit and by which every international readjustment that cannot be amicably agreed upon by the parties directly concerned shall be sanctioned."¹⁴ The obliga-

¹³ *Ibid.*, V, 363, 259.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

tions of membership would be handsomely offset by relief from the anxieties and costs of the old anarchy.

The new world order which Wilson espoused during the war was therefore intended to mitigate the conflict between neighborly duty and national self-assertion. But this did not answer the problem of where an "enlightened" nation should draw the line in the interim. Was a well-intentioned nation to behave in the existing state of world politics as it might be expected to do under the new order, or would self-preservation justify actions which would be reprehensible under more ideal conditions? Would the new order itself contain imperfection requiring equivalent deviations in national policy?

It must be admitted that Wilson did not devote much rigorous attention to this problem. This was largely because almost as soon as he abandoned the idea of a limited involvement in foreign affairs, he took up the scheme for world organization. But in his few references to the question Wilson conceded that, under prevailing conditions, effective foreign policy would require certain deviations from the pattern of behavior which a well-meaning nation would like to pursue and which, presumably, would become practicable in an effective league of nations. He confessed that America had first call upon his own concern and that the general benevolence, which he believed characterized the attitude of Americans toward other nations, was intimately associated with the margin of safety provided by the prosperity and security of the United States. "We can afford," he observed, "to exercise the self-restraint of a really great nation which realized its own strength and scorns to misuse it."¹⁵ There is nothing to indicate that Wilson contemplated any great sacrifices of the blessings enjoyed by the United States. He was, in fact, quite clearly ready to defend what he regarded as American rights — largely territorial integrity and opportunity for economic enterprise abroad—against any "influences intruded from without" even at the cost of resorting to force or full-scale war. This was consonant with Wilson's general insistence upon a legitimate role for force in politics. "In the last analysis," he once informed a gathering of pacifists, "the peace of society is obtained by force and . . . suppose . . . you say, 'We shall not have any war,' you have got to have the force to make that 'shall' bite." Adequate concern

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 42, 49.

for the interests of others did not preclude an active defense of the rights of one's own nation.¹⁶

Wilson further acknowledged that the nations of Europe, lacking America's geographical good fortune, were a great deal more troubled by "influences from without" and were therefore compelled to take correspondingly more drastic steps to meet them. He recognized that the European belligerents, including Germany, sincerely believed that they were fighting for the "lives and honor of their nations."¹⁷ The war had arisen from an atmosphere of mutual fear. As a result France, for example, had not unreasonably felt herself in "immediate peril" and "constant dread" which placed her under a "genuine pressing necessity of preparation."¹⁸ This tension would survive the fighting if nations did not reform their relationships and the war had convinced Wilson that the United States would have to join in the process of arming heavily against the contingency of foreign dangers.¹⁹

Threats might arise, then, which could only be met by the mobilization of power and use of large-scale violence to assert the nation's self-interest. The acknowledgment that the nature of international politics was such as to require frequent forcible opposition to other nations' desires raised another important problem. Given all possible eagerness to be accommodating, could a statesman really hope to draw a line between legitimate self-defense and excessive precautions leading to immoderate demands on others? Could the leaders of nations striving to be peaceful and cooperative actually identify the best course between aggression and self-immolation? Indeed, even if there were good will on all sides, could statesmen design a workable international organization and devise generally acceptable solutions to international issues which would blend each nation's aspirations relatively painlessly with those of others?

While Wilson's optimism was formidable, he was more aware of the moral and practical problems posed by the complexity of diplomatic questions than is frequently assumed. At the very beginning of his political career, he paid at least lip service to his awareness of the complexity of public affairs and the effect this must have

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 414; Harley Notter, *The Origins of the Foreign Policy of Woodrow Wilson* (Baltimore, 1937), p. 515.

