

# Wilsonianism: the dynamics of a conflicted concept

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Urging President George W. Bush on the eve of hostilities in Iraq in 2003 to 'follow through on the essentially liberal vision he has laid out', Lawrence F. Kaplan wrote that 'Bush is becoming the most Wilsonian president since Wilson himself' and that 'he should complete the job Wilson began'.<sup>1</sup> Taking issue with Kaplan, John B. Judis observed that 'Wilson did not believe the world's great powers, acting individually, should impose their political beliefs or economic systems on former colonies or protectorates. Instead, Wilson believed the great nations had to act together within an organization such as the League of Nations.'<sup>2</sup> Scholars, too, have expressed contrary views about how Wilson would have regarded the post-9/11 approach of the Bush administration. Quoting the 2002 National Security Strategy's commitment to the spreading of 'the hope of democracy, development, free markets and free trade' to 'every corner of the world', David Kennedy asserted in 2005 that 'Wilson would recognize George W. Bush as his natural successor.'<sup>3</sup> This claim was directly challenged by David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, who argued that:

Wilson's objective was not to overturn the rules traditionally governing the relations of states. The League of Nations he championed was based squarely on the need for the society of nations to devise defenses against aggression ... The league contained no democratic entitlement, and Wilson's concept of a world made safe for democracy did not mean that the world should be made wholly democratic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence F. Kaplan, 'Regime change', *New Republic*, 3 March 2003, pp. 21–3.

<sup>2</sup> John B. Judis, 'History lesson', *New Republic*, 9 June 2003, pp. 19–23.

<sup>3</sup> David Kennedy, 'What "W" owes to "WW"', *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2005, pp. 36–40. Similarly, the political scientist Tony Smith describes George W. Bush as 'the most Wilsonian president in the history of American foreign policy': *A pact with the devil: Washington's bid for world supremacy and the betrayal of the American promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 46. More recently, however, David Kennedy has severely qualified his earlier assessment: 'George W. Bush has proved to be Woodrow Wilson on steroids, a grotesquely exaggerated and pridefully assertive version of the original, undisturbed by doubt, uninformed by history, unchecked by a feel for the cussedness and complexity of the world, unconstrained by considerations of the finitude of American power, unconcerned with the receptivity of others to America's self-defined civilizing mission': Kennedy, 'Two concepts of sovereignty', in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds, *To lead the world: American strategy after the Bush Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, 'The freedom crusade', *National Interest* 81, Fall 2005, p. 15.

These competing claims illustrated the continuing importance in American foreign policy discourse of the principles and objectives that Woodrow Wilson proclaimed during the First World War. The intensity of the debate over how far the Bush administration's actions and policy statements represented a departure from previous US foreign policy has diminished as that administration has passed into history. But the meaning of Wilsonianism as a 'historic commitment' remains fiercely contested, as a recent publication by a number of leading American political scientists and historians indicates. 'What precisely was Wilson's vision?' G. John Ikenberry asks. 'Is the promotion of democracy the cutting edge of Wilsonianism, or is it international law and collective security?' 'First, and most fundamentally,' insists Tony Smith, 'Wilson called for the spread of liberal democratic government.' Not so, according to Thomas J. Knock: 'his claim to transcendent historical significance ... rests unquestionably upon his having set in motion ... the idea of an international organization with permanent processes for the peaceful settlement of international disputes'.<sup>5</sup>

It is thus not surprising that Wilsonianism has been characterized as a 'protean' concept, which helps to explain why, as Tucker observed some time ago, it has had appeal 'across the political spectrum' and US presidents from FDR onwards 'have almost all claimed to be Wilsonians in foreign policy'. Of course, the variations can be seen as falling within a broad tradition of liberal internationalism distinguishable from such other broad traditions as realism and isolationism—distinct not only in its underlying values and assumptions but also in its basic proposition that America's national security requires a liberal world order. Yet this allows for significant differences about the essential *character* of such an order, and the comparative importance of its possible components. In particular, as Tucker pointed out and recent events highlight, it makes a great difference whether Wilsonianism is identified 'with a commitment to the expansion of democracy, even when such expansion is pursued by aggressively unilateralist means' or with 'international cooperation as expressed through membership in and commitment to a universal collective security organization'.<sup>6</sup>

There are certainly ways in which the various objectives commonly described as 'Wilsonian' can be seen as integrally related and mutually supportive. Wilson himself articulated these at times, and so have other American leaders and many commentators and scholars. The general acceptance of liberal principles can be seen as the best way to establish a stable and peaceful international order. If a settlement was not based on the principle of government by the consent of the governed, Wilson argued, 'the ferment of spirit of whole populations will fight subtly and constantly against it, and all the world will sympathize'.<sup>7</sup> Within the liberal tradition, free trade has long been regarded as a force for peace and exclusive trade blocs as a source of international conflict. Beyond this, of course, there is

<sup>5</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter and Tony Smith, *The crisis of American foreign policy: Wilsonianism in the twenty-first century* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 1, 3, 57, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Tucker, 'The triumph of Wilsonianism?', *World Policy Journal* 10: 1, Winter 1993/4, pp. 83–4.

<sup>7</sup> Address to the Senate, 22 Jan. 1917, *The papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur S. Link, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966–94), vol. 40, p. 537.

the claim that democratic governments are more pacific by nature.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the flourishing of liberty can be seen as requiring the collective provision of security. Without the League of Nations, Wilson argued as he made the case for the peace treaty in 1919, small states could never be secure and frontiers would have to be fixed according to 'strategic considerations' rather than the principle of self-determination.<sup>9</sup> Those modern scholars who see Wilson as having set the agenda for later US foreign policy also generally regard the different elements in it as mutually supporting. To Tony Smith, for example, Wilson's programme constituted 'a comprehensive framework for world order' comprising three main elements—'liberal democracy promotion abroad at the nation-state level ... open markets for the world economic system; and international institutions to regulate conflict—especially the use of military force'.<sup>10</sup>

Yet in a world in which such values as democracy, self-determination and human rights are not always and everywhere respected by governments, there is bound to be a tension between a commitment to promote them and participation in a comprehensive system of collective security. Any such system must be based on an agreement between existing states and regimes, and their chief motivation in making such an agreement is to enhance their own security. A credible pledge of assistance in the event of attack by another state or states does this, but the legitimization of external support for changes in their own internal practices or in the geographical scope of their authority has the reverse effect. This explains the form given to the various goals of the United Nations in its Charter. It is true that in Article 56 the signatories pledge themselves to promote 'universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion'. But the specific obligations of member states are to 'refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state' and 'to make available to the Security Council, on its call and in accordance with a special agreement or agreements, armed forces, assistance, and facilities, including rights of passage, necessary for the purpose of maintaining international peace and security'. It is explicitly stated that 'nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The revival of 'democratic peace theory' in recent years was inspired by Michael W. Doyle's classic articles, 'Kant, liberal legacies, and foreign affairs', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12: 3, Summer 1983, pp. 205–35, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12: 4, Fall 1983, pp. 323–53, and 'Liberalism and world politics', *American Political Science Review*, 80: 4, Dec. 1986, pp. 1151–69. Doyle's own argument is more complex; he claims only that liberal states do not go to war with each other, but he quotes others, notably Ronald Reagan, making the broader claim that liberal democracies do not start wars.

