

Wilson and a World Safe for Democracy

We are glad ... to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of the peoples, the German peoples included; for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest or domination. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and freedom of the nations can make them.

—Woodrow Wilson requesting that the Congress declare war on Germany, April 2, 1917

ALTHOUGH AMERICAN EFFORTS to promote democracy abroad have often focused on a single country (as in the case of the Philippines or the Dominican Republic discussed in earlier chapters), the presidency of Woodrow Wilson had far more ambitious objectives. His policy toward Latin America had been regional in scope, but with the entry of the United States into war against Germany in 1917, his horizon expanded to Europe, and Wilson stepped forward with specific proposals for a global system of peace and security.

Wilson's recommendations marked the first time that the United States had elaborated a framework for world order. It proposed that governments recognize each others' legitimacy when they were constitutional democracies, and that they should maintain the peace through a system of collective military security and liberal economic exchange. Envisioned as a comprehensive framework for world order, Wilson's program constituted the foundation of what afterward could be called American liberal democratic internationalism or, more simply, Wilsonianism.¹

Wilson's liberal democratic internationalism was not a radical departure from traditional American national security policy. Thomas Jefferson had insisted that the United States could only participate in a world community dominated by democratic states. With the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the United States had declared itself opposed to the reimposition of European rule in the Western Hemisphere and so aligned itself with nationalist forces in Latin America, whose states Washington would recognize as sovereign. With the Open Door Notes of the turn of the century, Washington reaffirmed its commitment (as old as the Revolution) to a nondiscriminatory international trading system, hostile to mercantilism and imperialism alike (a position used again in the 1930s, especially to protest Japanese incursions on Chinese sovereignty). While Wilson's proposals to restructure world politics were far more bold than

any American leader had ever before laid out, they were nonetheless quite in line with basic propositions of United States foreign policy set long before his time.

Today we can appreciate more clearly than was possible in 1917–9 the enormous stakes involved by the entry of the United States on the central stage of world history under Wilson's leadership. Nationalism, which had begun to affect world politics in the late eighteenth century with the French Revolution, was now a global force, fueling not only the animosities of World War I but also the breakup of the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires thereafter. New states were emerging, struggling to achieve support from their populations through mass based political parties. With the victory of the Russian Revolution in 1917, communism offered itself as an ideology of state building and nationalist consciousness at the very moment Wilson was proposing liberal democracy to the same end. In short order, Mussolini and Hitler would offer yet a third modern alternative with fascism.

Wilson was not fully aware of the magnitude of his undertaking, of course. Like Lincoln during the Civil War, Wilson could only sense that the struggle he was engaged in concerned more than the traditional ends of state policy, and that the character of the peace to be established after the war would be critical to world affairs in a more lasting way than victory in battle often entailed. His reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution was hesitant, and he had left office before fascism took power in Italy. Nonetheless, in his ambitious initiatives of 1917–9, Wilson laid the groundwork for many of the fundamental tenets of American national security policy for the rest of the twentieth century: that nationalism should be respected as one of the most powerful political sentiments of our times; that democracy is the most peace-loving and only legitimate form of modern government, and that the United States has a self-interested as well as a moral obligation to further its prospects abroad; that democracy and capitalism are mutually reinforcing systems of collective action so long as large accumulations of wealth do not control the political process; that in a world destined to be composed of many states, the need for mutual understanding and common purpose calls for a new respect for international law sustained by multilateral institutional arrangements; that a nondiscriminatory world economic system that is antiprotectionist and antimercantilist promotes general prosperity and peace; and that a global system of collective security is necessary to stop aggression.

Then as now, however, two obvious questions arise. The first was whether a world order dominated by democratic states could, in fact, be established. If democracy's prospects for sinking roots abroad were dim, would America not be better advised to follow the practices of traditional statecraft, which dictated working with foreign governments as they were rather than becoming engaged in difficult and protracted struggles to change their domestic character? The second question was whether, once in place, a world community of democratic states would in fact operate any differently than other state systems had in the past. If Christian and Muslim states went to war with their own kind, why not democracies?