¹⁷ *Public Papers.*, IV, 48; V, 132-33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, V, 406.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

on moral judgment. Dealing with the question of the trusts, Wilson, eager as always to hold men individually responsible, nevertheless admitted that in the ramifications of modern business, men might perform socially undesirable actions unwittingly. Even when conscious of their responsibility, men might be genuinely perplexed as to what was the proper course. Before entering politics Wilson had confessed that "moral judgments have never been simple: they have always been complicated by a thousand circumstances which puzzle the will; but they have never been so difficult and complicated as they are now."²⁰ Men did not have a clean slate on which to write but were compelled to deal with the situations they found. Political leaders in particular were limited by the constant need to ensure consent and support from their followers.

Although he thus early perceived the problem posed by the "net of complicated circumstances"²¹ Wilson was slow to indicate what conclusions he would draw for the conduct of international relations. In the years of his inexperience foreign affairs may well have seemed simpler because they were remote. For two or three years after war broke out in Europe Wilson refused to interest himself in the details of the dispute among the belligerents. Partly the natural caution of the neutral, this was also the result of such engrossment with the idea of a new spirit in international dealings that he neglected to consider how he might embody the spirit in precise arrangements. There can be no doubt that Wilson's personal inclinations led him to prefer the development of broad propositions to worrying about details of application. This conduct persisted for some time after America entered the war but, as the climax approached, the President began to pay attention to particular issues, setting up the Inquiry and issuing his Fourteen Points and similar declarations. As he did so he revealed a healthy respect for the difficulties involved and a recognition of the need for precision. "We ought not to consider remedies merely because they have a sonorous sound," he suggested. "Practical questions can be settled only by practical means."²²

By the time he went to the Peace Conference, though he could

²⁰ Heckscher, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²¹ *Public Papers*, II, 208.

²² *Ibid.*, V, 50-51. Grappling painfully with the problems presented by Bolshevik Russia, Wilson confided to Masaryk: "I have felt no confidence in my personal judgment about the complicated situation in Russia and am reassured that you should approve what I have done." Baker, *Life and Letters*, VIII, 323.

still say, "Tell me what is right and I'll fight for it,"²³ Wilson's remarks suggested growing appreciation of perplexities ahead. "We have used great words . . . and now," he acknowledged, "we are to prove whether or not we understand those words and how they are to be applied to the particular settlements which must conclude this war."²⁴ It was this caution, this belief that many of the questions were "not susceptible of confident judgments at present" that led him to advance his well-known theory that "we can set up permanent processes. We may not be able to set up permanent decisions."²⁵ The League of Nations, therefore, assumed greater importance as the permanent process of adjustment, of applying the essential principle in a world of partial arrangements.

After Versailles — "the Paris education of Woodrow Wilson," as Charles Seymour has recently and aptly called it²⁶ — Wilson can be seen fully chastened by the impact of circumstances on principles. It was "not easy," he explained, "to graft the new order of ideas on the old, and some of the fruits of the grafting may, I fear, for a time be bitter." "The work of the conference squares, as a whole, with the principles agreed upon as well as with the practical possibilities of the international situation which had to be faced and dealt with as facts."²⁷

Thus for at least two interrelated reasons even nations of good will were bound to fall short of the kinds of conduct their moral impulses urged them to observe toward their neighbors. These reasons were, first, the need to counter the immoderate ambitions of others and, second, the difficulty of calculating ways to do this so as to strike a proper balance between a just defense and excessively overbearing countermeasures. A question naturally arises as to whether these limitations on the possibility of fully living up to the ideal of ethical international behavior left room for any significant moral distinctions between foreign policies. Did policies compromising conduct preferable on moral grounds with the need to protect self-interest in an imperfect arena have any claim at all to be regarded as moral? Were all policies which did not carry

²³ Charles Seymour, ed., *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (4 Vols., Boston, 1926-28), IV, 283.

²⁴ *Public Papers*, V, 237-38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 395-6.

²⁶ "The Paris Education of Woodrow Wilson," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXXII (Fall, 1956).