<sup>9</sup> Address in Columbus, Ohio, 4 Sept. 1919; address in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 8 Sept. 1919; *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 63, pp. 10–12, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Smith, *America's mission: the United States and the world-wide struggle for democracy in the twentieth century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 84, 327; 'National security liberalism and American foreign policy', in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi, *American democracy promotion: impulses, strategies, and impacts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 90. Ikenberry, too, argues that 'democratic enlargement and liberal order must go together': see e.g. *Liberal order and imperial ambition: essays on American power and world politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Charter of the United Nations, Articles 55, 56, 2, 43.

The tension between these two aspects of Wilsonianism would seem to have profound implications for the general thrust of American policy. A commitment to a comprehensive system of collective security involves emphasizing and building upon the common interests that states share—particularly that in avoiding devastating war. It requires a policy of tolerant coexistence with regimes of all types, and of seeking cooperation wherever possible. A commitment to the universal promotion of democracy, self-determination and human rights, on the other hand, involves putting pressure on, and in the last resort opposing, regimes that do not observe (and may not even pay lip service to) these values. In practice, the double commitment has rendered America's basic stance with respect to the status quo in world politics somewhat ambiguous, in a way that has tended to produce confusion or disillusionment on the part of foreign governments and groups. It has also, of course, provided grist for the mill of domestic debate, as in the case of Iraq.

Rather than seeking in an abstract way to determine the 'essence' of Wilsonianism, it is more illuminating to examine its origins and evolution in relation to the development of US foreign policy over the years. Tracing this historical process reveals certain recurrent patterns, and a broad shift in the emphasis placed on the different elements over time. This long-term perspective also suggests that both the persistence of Wilsonianism and its protean character reflect some of the most basic and enduring pressures that have shaped American policy over the last century.

### **'Wilsonianism' in the making**

The internal tensions within the concept of 'Wilsonianism' can be better understood through a close examination of how the various ideas and principles bundled together within it emerged in Wilson's own statements. For Wilson did not produce them as a single, coherent, integrated vision of a new world order. Rather, he articulated different elements at different times in pursuit of particular diplomatic and political objectives.

It was in the period of American neutrality in the First World War that Wilson declared that the United States was 'willing to become a partner' in 'an universal association of the nations ... to prevent any war begun either contrary to treaty covenants or without warning and full submission of the causes to the opinion of the world—a virtual guarantee of territorial integrity and political independence'.<sup>12</sup> This break with the American traditions of diplomatic unilateralism and non-involvement in the power politics of Europe was not a spontaneous initiative in the face of the unprecedented scale and horrors of the war. Rather, it was a response to the repeated pleas of the British government, most particularly the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, that the United States join in establishing 'a League of Nations binding themselves to side against any Power which broke a Treaty ... or which refused, in case of dispute, to adopt some other method of

<sup>12</sup> Address to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 37, pp. 113–16.

settlement than that of war'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the historical record clearly shows that the positive response to this request reflected the particular pressures Wilson was under when he made it.

When Grey had first asked, in the winter of 1914–15, whether the United States would be prepared to take an active part 'in the making of a programme of forcible security for the future', the suggestion had been rejected by Wilson's emissary, Colonel Edward House, as contrary to 'not only the unwritten law of our country but also our fixed policy not to become involved in European affairs'.<sup>14</sup> The change in the administration's position was a product of the crisis in German–American relations following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915. This not only raised for the first time the possibility that the United States might become involved in the conflict as a belligerent but also brought home to Wilson that, as he wrote to his future wife, 'the people of this country rely upon me to keep them out of war'.<sup>15</sup> The only way in which the President could permanently avoid the dilemma of having to choose, as he saw it, between peace and the nation's honour was by bringing about an early end to the European war. It was because Grey had suggested that the allies' readiness to accept a negotiated, compromise peace would be enhanced if the United States were to guarantee the settlement that Wilson was prepared by the autumn of 1915 to make the commitment that had been unthinkable the previous winter.<sup>16</sup>

Both the nature of the peace programme that Wilson advanced in 1915–17 and the immediate reasons why he promoted it reflected what he saw as America's interest in a peaceful, stable international order. In the short term, Wilson made the commitment to participate in a postwar 'universal association of the nations' as part of a strenuous diplomatic effort to bring about an early end to a conflict that was damaging American interests and threatening to embroil the nation in an unwelcome war. In the long term, he saw it as a way of preventing any such situation arising by establishing a stable and peaceful international order. This was not, of course, a uniquely American interest, as British support for the League of Nations and Grey's repeated urging of the idea on House demonstrated.<sup>17</sup> The idea of collective security represented an inherently multilateral solution to a problem—the avoidance of devastating war—that concerned other nations at least as much as the United States.

However, Wilson clearly recognized that it would not be easy to win the necessary public and political support at home for this potentially far-reaching commitment which, on the face of it, represented a dramatic departure from the time-hallowed stance of non-involvement in the power politics of the Old World. In meeting this challenge, he stressed that 'there is in this promise no breach in

<sup>13</sup> Sir Edward Grey to Col. E. M. House, 22 Sept. 1915, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 35, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> House diary, 10 Feb. 1915, in Charles Seymour, ed., *The intimate papers of Colonel House* (London: Ernest Benn, 1926), vol. 1, p. 375.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson to Edith Galt, 19 Aug. 1915, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 34, p. 261.

<sup>16</sup> For more details on this process, see John A. Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 106, 117–18, 122–3.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see George W. Egerton, *Great Britain and the creation of the League of Nations: strategy, politics, and international organization, 1914–1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

either our traditions or our policy as a nation, but a fulfillment, rather, of all that we have professed or striven for'. He did this rhetorically by claiming that he was proposing 'that the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world' and that 'all nations henceforth avoid entangling alliances which would draw them into competitions of power'; instead, they should pay 'a decent respect for the opinion of mankind' by submitting their case to an international tribunal before resorting to war. More substantively, Wilson sought to counter nationalist objections to his step towards multilateralism by calling for the peace to be based on such 'American principles, American policies' as 'government by the consent of the governed', 'freedom of the seas' and 'moderation of armaments'.<sup>18</sup>

As Wilson acknowledged, however, these goals were not exclusively American. In support of his claim that 'they are also the principles and policies of forward looking men and women everywhere', the President could have cited the example of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) in Britain. Its 1914 manifesto sought the replacement of the balance of power and alliance system by an international concert and 'drastic reductions in armaments', and demanded that 'no territory shall come under the control of any government unless it be with the consent of the population of the territory in question'.<sup>19</sup> The UDC, as its name implied, also called for *British* policy to be democratically controlled through parliament, but this was not erected into a general principle. It is therefore in no way surprising that this last point was not an aspect of their programme that Wilson adopted or commented on.