The first question asks whether there are boundaries set by culture and history to the expansion of democratic government. Perhaps one could dispense with the requirement that agrarian societies become democratic. Their predisposition to authoritarianism was strong, their ability to disrupt the peace of the world minimal, and it was only at a later stage in their

political development that a choice for democracy would be possible. But why assume that other industrial countries must become democratic before the United States could rest easy? If liberal democracy had less than universal appeal, might not the United States be well advised to avoid pushing its ways too hard, both for the sake of peace and for the purpose of safeguarding democratic government where it had naturally developed? The first argument against Wilson's hope to make the world safe for democracy—whether in 1919, 1945, or 1995—is that it misdirects American attention from the essential question with respect to the conduct of states in the international arena—are they hostile to the United States or not?—to questions of their internal order. It incites an antipathy toward non-democratic governments, which may be ill-advised. It indulges the country in a moralistic and self-righteous missionary crusade, which is a quixotic use of power that can be cruel and self-defeating.

Even should an order of democratic states in fact be created, the second question asks why we should assume it could indeed be organized so as to operate for the sake of the common good. What reason is there to assume some special dispensation for democracy to redeem the world when no other common code, be it monarchical, Christian, or Islamic, had succeeded before? Why should democracies necessarily be more cooperative and peace-loving than empires, for example? May not popular passions be as easily aroused as those of an aristocracy? Will the modern world with its economic and environmental interdependencies not breed as many sources of conflicting interest as at any time in the past, perhaps more? Might not the ensuing struggles between peoples rather than princes be especially cruel?

The questions surrounding Wilsonianism therefore concern not only his administration, but the conduct of much of American foreign policy in this century. The answers to these questions remain as urgent for our times as for the world of 1919.

WILSONIANISM IN THEORY

The essential genius of Wilson's proposals for a new world order after World War I was that it had a vision of the proper ordering of domestic as well as international politics that was well suited to the development of political and economic forces worldwide in the twentieth century. Here was a period in Germany, Russia, and Eastern Europe where social forces were struggling over the modernization of the state, where rival conceptions of national unity were trying to make government responsive through party government to nationalistic appeals for popular sovereignty. In domestic terms, Wilson respected the power of nationalism and favored national self-determination. States were presumed to be legitimate when they were democratically constituted, and it was expected that in most instances ethnic boundaries would make for the frontiers of countries. In the context of the world of 1918, such a proposal was radical; it accepted the dismemberment of empires (those of Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Turkey immediately; those of the Western European powers by implication thereafter), and it worked for the replacement of autocracies with democracies in Germany and the new nation-states to the East.²

For international relations, Wilson called for a liberal economic regime and a system of

collective security designed to preserve the peace. Again, his initiative was radical for it challenged the competitive mercantilistic practices that dictated much of world commerce with a more open trading system, just as it proposed to replace competitive balance of power thinking politically with what he called “a covenant of cooperative peace.”

In short, the foundation of Wilson’s order was the democratic nation-state; its superstructure was an international order of economic, military, and moral interdependence. Nationalism wed to democracy; democracies wed in peace, prosperity, and mutual respect embodied in international law and institutions: such was Wilson’s essential vision, a form of liberalism he felt to be both necessary and appropriate for his era and essential to guarantee American national security. Each of these interlocking propositions deserves a closer look.

In his views on the proper organization of domestic affairs, Wilson was a man of 1848. That year marked the first flowering of that “springtime of nations” when, following upheavals in Paris, populist uprisings confronted the German and Austro-Hungarian monarchies with demands democracy and national self-determination. Over and again, Wilson insisted that the peace treaties signed in Paris in 1919 had as their “central object ... to establish the independence and protect the integrity of the weak peoples of the world.”³ Or again, “The heart and center of this treaty is that it sets at liberty people all over Europe and in Asia who had hitherto been enslaved by powers which were not their rightful sovereigns and masters.”⁴ As he declared in a celebrated address to the American Congress in January 1917:

No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property. I take it for granted ... that statesmen everywhere are agreed that there should be a united, independent, and autonomous Poland, and that henceforth inviolable security of life, of worship, and of industrial and social development should be guaranteed to all peoples who have lived hitherto under the power of government devoted to a faith and purpose hostile to their own. ... I would fain believe that I am speaking for the silent mass of mankind everywhere who have as yet had no place or opportunity to speak their real hearts out. ... no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful.⁵