²⁷ *Public Papers*, V, 541, 549.

self-abnegation to the point of self-immolation indistinguishably immoral?

Wilson believed it was possible to draw meaningful distinctions; that the moderation imposed on policies of pure national self-interest by ethically inspired efforts to accomodate the welfare of others could produce results morally distinguishable from policies not under such restraints. From this perspective, it was not ridiculous to speak of a moral compromise, embodied in policies which tended toward the kinds of concrete action called for by moral imperatives. Compromise was in fact "the true gospel of politics." "But," Wilson insisted,

it depends almost altogether on how you conceive and define compromise . . . all growth is a process of compromise of the vital forces within the organism with the physical forces without, which constitute its environment. Yet, growth is not dishonest. Neither need compromise in politics be dishonest if only it be progressive.²⁸

It was, then, a matter of prudence, of using sense and judgment to maintain an advance. "The question is not pace," said Wilson, ". . . that is not a matter of principle. Where the individual should be indomitable is in the choice of direction. . . ."²⁹

Thus by espousing the cause of moral principle Wilson did not reject or ignore necessity. He embraced necessity within principle and admitted that the requirements of self-preservation and the complexities of international relations made it virtually impossible to realize fully his ideal of mutual service. Not even the new order under the League would be perfect. It was therefore necessary to make do with policies which were merely the best approximation to principle possible under the circumstances. But by his distinction between pace and direction, Wilson apparently intended to avoid making a virtue of this relativism by regarding the approximations as wholly satisfactory. Even the best approximations remained imperfect. Moral principles, then, could not be policies, but standards by which policies were to be measured and modified.

Resignation to policies which only partially accord with principle entails the risk that any policy, however selfish, may be represented as the best possible in the circumstances. Wilson's own temperamental desire to be virtuous and recognized as such, con-

²⁸ Heckscher, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

²⁹ *Public Papers*, I, 184-185.

stantly tempted him to present his own policies as without blemish. The only guardian against this danger is prudence, the good judgment of the statesman. This may appear a weak reed on which to lean and a poor reward for so much speculation. But a full awareness of the dilemma of principle and necessity, of the inescapable imperfections of policy, can greatly strengthen the incentive for constant self-criticism and reconsideration of past decisions. True, the necessities of international politics sometimes become so pressing as to demand policies which are scarcely distinguishable from those based on pure self-seeking. But if the world is not always as easy-going a place as Wilson occasionally seemed to suggest, neither is it as grim an environment as some of his more extreme critics depict. Aspects of national well-being are often thrown in question but survival itself is not always at stake, and when it is, there usually remain choices as to how the danger shall be met.

To deny the very possibility of striking a practical balance between altruism and survival would come close to denying the possibility of being guided by a moral code in any field of endeavor, short of absolute perfectionism. Difficult in theory, in practice the effort may show results and a great many of the most respected political theorists have recognized the value of the attempt. In the words of Edmund Burke, "No lines can be laid down for civil or political wisdom. They are a matter incapable of exact definition. But, though no man can draw a stroke between the confines of day and night, yet light and darkness are upon the whole tolerably distinguishable."³⁰

Wilson's personal attempt to meet a great world crisis with a foreign policy based on this philosophy has brought upon him vehement accusations of naivete or hypocrisy. The nature of the charges is such that their validity cannot be finally determined, but any assessment worthy of respect must rest upon a careful examination of the record. Detailed studies of the ways in which the ethical principles of statesmen have actually emanated in policy, and with what result, deserve more attention as a means of bringing discussions of ethics and foreign policy down to earth. Here it is only possible to suggest one approach to perhaps the most serious and provocative of the charges: that Wilson's views on morality in foreign policy led him to wage a self-righteous crusade which injected an unnecessary rancor into the war and subsequent settle-

³⁰ *Works of Edmund Burke* (12 vols., Boston, 1865-67), I, 477.

ment, contributing directly to the disastrous aftermath of the Versailles Treaty. Did Wilson's policies serve narrowly selfish policies cloaked in moral forms; were they naively ineffective or were they a consistent and respectable, if imperfect and unsuccessful, attempt to establish a settlement in which his principle of harmonious co-operation would be more generally and easily applied?