Thus, during the period of American neutrality Wilson's public statements about the proper shape of the postwar settlement focused exclusively on the need to reform the nature of relations between states. At no time did he link this with the way that states were governed internally or the character of their regimes.<sup>20</sup> In his two major public statements of this time—the speech to the League to Enforce Peace on 27 May 1916, and the Address to the Senate on 22 January 1917—he articulated only the following principles. First and foremost, he insisted on the need for a league of nations or 'some definite concert of power which will make it virtually impossible that any such catastrophe should ever overwhelm us again'. He also called both for a reduction of armaments and for 'a new and more wholesome diplomacy' that eschewed 'secret counsels' and expected nations to 'be governed by the same high code of honor that we demand of individuals'. He stressed that small states should 'enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and territorial

<sup>18</sup> Address to the Senate, 22 Jan. 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 40, pp. 538–9; nonpartisan address in Cincinnati, 26 Oct. 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 38, pp. 541–2.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas J. Knock, *To end all wars: Woodrow Wilson and the quest for a new world order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 36–8.

<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Wilson in this period attributed the European war to the whole system of international power politics rather than to the character of any particular regime or regimes. 'Nothing in particular started it, but everything in general,' he told an audience in 1916. 'There had been growing up in Europe a mutual suspicion, an interchange of conjectures about what this government and that government was going to do, an interlacing of alliances and understandings, a complex web of intrigue and spying, that presently was sure to entangle the whole of the family of mankind on that side of the water in its meshes': Address to women in Cincinnati, 26 Oct. 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 38, p. 531.

integrity that great and powerful nations expect and insist upon'. He stated that 'every great people ... should be assured a direct outlet to the great highways of the sea', and that these highways should be free for all to use securely. He declared that 'no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people' and that 'no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property'. It was in this connection that he asserted that 'every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live'. He stressed, nevertheless, that this was 'not because of any desire to exalt an abstract political principle' but because 'any peace which does not recognize and accept this principle will inevitably be upset'. At this stage, Wilson clearly had in mind possible new annexations rather than the integrity of existing empires. Privately, he indicated that he did not wish to see the destruction of the Habsburg empire; nor was he intending to challenge the principle of colonialism. Wilson's recognition that a lasting settlement required a sensitivity to psychological factors also underlay his call for 'a peace without victory': 'victory would mean peace forced upon a loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.' But a peace without victory would presumably be one between the pre-existing states and regimes. Wilson could not have made it plainer that stability was his overriding goal.<sup>21</sup>

It was when the United States moved from neutrality to belligerency in April 1917 that Wilson argued that a peaceful world order would require the extension of democracy. In asking Congress to recognize that, through its inhumane and unrestricted submarine campaign, Germany was in effect making war upon all nations including the United States, Wilson declared that 'neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people'. He now advanced a version of what has become known as democratic peace theory when he asserted that 'self-governed nations do not fill their neighbor states with spies or set the course of intrigue to bring about some critical posture of affairs which will give them an opportunity to strike and make conquest'. Whereas before he had spoken of 'an universal association of nations' without reference to forms of government, now he said that 'a steadfast concert of peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic governments. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants.' Accordingly, the United States would be fighting 'for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Address to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 37, pp. 113–16; address to the Senate, 22 Jan. 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 40, pp. 533–9; J. J. Jusserand to the French Foreign Ministry, 7 March 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 41, pp. 356–7.

<sup>22</sup> Address to Congress, 2 April 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 41, pp. 519–27. Wilson had earlier expressed

This appeal to the nation's historic ideals and sense of mission was clearly part of Wilson's attempt to mobilize support for a war that Americans had been very reluctant to enter. Framing the issues in this way also served other, more specific, purposes during the period of American belligerency. Emphasizing that the enemy was 'the Imperial German Government' and that 'we have no quarrel with the German people' was seen as making it easier for German Americans to justify the President's declared confidence that most of them were 'as true and loyal Americans as if they had never known any other fealty or allegiance'. The distinction between the German people and their government was to be employed by Wilson to evade pleas for peace that, as the leader of a belligerent nation, he now came to view as premature. In August 1917, when Pope Benedict XV appealed to the belligerent powers to make peace on a basis very similar to that which Wilson had set out in January, the President replied that this was impossible because 'we cannot take the word of the present rulers of Germany as a guarantee of anything that is to endure'. 'The object of this war', he explained, 'is to deliver the free peoples of the world from the menace and the actual power of a vast military establishment controlled by an irresponsible government which, having secretly planned to dominate the world, proceeded to carry the plan out ... That power is not the German people. It is the ruthless master of the German people.'<sup>23</sup> The same distinction helped Wilson in the autumn of 1918 to reconcile his wish to accept the German request for an armistice on the terms he had set out in the Fourteen Points that January and other speeches with the strong public and congressional demand for an unconditional victory. In the exchange of notes that followed the German overture, Wilson insisted that if the American government had to deal with 'the military masters and the monarchical autocrats of Germany ... it must demand, not peace negotiations, but surrender'. This obduracy contributed greatly to the pressures that led shortly thereafter to the abdication of the Kaiser. If regime change was the goal of America's war, it had been achieved by the time of the armistice.<sup>24</sup> (It was, however, a uniquely American goal: Wilson's remarks on the impossibility of treating with the existing German government were one reason why the British Cabinet declined to endorse his reply to the Pope in 1917.<sup>25</sup>)

During the period of American belligerency Wilson also came to give a somewhat more revisionist interpretation to his previously proclaimed principle that 'every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall

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the view 'that only governments initiate such wars as the present and that they are never brought on by peoples, and that, therefore, democracy is the best preventive of such jealousies and suspicions and secret intrigues as produce wars among nations where small groups control, rather than the great body of public opinion': 'An interview with Henry Noble Hall', 31 Oct. 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 38, p. 569. However, although said to a newspaperman, this remark was never even published, and it certainly did not at that time represent a publicly stated goal of American policy.

<sup>23</sup> Address to Congress, 2 April 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 41, pp. 523, 526; Robert Lansing to W. H. Page, 27 Aug. 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 44, pp. 57–9.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 173–7; Robert Lansing to F. Oederlin, 23 Oct. 1918, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918*, suppl. 1, vol. 1 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1933), pp. 381–3.

<sup>25</sup> Sterling J. Kernek, 'Distractions of peace during war: the Lloyd George government's reactions to Woodrow Wilson, December 1916–November 1918', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 66: 2, pp. 59–60.



live'.<sup>26</sup> This was both a more gradual and a more limited development than one might expect from the image of Wilson as the prophet of national self-determination. The issue was pushed to the fore in 1917 not by Wilson but by the propaganda of the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution. The European allies endorsed the claims of the subject nationalities of the Habsburg empire long before Wilson did, and they were also earlier in granting recognition to the Czechoslovak National Council.<sup>27</sup> The United States did not declare war on Austria-Hungary until December 1917, and even then Wilson, hoping that Germany's chief ally might be induced to make a separate peace, declared that 'we do not wish in any way to impair or to rearrange the Austro-Hungarian Empire'.<sup>28</sup> In his Fourteen Points address of January 1918, he said no more than that the peoples of the empire 'should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development'. Although in that speech he called for the frontiers of Italy, Poland and the Balkan states to be fixed along 'lines of nationality', he did not proclaim this to be a universal principle until the following month, and then did so in a carefully qualified way: 'All well defined national aspirations shall be accorded the utmost satisfaction that can be afforded 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.'<sup>29</sup> A little later, he made plain that, whereas self-determination was a universal principle (if not in every case an overriding one), the same did not necessarily apply to democracy: 'There isn't any one kind of government under which all nations ought to live ... I am not fighting for democracy except for the peoples that want democracy ... If they don't want it, that is none of my business.'<sup>30</sup> However, after it became clear in April 1918 that there was no chance of inducing Vienna to break with Germany, the US government supported the claims of the subject nationalities increasingly strongly. This not only led to Wilson's name being much honoured in an independent Czechoslovakia as a liberator, but also raised expectations that in the postwar settlement he would champion the principle of national self-determination universally and unequivocally.<sup>31</sup>

The tensions within 'Wilsonianism' became manifest when it came to the peace-making. To a significant extent, Wilson's problems at the Paris Peace Conference stemmed from the difficulty of reconciling the different ideals to which he had

<sup>26</sup> Speech to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 37, p. 115. For an excellent analysis of this evolution, see Michla Pomerance, 'The United States and self-determination: perspectives on the Wilsonian conception', *American Journal of International Law* 70: 1, 1976, pp. 1–2, 16–19.