As these lines suggest, Wilson was a friend to nationalism everywhere. He endorsed the Balfour Declaration, promising the Jewish people a place in Palestine. He was sympathetic to the needs of the Armenians (and deliberated whether the United States should exercise a mandate over this people). He gave repeated assurances to the Germans that, once their autocratic leaders were deposed, their national integrity would be respected. Czechoslovak patriots quoted Wilson’s words of 1898 as their organizing slogan in the United States during World War I: “No lapse of time, no defeat of hopes, seemed sufficient to reconcile the Czechs of Bohemia to incorporation with Austria. Pride of race and the memories of a notable and distinguished history kept them always at odds with the Germans at their gate and the

government over their heads.”⁶ As the president put it in 1919, “self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.”⁷

Respect for nationalism was not enough, however. Nations needed to be organized democratically. From Wilson’s perspective, a major advantage of democratic government aside from its moral appeal was that it was more stable and less predatory than autocratic government. Democracy was more stable because it provided a formula that could accommodate contending social forces by providing for orderly change under the rule of law; it was thus a form of government appropriate to the increased specialization and interdependence of modern life. Democracy was less predatory because public opinion could supervise official decision-making and prevent the kind of aggressions abroad that served selfish private interests. A constitutionalist for domestic matters, Wilson was a constitutionalist for the world community as well. Because no nondemocratic constitutional government had established the rule of law to the degree of the democracies, democracy’s internal procedures for conflict resolution and compromise—for providing unity while respecting diversity—might be transferred to institutions governing world affairs.

Wilson’s faith in popular sovereignty made him the enemy of monarchical rule. In the case of Germany, Wilson repeatedly distinguished between the German people and their government. As he put it to the Congress in his request for a declaration of war:

We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling toward them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval. It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools.⁸

Or again: “German rulers have been able to upset the peace of the world only because the German people were not suffered under their tutelage to share the comradeship of the other peoples of the world either in thought or in purpose. They were allowed to have no opinion of their own which might be set up as a rule of conduct for those who exercised authority over them.”⁹ Thus, as the war neared its end, Wilson indicated that the German surrender should come from representatives of the people; in other words, that the Kaiser be deposed and the way cleared for democracy before peace could be concluded.

Similarly, Wilson welcomed “the wonderful and heartening things” that transpired in Russia during March, 1917, when the Czar was forced to abdicate to republican forces:

Russia was known by those who knew it best to have been always in fact democratic at heart, in all the vital habits of her thought, in all the intimate relationships of her people that spoke their natural instinct, their habitual attitude toward life. The autocracy that crowned the summit of her political structure, long as it had stood and terrible as was the reality of

its power, was not in fact Russian in origin, character or purpose; and now it has been shaken off and the great, generous Russian people have been added in all their naive majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world, for justice, and for peace.¹⁰

The marriage of democracy to nationalism was not at all a foregone conclusion in Wilson's thinking. In Eastern Europe, the prospects for democracy varied with the country. As Wilson's experience with Polish nationalists during the war taught him, not all were so favorably disposed as the Czechoslovaks for a postwar consolidation of republican government.¹¹ Throughout much of Central and Eastern Europe were the old right-wing militaristic "forces of order" embodied in the aristocracies and autocracies that Wilson so much deplored, against whom America had gone to war.¹² The war over, these reactionaries would scheme once again to take power and wage war. And on the left were the new "forces of movement" embodied in the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. Here Wilson perceived an energy born of oppressions centuries old, now demanding "world revolution," which threatened to bring struggle and suffering to the peoples of East and Central Europe—and perhaps beyond, into Asia—in the disorder following the destruction of war. Isaiah Bowman, a chief adviser to the president in 1918–9, cites Wilson saying that "the poison of Bolshevism was readily accepted by the world because 'it is a protest against the way the world has worked.' It will be our business at the Peace Conference to fight for a new order, 'agreeably if we can, disagreeably if necessary.'" ¹³

In these politically polarized circumstances, Wilson preached the doctrine of the liberal democratic alternative to reaction and to revolution, a third way forward, which called for clear resolve. In some measure, Wilson understood the full scope of his enormous ambition: "The conservatives do not realize what forces are loose in the world at the present time," he observed in January 1919. "Liberalism is the only thing that can save civilization from chaos. ... Liberalism must be more liberal than ever before, it must even be radical, if civilization is to escape the typhoon."¹⁴