There is no gainsaying that Wilson's devotion to the notion of moral principle in diplomacy, combined with his temperamental need to be widely acknowledged as right on moral issues, impelled him to adopt a highly dogmatic and sententious attitude on a number of important questions and to apply the cautions which can be drawn from a relativistic ethic all too rarely to his own actions. The task of giving the nation a strong lead in wartime doubtless reinforced this tendency. However useful this dogmatism was to Wilson as a war leader, the characteristic had several very undesirable consequences. For example, it disposed him to invest the policy of the moment with something of the sanctity of the purposes it was intended to serve. Thus, neutrality, neutral rights, freedom of the seas, resistance to a program of military preparedness, all seemed temporarily beyond criticism.³¹ This confused Wilson's followers and made the President himself slow to abandon unsuccessful policies, to prepare alternative courses of action, and to adopt them.

Once in the war Wilson lent his formidable eloquence to depicting the war as a crusade, the enemy as extraordinarily evil, his own side as entirely justified. Forgetting or choosing to overlook the tortuous path by which the war had come to America, he presented the nation's cause as a simple dedication to righteousness. America was to be "an instrument in the hand of God."³² The coming peace necessarily took on the appearance of a millenium. In this connection Wilson, used expressions which no sound statesman, and no Christian, could properly adopt. He promised "peace by the overcoming of evil, by the defeat *once for all* of the sinister forces that interrupt peace and render it impossible,"³³ the fighting over, Wilson pronounced that "wrong has been defeated."³⁴ Whether or not sentiments of this kind were unavoidable for a war-

³¹ On this see, for example, Edward Buehrig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Balance of Power* (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), esp. Chaps. 5 and 6.

³² *Public Papers*, V, 55.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 129. Italics inserted.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

time leader, they unquestionably did much to unleash passions beyond Wilson's control which contributed greatly to the defeat of his own aspirations.

For Wilson himself retained a greater sense of direction and proportion than many of his public utterances and a number of historical accounts suggest. This is a point at which the Wilsonian legend is in particular need of revision.³⁵ Throughout the war years, Wilson clung with a good deal of consistency to the idea that American foreign policy should be aimed at a settlement which would be a comprehensive readjustment of interests designed to advance his principle of a harmonious world order based on mutual benefit. Wilson decided very early that this would be the only basis for lasting peace. The true task of peace-making was, he observed, that of "removing the chief provocations to war,"³⁶ and all his policies were consciously aimed at realizing this ideal.

In pursuit of his goal the President tried, as a neutral, to secure an opportunity for mediation, directed toward achieving a negotiated peace before either side gained sufficient ascendancy to impose its will unchecked. This idea that the settlement should be a rational compromise of the points in dispute preceded the famous "peace without victory" speech by many months. One of the motives — though not, of course, the chief — for Wilson's desperate efforts to keep America out of the war was to retain an opportunity to dissuade the belligerents from making immoderate demands. The restraint envisaged by this policy was not dissimilar from that which might have been urged in the name of the balance of power, but Wilson's concern was not so much for the future distribution of power as for the tensions and dissatisfactions which would be created by a settlement made in the interests of only a few nations. He believed that the United States should and would be willing to accept the necessary restraints, both at the settlement and after, and "limit" itself to "a prescribed course of duty and respect for rights of others, which will check any selfish passion of our own, as it will check any aggressive impulse of theirs."³⁷ This he could freely accept, of course, because of his belief that it would run counter to no true American interest.

³⁵ The writer's recent study of Wilson and British liberalism is an attempt to perform a part of this task.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 187.