<sup>27</sup> Betty Miller Unterberger, *The United States, revolutionary Russia, and the rise of Czechoslovakia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 35, 62–3, 168, 233, 269–70, 284–6, 314–15.

<sup>28</sup> Annual Message on the State of the Union, 4 Dec. 1917, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45, p. 197.

<sup>29</sup> Addresses to Congress, 8 Jan. 1918, 11 Feb. 1918, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45, pp. 537–8, vol. 46, p. 323.

<sup>30</sup> Remarks to foreign correspondents, 8 April 1918, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 47, p. 288.

<sup>31</sup> Victor Mamatey has observed that a visitor to interwar Prague 'would detrain at the Wilson station. Coming out of the station, he would face the Wilson Square and the Wilson Park, with a statue of President Woodrow Wilson in its center': Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe 1914–1918: a study in Wilsonian diplomacy and propaganda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. vii. On the wider impact of Wilson's rhetoric on self-determination, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); 'Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: dreams of East–West harmony and the revolt against empire in 1919', *American Historical Review* 111: 5, Dec. 2006, pp. 1327–51.

committed himself. It was not so much that these were incompatible in theory as that in practice their realization depended upon the accommodation of conflicting interests. The establishment of the League of Nations depended upon the cooperation of the governments of the other Great Powers. At a minimum they had to agree to take part in it, but beyond this they had to be persuaded to entrust their future security to it if the League was to have the transforming effect on international relations that Wilson had promised. But the implementation of most of Wilson's other principles would impinge on the interests of the Great Powers. National self-determination was clearly a potential threat to their colonial empires as well as an obstacle to Italian and French territorial demands in Europe. Freedom of the seas would strike a traditional weapon from Britain's hands and for that reason was anathema in London. Even if the goal of extending democracy was in effect limited to the defeated enemy, its underlying requirements were at odds with allied policy objectives. Fostering sturdy public support in Germany for a democratic republic required a more generous settlement than was compatible with allied demands for substantial reparations and with what the French saw as necessary for their own future security.<sup>32</sup>

As he was compelled to confront and adjust to these conflicts between his proclaimed objectives, Wilson left little doubt as to what his priorities were. Historians, like those who dealt with him at the time, agree that his overriding goal was the establishment of the League of Nations as an integral part of the peace treaty.<sup>33</sup> It is clear that Wilson's determination to establish a credible League of Nations in the form most acceptable to American opinion accounts for many of the compromises he made on other issues in Paris. At the most general level, it ruled out any possibility that he might respond to unacceptable allied demands by leaving the conference and making a separate peace. More specifically, it seems that Wilson's early concession to Italy of a northern frontier incorporating a substantial German-speaking population was motivated by his desire for the Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando's cooperation in the commission drafting the League of Nations Covenant.<sup>34</sup> Lloyd George exploited Wilson's political need for an amendment to the covenant specifically recognizing the Monroe Doctrine to secure a cutback in the American naval building programme.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On this point, see Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, revolutionary Germany, and peacemaking, 1918–1919: missionary diplomacy and the realities of power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), esp. pp. 340, 383–4, 391–4.

<sup>33</sup> After his first meeting with Wilson in December 1918, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George reported to the Imperial War Cabinet that 'the President had opened at once with the question of the league of nations, and had given the impression that this was the only thing that he really cared much about'. This was a little unfair inasmuch as Wilson had evidently also expressed strong views on a number of other matters, but it laid the basis for the Prime Minister's recommendation that the British should go along with Wilson's wish to make the League of Nations the first item of business in Paris 'on the ground that this would ease other matters, such as the questions of the "Freedom of the Seas", the disposal of the colonies, economic issues, etc.': Minutes of the Imperial War Cabinet, 30 Dec. 1918, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 53, pp. 558–69.

<sup>34</sup> Sterling J. Kernek, 'Woodrow Wilson and national self-determination: a study of the manipulation of principles in the pursuit of political interests', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 126 (1982), pp. 255–62.

<sup>35</sup> Seth P. Tillman, *Anglo-American relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 287–94.

### *Wilsonianism: the dynamics of a conflicted concept*

The most dramatic instance of such a tradeoff was Wilson's reluctant assent to the takeover by the Japanese of the rights previously enjoyed by Germany in the Chinese province of Shantung. The President did not conceal from his associates that it was Japan's threat not to enter the League of Nations that had led him to yield (much to the disgust of Secretary of State Robert Lansing).<sup>36</sup>

There were, of course, domestic political reasons for Wilson's prioritizing of the League of Nations. It was the embodiment of his promise that Americans had been fighting for a new world order that would put an end to such terrible wars. Integrating the League with the peace treaty would, Wilson believed, make it impossible for Republicans in the Senate to reject it. It is true that support for the League of Nations in the United States was to a degree dependent on the terms of the peace settlement, in that some would oppose membership in an organization committed to upholding what they saw as an illiberal status quo. But, as Wilson's Wall Street ally Thomas Lamont observed in July 1919, 'the critics who called the Treaty unjust were not dangerous to ratification' in the way that the Republicans were.<sup>37</sup> This assessment accorded with that of Wilson's political secretary, Joseph Tumulty, who had earlier cabled the President a warning not to push his opposition to the allied claims for reparations too far:

A great number of your friends here feel that the position of the United States in matter of indemnity and reparation, which is a paramount question with European nations and only of indirect interest to us, will solidify the opposition of England, France, Italy and Belgium to a League of Nations. Our friends believe that any necessary sacrifice to assure a League of Nations should be made.<sup>38</sup>

There was no political drive in the United States to promote democracy overseas, nor even much concern with self-determination except in a few special cases such as Shantung and Ireland.

The popular appeal of the League of Nations was as a mechanism that would prevent future wars and allow the United States to resume an undisturbed existence. As Robert Tucker has written, 'Wilson's internationalism was conditioned by the expectation of a world in which America's cooperative participation would entail only the most modest of costs.'<sup>39</sup> In the domestic debate over the League, Wilson's opponents highlighted its potential costs, in terms of unwanted involvement in conflicts across the globe and restrictions on America's own freedom of action. As they did so, support for it, too, diminished.

### **'Wilsonianism' after Wilson**

In their origins, then, the different aspects of 'Wilsonianism' emerged at different times and in response to different imperatives. The commitment to participate in a postwar collective security organization was originally made in 1915–16

<sup>36</sup> Lansing memorandum, 28 April 1919, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 58, p. 185; diary of Ray Stannard Baker, 30 April 1919, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 58, pp. 270–1.

<sup>37</sup> Lamont diary, 5 July 1919, quoted in Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, revolutionary Germany, and peacemaking*, p. 531.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph P. Tumulty to Wilson, 9 April 1919, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 57, pp. 188–9.

<sup>39</sup> Tucker, 'The triumph of Wilsonianism?', p. 90.

as a consequence of Wilson's desire to bring the European war to an early end and to prevent the recurrence of such a disruptive and dangerous conflict in the future. Diplomatically, it was the principal means by which he hoped to persuade the belligerent powers, particularly the allies, to accede to 'a peace without victory'. In making the case to the American people for this prospective commitment, Wilson linked the League to a general reform of the character of international relations that would not only reduce the risk of war but also check the power of large states. The principles he enunciated were in line with the ideas of many European liberals, but the President presented them also as the fulfilment of America's own historic mission. However, it was only in 1917, when he was seeking to mobilize support for a major overseas war, that Wilson came to incorporate the spread of democratic government into his vision of a new world order and to suggest that, in one case at least, this could be achieved by the use of military force. During the period of American belligerency, he also called for the first time for the revision of some existing boundaries in accordance with the principle of national self-determination. Following victory, these more ideological goals were abandoned or downgraded as Wilson in Paris concentrated on achieving the League of Nations that he hoped would both serve the nation's interest in a stable and peaceful world order and also provide a domestically acceptable basis for a more continuously active involvement by the United States in international affairs generally.

The persistence and recurrence of 'Wilsonianism' as a theme in American foreign policy and debate about it since Wilson's day may be explained by the long-term nature of the fundamental pressures that gave rise to it in the first place. In this later history, too, different elements have come to the fore in different contexts. Broadly speaking, it has been in peaceful times, particularly in the aftermath of conflicts, that there has been the greatest interest in the potentialities of a universal collective security organization. This has reflected the interest of the United States, as a 'satisfied' power, in maintaining a peaceful and stable world order in an economical way. During conflicts, or in the run-up to them, the more ideological and revisionist goals tend to be emphasized in attempts to develop domestic support for active and potentially costly policies.

In the relatively tranquil 1920s, the former President's name was associated above all with the League of Nations. The Woodrow Wilson Foundation, which Franklin D. Roosevelt played a leading role in establishing in 1922, offered prizes for essays on internationalism and erected a memorial to Wilson at the League's headquarters in Geneva. Although the Republican administrations of the era reflected the general sentiment of the United States in keeping their distance from the League, a League of Nations Association developed local organizations across the country and continued to campaign, first for American membership and later for diplomatic cooperation with the League. But after the League first proved incapable of deterring or dealing with Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931–2, and then suffered the withdrawal of Japan and Germany in 1933, support for it in the United States dwindled further and the League of Nations Association found its

*Wilsonianism: the dynamics of a conflicted concept*

membership and budget declining.<sup>40</sup> As a presidential candidate in 1932, Roosevelt disavowed his earlier support for American membership on the grounds that ‘the League of Nations today is not the League conceived by Woodrow Wilson’.<sup>41</sup> After his election, Roosevelt built on this distinction between the existing League and Wilson’s vision in an address to the Woodrow Wilson Foundation in December 1933. Like his Republican predecessors, he portrayed that other Wilsonian goal of international disarmament as the way to reduce the threat of war.<sup>42</sup>

However, when in the later 1930s Roosevelt more strenuously sought to counter isolationism he revived the connection Wilson had made in his April 1917 War Address between international order and the nature of countries’ regimes. He increasingly emphasized that the nations responsible for ‘international lawlessness’ were not only a minority but were also the enemies of democracy. ‘Disregard for treaty obligation seems to have followed the surface trend away from the democratic representative form of government,’ he told Congress in January 1938. ‘It would seem, therefore, that world peace through international agreements is most safe in the hands of democratic representative governments.’ A year later, he referred to ‘international good faith’ as ‘a sister of democracy’.<sup>43</sup> The same ideological note was sounded by anti-isolationist publicists and organizations. William Allen White, chairman of the Non-Partisan Committee formed to back Roosevelt’s attempt to revise the Neutrality Law in 1939, insisted that the European struggle was ‘a clash of ideologies’.<sup>44</sup> Other anti-isolationist organizations carried such names as The Council for Democracy or The Friends of Democracy, Inc. as they sought to rally Americans in opposition to ‘the totalitarian Axis’.<sup>45</sup>

As in 1917, the overriding sense of a momentous conflict not only nourished an ideological interpretation of world politics but also produced a change in the kind of international organization that was thought desirable. The movement for ‘Union Now’, launched by Clarence Streit in 1939, proposed a league defined on ideological lines. Democracies such as Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries would be included, but Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union would be excluded.<sup>46</sup> In January 1941 President Roosevelt proclaimed the objective of US policy to be ‘a world founded upon four essential freedoms’, and later that year, with Winston Churchill, he promulgated the

<sup>40</sup> Robert A. Divine, *Second chance: the triumph of internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 6–28.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American foreign policy, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Speech to the annual dinner of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, 28 Dec. 1933, in Edgar Nixon, ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and foreign affairs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 560–2.

<sup>43</sup> Address at Chicago, 5 Oct. 1937, *The public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York: Macmillan, 1938–50), vol. 6, 1937, p. 404; annual message to Congress, 3 Jan. 1938, *Papers and addresses of Roosevelt*, vol. 7, 1938, p. 2; annual message to Congress, 4 Jan. 1939, *Papers and addresses of Roosevelt*, vol. 8, 1939, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Johnson, *The battle against isolation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Lincoln Chadwin, *The warhawks: American interventionists before Pearl Harbor* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 22; Johnson, *Battle against isolation*, p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> Clarence Streit, *Union Now: a proposal for a federal union of the democracies of the North Atlantic* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1939); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A new deal for the world: America’s vision for human rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 20–45.

Atlantic Charter, which highlighted ‘the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they shall live’ and the principle that there should be ‘no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned’. At Roosevelt’s own insistence, there was only a vague reference to ‘a wider and permanent system of general security’ to be formulated at some time in the future.<sup>47</sup>

The balance between the different elements of Wilsonianism shifted again after Pearl Harbor. The surprise attack of December 1941 resolved the debate over US involvement in hostilities more conclusively than had ever been the case in the First World War. Roosevelt did not have to counter a politically significant sentiment for an early peace, as Wilson had had to do in 1917–18. In the new context, there was not only less need to emphasize the ideological justification for fighting the Axis but also a reason to downplay the identification of peace-loving states with democracies only. The de facto alliance with the Soviet Union was obviously a short-term military necessity and many also saw its continuation as essential to the maintenance of a lasting peace in the long term. As is well known, Roosevelt himself not only held this view but inclined initially to a conception of the desirable postwar order strongly marked by *realpolitik*—one in which ‘the United States, England and Russia and perhaps China should police the world’.<sup>48</sup>