Wilson failed in his efforts at mediation and found himself going to war under such confusing conditions that the American people never had any very mature understanding of why they were fighting. Wilson had his own grave doubts as to the wisdom of joining the struggle, precisely because it would mean depriving the world of its only remaining neutral influence of any consequence. This would greatly increase the danger of total victory and an unmitigated humiliation of the Central Powers. But Wilson believed he had reached one of those junctures where principle must be served by imperfect means. "It is," he mourned, "just a choice of evils."³⁸

These misgivings contrast sharply with Wilson's subsequent public addresses. It is largely on the basis of these utterances that Wilson had been branded as the father of "unconditional surrender" and accused of endowing the war with the ruthless ideological character which wreaked great material and intellectual damage from which we still suffer.³⁹ His conduct, it is said, represents a complete abandonment of the principles on which he had based his policy as a neutral. A little reflection suggests that this charge is excessive.

The war had become ideological and unrelenting long before April, 1917. Liberals performed the feat but they were European not American. It was H. G. Wells who canonized the struggle as a war to end war and he did it before August, 1914, was out.⁴⁰ Governments seized on the device of the crusade to justify their unprecedented efforts. Wilson may have been unwise to endorse the idea so eloquently, but he certainly did not invent it.

As for negotiated peace, there is now general agreement that, if ever there was an opportunity, it was in 1916 when the campaigns were at a stalemate and Russia had not yet collapsed. But Wilson has as good a claim as anyone to have recognized this. In that year he made not one but two major efforts to bring an end to the war. He sponsored the exchanges which culminated in the House-Grey memorandum and he published his own ill-fated overtures to the belligerents. By the time he went to war Germany had clearly shown, and the archives now confirm, that she was not willing to

³⁸ John L. Heaton, *Cobb of "The World"* (New York, 1924), pp. 268-70.

³⁹ See, for example, George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago, 1951), Chaps., IV and V.

⁴⁰ In a series of articles later published as *The War that will End War* (London, 1914).

renounce the opportunity of a crushing victory until she herself had suffered a decisive defeat. Wilson had been proposing a compromise peace based on military stalemate. It was ironic that in the event he was obliged to mobilize American power and himself break the deadlock on which his hopes of compromise had rested.

There is also much to prove that as a belligerent Wilson did not abandon his attachment to a peace of reconciliation designed in accordance with his principle of mutual accommodation and that he did his best to work toward that end. Although he had given up hope of reaching such an agreement with the existing German Government, his Fourteen Points and other manifestos were not tantamount to unconditional surrender nor were they treated as such when the moment of surrender came. They were attempts to design a peace which would leave room for the essential interests of all sides and to make world opinion see the moral and practical advantages to be gained from such a result. Wilson realized that once America was at war and he had accepted the need for a decisive defeat of the Central Powers, a reasonable settlement would depend upon restraint exercised from within the camp of their enemies. This, he acknowledged, would require a "purity of motive and disinterestedness of object which the world has never witnessed before in the councils of nations,"⁴¹ but he was determined to do his best to cause such an attitude to prevail. He retained a profound conviction that many of his Allies' ambitions were incompatible with the new pattern of world politics which he hoped to establish and he devoted constant efforts to curbing them. It is usually forgotten that the Inquiry was set up in order to prepare for resistance against unreasonable demands made by the Allies upon the enemy. Wilson persisted in this endeavor to the end and the pre-Armistice agreement was a spirited attempt to commit the victors to the principle, and a great many of the details, of a just peace.

Nor did Wilson omit to continue his public exposition of the need for the peace of mutual benefit which he had espoused as a neutral. Even his most pugnacious orations made reference to the importance of self-control in those who incongruously sought "to make conquest of peace by arms." The price of a stable peace, he warned repeatedly, was "full and impartial justice — justice done at every point and to every nation that the final settlement must

⁴¹ *Public Papers*, V, 363.

affect, our enemies as well as our friends.”⁴² According to Wilson’s beliefs this was not merely right and just; it was prudent, the only course compatible with true self-interest. Any departure from this principle would lay the basis for costly strife in the future. Here was the practical consequence of the essential harmony of interests, which rested on a common interest in harmony. The enthusiasm which Wilson’s sentiments aroused among liberal elements everywhere made them into a powerful political force which no government was able to ignore.