That Roosevelt had to modify this vision by committing himself to a new version of the League of Nations project was testimony to the revived appeal of Wilson’s vision to American public opinion. As the historian Robert Divine has shown, the keepers of the Wilsonian flame had been quick to argue that the coming of the Second World War vindicated Wilson’s advocacy of the League of Nations, particularly by fulfilling his prophecy while campaigning for Senate ratification that if the United States failed to join there would be another, even more terrible, war within a generation. In a typical statement, James T. Shotwell, president of the League of Nations Association, asserted in June 1941 that ‘the American people are now paying the price of two decades of international irresponsibility’. This mistake had to be put right. As Vice-President Henry Wallace put it in December 1942, ‘the nations of the world’ now had ‘a second chance to erect a lasting structure of peace—a structure such as that which Woodrow Wilson sought to build but which crumbled away because the world was not yet ready’. Public opinion polls during the war showed large majorities in favour of US participation in a permanent international organization. The strength of this sentiment led to the Fulbright and Connolly resolutions in Congress and helped to make the foundation of a new world collective security organization central to the administration’s postwar planning. In the Moscow Declaration of November 1943, the United States joined with its major allies in committing itself to the creation of ‘a general international organization, based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving states, and open to

<sup>47</sup> Annual Message to Congress, 6 Jan. 1941, *Papers and addresses of Roosevelt*, vol. 9, 1940, p. 672; The Atlantic Charter, *Papers and addresses of Roosevelt*, vol. 10, 1941, pp. 314–15.

<sup>48</sup> Roosevelt–Molotov conversation, 29 May 1942, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1942*, vol. III (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 573–4.

*Wilsonianism: the dynamics of a conflicted concept*

membership by all such States, large and small, for the maintenance of international peace and security'.<sup>49</sup>

Other aspects of the postwar order promoted by the United States could also be seen as a delayed fulfilment of the Wilsonian programme, particularly the creation of the Bretton Woods framework for a multilateral, liberal world economy. However, the commitment to such principles as the equality of states and self-determination, let alone the extension of democracy, was less wholehearted. In the new United Nations Organization, power was to be firmly located in the Security Council with its five veto-wielding permanent members. Roosevelt clearly believed that a stable peace required a cooperative relationship between the Great Powers, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union. The nature of the latter's regime was not an issue, though in some public remarks the President attempted to put it in a better light. For the sake of maintaining Great Power harmony, Roosevelt seems to have been privately prepared to subordinate the principle of self-determination. 'As far as Poland is concerned, the important thing is to set it up in a way that will help maintain the peace of the world,' Harry Hopkins recorded him as saying to the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, and 'the big powers would have to decide what Poland should have'.<sup>50</sup> As the President told John Foster Dulles, he had a fear that 'too much "idealism" in these matters should lead to a rejection of collaboration as a permanent principle'.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, as in Wilson's day, advocates of American membership of an international collective security organization had to counter the argument that this would commit the nation to upholding an unjust status quo. At the outset of the 1944 presidential campaign, Roosevelt's Republican opponent, Thomas Dewey, attacked rumoured plans 'to subject the nations of the world, great and small, permanently to the coercive power of the four nations' holding the forthcoming Dumbarton Oaks conference.<sup>52</sup> It is generally agreed by historians that it was concern for domestic opinion that led FDR at Yalta to press for a public 'Declaration on Liberated Europe' in which the big three victorious powers reaffirmed the Atlantic Charter and undertook to assist the people in the European liberated states 'to form interim governmental authorities ... pledged to the earliest possible establishment through free elections of governments responsive to the will of the people'. But the President disregarded a State Department proposal that a high commission be established to implement this agreement. It is hard to resist the conclusion of the historian Daniel Yergin that there was a 'considerable gap between Roosevelt's *foreign* foreign policy and his *domestic* foreign policy'.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Divine, *Second chance*, pp. 36, 47–173; Borgwardt, *A new deal for the world*, pp. 80–1, 156. In 1944 a lavish film biography was produced by Darryl Zanuck in Hollywood, in which Wilson was portrayed as both a prophet and a martyr in the cause of the League of Nations.

<sup>50</sup> Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: an intimate history* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1948), p. 710.

<sup>51</sup> John Foster Dulles, memo of conversation with FDR, 26 March 1943, quoted in Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and power: a history of the domino theory in the twentieth century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 128. Roosevelt reportedly told Cardinal Spellman in September 1943 that he anticipated 'Russian domination' of much of Central as well as Eastern Europe in the postwar period: Robert I. Gannon SJ, *The Cardinal Spellman story* (London: Robert Hale, 1963), pp. 222–4.

<sup>52</sup> Dallek, *Roosevelt and American foreign policy*, p. 483.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Yergin, *Shattered peace: the origins of the Cold War and the national security state* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,

This ambiguity in Roosevelt's policy was not, of course, officially acknowledged, and the US government emerged from the Second World War publicly committed to the establishment of a world order that realized Wilson's vision in full—both a comprehensive collective security organization and the universal recognition of such liberal principles as self-determination and human rights. This was the expectation of most in Congress, including Senator Harry Truman, who declared in 1943 that 'we are fighting now that the Four Freedoms shall be not only freedoms for the United Nations but a heritage for all the peoples of the world'.<sup>54</sup> Truman expressed this aspiration when he addressed the delegates of the San Francisco Conference in 1945 after the signing of the UN Charter. 'Under this document,' the new President stated, 'we have good reason to expect the framing of an international bill of rights, acceptable to all the nations involved.' But like Wilson, whose memory he invoked, Truman mainly emphasized that what had brought the delegates of so many diverse countries together was 'one unshakable unity of determination—to find a way to end wars'. With Wilsonian confidence, he declared that 'if we had had this Charter a few years ago—and above all, the will to use it—millions now dead would be alive'. The 'powerful military nations' had a particular 'duty ... to assume the responsibility for leadership toward a world of peace'.<sup>55</sup>

Within a couple of years, of course, hopes for a Wilsonian world order underpinned by a cooperative relationship between the Great Powers had foundered. In a sense, the tension between the two aspects of Wilsonianism may be seen as lying at the root of the Cold War—at least to the extent that it was Soviet behaviour in Eastern Europe that caused the confrontation between the wartime allies. Attachment to the ideal of the UN remained strong at this time among the American public, Congress and not least the President himself.<sup>56</sup> But when Truman felt the need to ask Congress and the American people for substantial resources to implement the policy of containment, he did as Wilson and Roosevelt had done in similar situations by stressing the ideological aspect of Wilsonianism. After declaring that 'the United Nations is designed to make possible lasting freedom and independence for all its members', the President argued that 'we shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes'. At a time when 'nearly every nation' had to choose 'between alternative ways of life', the United States needed to support the one 'distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion,

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1980), pp. 68, 46–8. For broadly similar analyses by historians of different perspectives, see John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 133–75; Dallek, *Roosevelt and American foreign policy*, pp. 506, 515–16; Warren F. Kimball, *The juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as wartime statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 171–2, 176–80; Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 38–43, 61–3, 66–8.

<sup>54</sup> Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Address in San Francisco at the closing session of the United Nations conference, 26 June 1945, *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1945* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 138–44.

<sup>56</sup> On Truman's commitment to the United Nations, see Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman*, esp. pp. 24, 32.



and freedom from political oppression'.<sup>57</sup> Although the text of the North Atlantic Treaty of April 1949 extensively reaffirmed the signatories' loyalty to the United Nations, it clearly represented a less universal conception of collective security—and also one with a much stronger ideological component. An attack upon any of the North Atlantic nations, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote as he transmitted the treaty to the President, 'would not be designed merely to gain territory or nationalistic ends. It would be directed squarely against our common democratic way of life.'<sup>58</sup> The debate over NATO at the time was conducted to a significant extent in Wilsonian terms. Supporters of the pact argued that it represented the only way to realize the vision of collective security when the Security Council was rendered impotent by the Soviet veto, whereas critics saw it as an example of just the sort of balance of power politics that Wilson had denounced.<sup>59</sup>

During the Cold War, as during the Second World War, the exigencies of the conflict led the United States to act in ways that were hard to reconcile with Wilsonian principles in any version. Nonetheless, these principles were often invoked as justifications of American actions, and in ways that again brought out the tension between the upholding of established international law on the one hand and the promotion of democracy on the other. The former legitimated the Korean War, which was fought under the authority of the United Nations to enforce the most basic commitment of the Charter—that of collective action against trans-border aggression. But neither of these legitimations applied to the Vietnam War, or to any other American military action during the Cold War. Indeed, several of these actions, such as the sending of marines to topple governments in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Grenada in 1983, were contrary to accepted international law, as of course were the covert or semi-overt interventions of the CIA in various foreign countries. When Nicaragua filed a complaint to the World Court in 1984 about the mining of its harbours and other illegal actions, the Reagan administration responded by withdrawing the United States' acceptance of the court's compulsory jurisdiction.<sup>60</sup>

These actions were justified by invoking the ideological version of Wilsonianism. Defining 'the Reagan Doctrine' and explicitly referring to US involvement in the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Central America, President Ronald Reagan declared that 'the United States stands today with those who would fight for freedom. We stand with ordinary people who have had the

<sup>57</sup> Address to a joint session of Congress, 12 March 1947, *Public papers of the presidents: Truman, 1947* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1963), pp. 176–80. This has, of course, become known as the Truman Doctrine.

<sup>58</sup> Report of the Secretary of State to the President on the North Atlantic Treaty, 7 April 1949, *Department of State Bulletin*, 20 (24 April 1949), p. 532. The continuity with Wilson's declarations in 1917 and the rhetoric of pro-allied publicists in 1937–41 was embodied by adherents of Clarence Streit's vision, now broadened to the idea of an Atlantic Federation, who were among the most energetic proponents of the North Atlantic Treaty. See Lawrence S. Kaplan, *The United States and NATO: the formative years* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), pp. 47, 53–4, 58, 132–3.

<sup>59</sup> For a thorough analysis of the debate over NATO from this perspective, see Fumiko Nishizaki, 'From collaboration to deterrence: the United States, the United Nations and the Cold War, 1945–1950', PhD diss., Yale University, 1990, chs 3–4.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *On the law of nations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 143–4.

courage to take up arms against Communist tyranny.<sup>61</sup> It was such statements that led the political scientist Tony Smith to call Reagan 'the most Wilsonian of all presidents since Wilson's time'.<sup>62</sup> As a crusade for democracy, however, American policy in the Cold War was compromised in two ways. A number of the regimes with which it was allied, and which in some cases it helped to keep in power, were repressive dictatorships. On the other hand, its support for popular movements against Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956, was little more than verbal; the anticipated costs of bolder intervention, including the risk of provoking nuclear war, led to the de facto adoption of a spheres-of-influence approach. Each of these aspects of American policy attracted domestic criticism (from somewhat different quarters), but both persisted through several decades.

As the communist bloc crumbled and the Cold War came to an end, it seemed to many commentators and policy-makers that these dilemmas and ambiguities had been resolved. In the immediate euphoria, President George H. W. Bush repeatedly hailed 'freedom's march' and 'democracy's advance', and expressed the hope that this was opening the way 'for the creation of a true community of nations built on shared interests and ideals'. As he rallied support for opposition to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in September 1990, Bush echoed Wilson's rhetoric 70 years earlier: 'Today a new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice.' During the First Gulf War, the United States' military operations were not only legitimated by a Security Council resolution but supported by the forces of 33 other countries and by (even more welcome) financial contributions totalling \$52 billion. After the successful conclusion of the war, Bush declared that 'now we can see a new world coming into view ... A world where the United Nations, freed from the cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.'<sup>63</sup>

Once again, within a few years hopes for such an ideal solution were dashed. Although the First Gulf War had demonstrated some practical as well as political benefits from operating within the framework of the UN Charter, it did not become the standard pattern for US policy in subsequent years. The chief incentive for doing so had always been fear of Great Power war, and this was hardly a factor in an era of unipolar supremacy. When the necessary international consensus for UN authorization proved impossible to achieve, as in the Balkan crises of the 1990s, the United States acted through NATO or assembled 'coalitions of the willing'. In these circumstances, the regnant version of Wilsonianism became the ideological

<sup>61</sup> Remarks at the National Defense University, 25 Oct. 1988, *Public papers of the presidents: Ronald Reagan 1988–89* (Washington DC: US Printing Office, 1991), p. 1382.

<sup>62</sup> 'Making the world safe for democracy', *Washington Quarterly* 16: 4, Autumn 1993, p. 198. See also Smith, *America's mission*, pp. xv, 268–72, 304.

<sup>63</sup> Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 25 Sept. 1989; State of the Union Address, 31 Jan. 1990; address to Congress, 11 Sept. 1990; address to Congress, 6 March 1991, *Public papers of the presidents: George Bush (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990–92) 1989*, p. 1249; 1990, pp. 133, 1219; 1991, p. 221.

one. Already, the apparently rapid spread of democracy following the collapse of communism had engendered a confident, optimistic mood in which the promotion of democracy came to be seen as the central element of Wilsonianism, and indeed of America's 'grand strategy' in the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> 'Democratic peace theory' became widely accepted in both academic and policy-making circles.<sup>65</sup> Under Bill Clinton, who in his campaign for the presidency had accused George H. W. Bush of hesitating 'when democratic forces needed our support in challenging the status quo' and of not being 'at home in the mainstream pro-democracy tradition of American foreign policy', 'democratic enlargement' became an official objective of US policy.<sup>66</sup> 'In an increasingly interdependent world,' Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott argued, 'Americans have a growing stake in how other countries govern, or misgovern, themselves.'<sup>67</sup> Making the case for military action against Serbia, President Clinton argued that 'this Kosovo thing ... is about our values ... we need a Europe that is undivided, democratic, and free ... democratic, not dictatorial'.<sup>68</sup> The Kosovo intervention could be seen as the first occasion since the Second World War on which the United States had sought by force to extend democracy (or at least self-determination).

Under President George W. Bush, of course, democracy promotion became even more prominent as a rationale for US policy. Particularly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the administration presented it as vital for the nation's own security—far more consistently and expansively than Wilson had ever done. 'The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands,' the President declared in a typical formulation of this proposition.<sup>69</sup> In pursuit of this objective, the administration seemed happy for the United States to act alone, and to employ military force without the backing of NATO, let alone that of the United Nations. This unilateralist approach became subject to much criticism, at home as well as abroad, following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In this context, the idea of a league or concert of democratic nations gained support, in one version or another, in both liberal and conservative circles.<sup>70</sup> As we have

<sup>64</sup> The scholars in the forefront of this interpretation were Tony Smith and G. John Ikenberry. In addition to Smith's *America's mission* and Ikenberry's *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), see their essays in Cox et al., eds, *American democracy promotion*.