Wilson carried the fight to Versailles and the most convincing studies of the conference indicate that his achievement was not inconsiderable. Though the Treaty lacked the obvious spirit of generous reconciliation which he had desired, the President’s efforts moderated the terms in many particulars, while plebiscites, mandates, and all the historical apparatus of the conference at least acknowledged an obligation to serve the overall welfare of the peoples affected.

Some of Wilson’s policies may have been ill-advised or poorly executed but it would seem that there is at least a case for arguing that they constituted a reasonably consistent effort to implement his principles by achieving a world settlement which would accomodate the welfare of all nations. But if Wilson kept his “direction,” the pace fell sadly short of his followers’ inflated expectations and they were quick to accuse him of betrayal. As a final quirk of fate, the compulsion of Wilson’s character so ordered it that the very devotion to principle which had steadied his purpose played the dominant part in depriving the League of American membership.

Woodrow Wilson’s failures are patent and his strategy is open to many criticisms. Perhaps he would have done better to immerse himself in the details of war aims from the start or to have made earlier efforts to commit the Allies to his program. His greatest error may have been to set himself too hard a task and to speak about it in ways which helped to conceal the difficulties from large numbers of people. He underestimated and perhaps misinterpreted the opposition. Could he reasonably expect Germany to trust in his own good faith and capacity to restrain the Allies instead of in the chance of winning supremacy? Even if Frenchmen endorsed Wilson’s ultimate goals, could they easily rely upon his untried schemes for their security? Yet if Wilson perceived the difficulties

⁴² *Ibid.*, 130.

ahead should he not have prepared his followers for disappointment and established intermediate objectives? Here again his rigidity in adhering to the purpose of the moment becomes apparent.

Certainly Wilson all too rarely called in question the motives of America, still more rarely his own. Occasionally he deplored some episode in past American policy, and his constant exhortation to America to be true to its "mission" in the world presumably implied the possibility that the nation might fail in its duty. But conscious though he was of the difficulties of achieving a morally satisfactory foreign policy, in his utterances on particular issues these obstacles persistently assumed the form of a failure on the part of others to live up to their obligations rather than defects within his own nation or personality.

For all this, Wilson's principles exercised a real restraint on his policies, and his policies restrained his Allies. His impression on the world as a great preacher has been deep and enduring. He gave an important stimulus to the urge for harmonious international co-operation which has always been a constructive characteristic of Anglo-American thought. The United Nations itself is one of the many monuments to the continuing influence of Wilson's belief that war is an increasingly ineffective method of satisfying national aspirations and that by the general acceptance of common restraints, it may be possible to devise some less costly way to determine disputes.

Wilson's solution was to approach the balance of power from behind and to seek a balance of satisfaction: "If we truly intend peace we must truly intend contentment."⁴³ This would require a wholesale reinterpretation of interests amounting, as he admitted, to a conversion: a general acceptance, that is, of the real moral self-satisfaction of ministering to the welfare of others and also of the practical rewards to be derived from avoiding the costs of unilaterally imposing the will of one nation on others. Today we may not match Wilson's faith that this will come to pass, but it may nevertheless be one of his most pregnant contributions to the present discussion. For by calling for revision of interests, he was implying that necessity is as subjective as principle, that the demands made on environment in the name of necessity are in kind no more immutable than those of principle. Though he did not

⁴³ *Public Papers*, V, 307.

question the aim of self-preservation, he was suggesting that the terms in which it is conceived would greatly affect the policies which were necessary to achieve it. What we demand for the nation depends upon how we conceive its welfare. The search for security by one's own right arm, for instance, may lead into different paths from the search for security by mutual accommodation. Necessity itself, then, depends on the principles by which it is judged. Revise your principles and you may govern your necessities.