<sup>65</sup> In addition to the essays by Michael Doyle cited in n. 8, see Bruce Russett, *Grasping the democratic peace: principles for a post-Cold War world* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); James Lee Ray, *Democracy and international conflict: an evaluation of the democratic peace proposition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); William J. Dixon, 'Democracy and the peaceful settlement of international conflict', *American Political Science Review* 88: 1, 1994, pp. 14–32. For a critical account of this development, see Smith, *A pact with the devil*, ch. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Cox, 'Wilsonianism resurgent? The Clinton administration and the promotion of democracy', in Cox et al., eds, *American democracy promotion*, pp. 218–39.

<sup>67</sup> Strobe Talbott, 'Democracy and the national interest', *Foreign Affairs* 75: 6, Nov.–Dec. 1996, pp. 47–63.

<sup>68</sup> Remarks at the Legislative Convention of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 23 March 1999. *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1999*, Book 1 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000), pp. 429, 432.

<sup>69</sup> George W. Bush, second inaugural address, 20 Jan. 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/index.html>, accessed 17 Nov. 2009.

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a world of liberty under law: US national security in the 21st century* (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2006), pp. 25–6, 61; Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The idea that is America: keeping faith with our values in a dangerous world* (New York:

seen, such a project has been a recurrent theme in American debate about foreign policy, at least since the time of Wilson's War Address.

### Wilsonianism: a creed at war with itself?

Several conclusions may be drawn from this brief review of the major manifestations of 'Wilsonian' themes in US foreign policy discourse. The first is that, although 'Wilsonianism' has been seen by many commentators as an interlocked bundle of objectives, and has sometimes been presented as such by policy-makers, its component parts had different origins and purposes and have quite often conflicted in practice. In particular, the ideal of a worldwide collective security organization has not sat easily with a drive to extend democracy across the globe. As we have seen, a pattern can be discerned in which the former takes priority when the maintenance of international peace seems the most important goal (which has been the case in the immediate aftermath of major wars), whereas the latter is generally emphasized as the country is being rallied for a conflict. It is also evident that there has been a broad shift in the balance between these themes over time. For Wilson himself, the establishment of a League of Nations, envisaged as a universal organization superseding more partial alliances and alignments, was clearly the overriding goal. It was only during the brief period of American belligerency in the First World War, and then only with respect to the Kaiser's Germany, that Wilson made the extension of democracy a policy objective. It was his association with the League of Nations ideal that kept Wilson's memory alive and powerful through the interwar period and the 1940s. Only in recent years has the promotion of democracy in the world come to be seen as the essence of 'Wilsonianism'.<sup>71</sup>

At least as significant as these patterns, however, is the sheer persistence of Wilsonian themes in the discourse of policy-makers and participants in public debate over almost a century. This indicates that they should be attributed less to the views and attitudes of particular personalities or generations than to more long-term aspects of the context in which that discourse has taken place. Seen from this perspective, the tension between the different aspects of Wilsonianism reflects a deeper one between two of the basic realities that have shaped US foreign policy. On the one hand, the country's material strategic and economic interests have been well served by the status quo, so that maintaining this in the least costly way has been a rational policy objective.<sup>72</sup> The logic of this situation points towards seeking to establish, through cooperative, multilateral action, a stable international order with norm-governed regimes. On the other hand, Americans have generally felt

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Basic Books, 2007), p. 43; Robert Kagan, *The return of history and the end of dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008), pp. 97–102; 'McCain on his hopes for his first term', *New York Times*, 15 May 2008. In 'Democracies must work in concert', *Financial Times*, 10 July 2008, Anne-Marie Slaughter and John Ikenberry distinguish between their conception and that of Robert Kagan and Senator John McCain.

<sup>71</sup> As e.g. in Smith, *America's mission*, esp. ch. 11. Smith has subsequently written that 'prior to the dramatic turn of events that accompanied the fall of Soviet communism between 1989 and 1991, I myself would never have thought to have written a book such as *America's mission*': see Cox et al., eds, *American democracy promotion*, p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> This point has been stressed by Ikenberry.

that when their country's weight in world affairs is exercised it should be on behalf of the nation's values.<sup>73</sup> Elected officials, not least in Congress, have been responsive to the various specific forms that this sentiment has taken, and the nation's leaders have generally felt that mobilizing support for foreign policy enterprises that make substantial demands on the American people requires the articulation of an ideological agenda. Moreover, they have commonly emphasized not only the need to defend such values as democracy, self-determination and human rights, but also the prospect of spreading them. In this mode, the United States has been a dynamic, revisionist, power.

The Janus-faced character of American policy has produced a similar ambivalence in the responses to it of people in other countries. Broadly speaking, established governments and dissatisfied groups have responded to its different aspects in contrasting ways. In this respect, too, the shape of Wilson's experience was to be replicated later. Many European leaders, particularly in Britain, welcomed Wilson's commitment to a postwar League of Nations, even if they retained doubts about the extent and reliability of an American underwriting of European security. However, the allied governments distanced themselves from the President's demands for regime change in Germany and were apprehensive about his apparently limitless commitment to the principle of self-determination. On the other hand, these elements of Wilson's rhetoric aroused enthusiasm and hopes, not only in Europe but across the world, among ethnic groups and subject peoples seeking their freedom. For the most part, these latter were disappointed if not disillusioned by the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>74</sup> The pattern was to persist in later years. Other states have often sought to align themselves with the United States for security reasons, only to find themselves under a degree of pressure from its revisionist ideological inclinations. It has been dissatisfied groups and oppressed populations across the world that have positively welcomed (and sought to strengthen) this latter aspect of American policy. But their hopes have generally been disappointed in practice.

This is a reminder, should one be needed, that Wilsonian ideas in any form do not account for the substance of US foreign policy actions over the decades and across the globe. Strategic and economic interests and ties to particular foreign countries are only the more obvious of the other factors that have commonly been more influential. Yet the tensions implicit in what has become known as Wilsonianism do highlight a persistent dilemma facing American policy-makers. They have all been fated to wrestle with the same fundamental problem that confronted—and eventually defeated—Woodrow Wilson: how to reconcile the external reality of a diverse, conflict-strewn world with the internal reality of American opinion.

<sup>73</sup> It should be noted, however, that studies of public opinion indicate that democracy promotion, although widely approved of as a general goal of US foreign policy, is regarded by the majority as less important than America's own security or economic interests and as not, in itself, justification for enterprises involving significant human or financial costs. There is also evidence that support for it has been declining rather than growing in recent years. See Ole R. Holsti, 'Promotion of democracy as popular demand?', in Cox et al., eds, *American democracy promotion*, pp. 151–80; John Tures, 'The democracy-promotion gap in American public opinion', *Journal of American Studies* 41, Dec. 2007, pp. 557–79.

<sup>74</sup> On this point, see the recent illuminating work by Erez Manela cited in n. 31 above.