Liberalism: here was the touchstone on which Wilson based his hopes for a new order of world peace. Following in the footsteps of British and American liberals before him, Wilson viewed himself as a cosmopolitan as well as an American, a man able to understand and respect the interests of others and to look forward to a structure of world order that would permit nations to work together cooperatively in a system where the self-interest of each would be realized in terms of the common interest of all. Nationalism and democracy were not enough. Only international economic and political cooperation could preserve the peace. "Unless all the right-thinking nations of the world are going to concert their purpose and their power, this treaty is not worth the paper it is written on," he warned in 1919, "because it is a treaty where peace rests upon the right of the weak, and only the power of the strong can maintain the right of the weak."¹⁵

The economic dimension of the new democratic world order would be modeled on the kind of multilateral, nondiscriminatory system the British had promoted since the first half of

the nineteenth century—a set of measures known as international economic liberalism. The United States had backed such procedures earlier, most vigorously in international affairs by the Open Door Notes of 1899–1900, when Washington asked that China be permitted to adopt a uniform stand with respect to trade and investment, equal with regard to all with whom it treated. America did not endorse free trade, but it was most decidedly liberal and anti-imperialist in that, as the name Open Door suggested, states would deal with one another economically in uniform terms without special favors (so-called most favored nation treatment, by which all trading partners would be extended the most generous terms provided any of them).

The political significance of this policy was even more important than its economic promise. The Open Door Notes were the functional equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine for the Far East, since Washington sought to preserve the political integrity of China against demands that it be divided into spheres of influence based on European and Japanese economic interest.

Accordingly, in September 1916, speaking of the American business stake in the Panama Canal, the president declared:

Here is the loom all ready upon which to spread the threads which can be worked into a fabric of friendship and wealth such as we have never known before! The real wealth of foreign relationships, my fellow-citizens, whether they be the relationships of trade or any other kind of intercourse, the real wealth of those relationships is the wealth of mutual confidence and understanding. If we do not understand them and they do not understand us, we can not trade with them, much less be their friends, and it is only by weaving these intimate threads of connection that we shall be able to establish that fundamental thing, that psychological, spiritual nexus which is, after all, the real warp and woof of trade itself. We have got to have the knowledge, we have got to have the cooperation, and then back of all that has got to lie what America has in abundance and only has to realize, that is to say, the self-reliant enterprise.¹⁶

Given these liberal assumptions, Wilson opposed German mercantilist principles, which implied the necessity of political control over foreign peoples for the advancement of German industry. Speaking before the American Federation of Labor in November 1917, Wilson praised the German success: “The whole world stood at admiration of her wonderful intellectual and material achievements. ... She had access to all the markets of the world. ... She had a ‘place in the sun.’” But given the structure and attitudes of German business, the president continued, “the authorities of Germany were not satisfied”:

There is no important industry in Germany upon which the Government has not laid its hands, to direct it and, when necessity arose, control it. ... You will find that they were the same sort of competition that we have tried to prevent by law within our own borders. If they could not sell their goods cheaper than we could sell ours at a profit to themselves they could get a subsidy from the Government which made it possible to sell them cheaper anyhow, and the conditions of competition were thus controlled in large measure by the

German Government itself. But that did not satisfy [them]. All the while there was lying behind its thought in its dreams of the future a political control which would enable it in the long run to dominate the labor and the industry of the world. They were not content with success by superior achievement; they wanted success by authority ... [thus] the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was constructed. ... I saw a map in which the whole thing was printed in appropriate black the other day, and the black stretched all the way from Hamburg to Baghdad—the bulk of German power inserted into the heart of the world.¹⁷

The point is worth emphasizing, for it would reappear in American conduct toward Germany after 1945: German capitalists were to be obliged to see the world from a liberal Open Door perspective, not from a mercantilist point of view, which implied the necessity of political control over foreign peoples for the advancement of German industry.

Wilson was also outspoken in his distrust of unregulated American trusts. Politics, not economics, should command. Sounding every bit the Progressive, Wilson warned: “Men who are behind any interest always unite in organization, and the danger in every country is that these special interests will be the only things organized, and that the common interest will be unorganized against them. The business of government is to organize the common interest against the special interest.” The same logic applied abroad. He broke with Taft’s dollar diplomacy, forced American banks out of China, and resisted loans to Latin America, which he felt might compromise national sovereignties in the region. Similarly, writing of the Russian Revolution toward the end of his life, Wilson remarked “that great and widespread reaction like that which is now unquestionably manifesting itself against capitalism do not occur without cause or provocation”:

... before we commit ourselves irreconcilably to an attitude of hostility to this movement of the time, we ought frankly to put to ourselves the question: Is the capitalistic system unimpeachable? ... Have capitalists generally used their power for the benefit of the countries in which their capital is employed and for the benefit of their fellow men? Is it not, on the contrary, too true that capitalist have often seemed to regard the men whom they used as mere instruments of profit? ... if these offenses against high morality and true citizenship have been frequently observable, are we to say that the blame for the present discontent and turbulence is wholly on the side of those who are in revolt against them?¹⁸

One body of literature has seen Wilson’s primary postwar project as the creation of a liberal international economic order, with the League of Nations serving as its guarantor. By these lights, Wilsonianism is essentially synonymous with “liberal capitalist (not democratic) internationalism,” and this material and class interest, not the political rhetoric of democracy, is the heart of his appeal to later American leaders.¹⁹

The problem with this interpretation of Wilsonianism is that it takes an aspect of Wilson’s agenda and mistakes it for his whole program. Certainly Wilson was an international economic liberal; that point is not in doubt. But Wilson’s primary concerns were political. Aside from sponsoring democratic national governments, his first priority was the League of Nations,

whose basic mandate he saw as providing collective military security; economic issues were secondary in its functioning (and even then included the creation of the International Labor Organization, which might be seen as a constraint on liberal capitalism). Nor did the Peace Conference engage in prolonged deliberations on a new world economic order. Germany was not ushered into a liberal economic order internationally; the closed new states of Eastern Europe were no better suited for such an arrangement. More, the United States was adamant that interallied loans be repaid, putting a serious strain on global finances. In fact, Wilson's shortcoming was that he did not stress enough the economic dimension of his agenda for world order. John Maynard Keynes may have clearly seen at the time the need for an economically integrated Europe in cooperation with the United States, but it was precisely because Wilson did not fully understand what was needed that Keynes became such a harsh critic of the president.²⁰

What mattered far more to Wilson, and where his thinking was more original, was in his ambition to build a liberal collective security system centered on Europe after 1918, an idea that was embodied in the League of Nations.²¹ As Wilson accurately perceived, the prospects for the survival of the young democracies of Eastern Europe he was working so hard to establish would be greatly enhanced if they could have cooperative relations with a fully democratized Germany and with the more established democracies of Western Europe and the United States in the League. As the president put it early in 1919:

Do you realize how many new nations are going to be set up in the presence of old and powerful nations in Europe and left there, there, if left by us, without a disinterested friend? Do you believe in the Polish cause as I do? Are you going to set up Poland, immature, inexperienced, as yet unorganized, and leave her with a circle of armies around her? Do you believe in the aspirations of the Czechoslovaks and Jugo-slavs as I do? Do you know how many powers would be quick to pounce upon them if there were not guarantees of the world behind their liberty? Have you thought of the sufferings of Armenia? You poured out your money to help succor Armenians after they suffered. Now set up your strength so that they shall never suffer again.²²

The general premise on which Wilson's argument depended was to be repeated time and again in words similar to those he used in January 1917:

The question upon which the whole future peace and policy of the world depends is this: is the present war a struggle for a just and secure peace, or only for a new balance of power? If it be only a struggle for a new balance of power, who will guarantee, who can guarantee, the stable equilibrium of the new arrangement? Only a tranquil Europe can be a stable Europe. There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace.²³

Three basic assumptions undergirded Wilson's notion of the League. First, it was to be composed of democratically constituted states. "A steadfast concert for peace can never be

maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion. ... Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own.”²⁴ Subsequently, the stricture on the need to be democratic was loosened in favor of admitting states that were simply “fully self-governing,” while the mandate system pledged the League eventually to welcome other peoples under foreign control to a club of self-determining countries. Of the thirty states that signed the original instrument creating the League in 1919, fewer than half were democracies. In 1938, when League membership had increased to fifty-seven states, the proportion was smaller still.²⁵

Wilson’s second assumption was that these self-governing peoples should be capable of disinterested moral judgment and should recognize that henceforth their individual interest would best be served by pursuing the common good enshrined in international law and organization. “The nations of the world have become each other’s neighbors,” he declared in May 1916. “It is to their interest that they should understand each other. In order that they may understand each other, it is imperative that they should agree to cooperate in a common cause and that they should so act that the guiding principle of that common cause shall be even-handed and impartial justice.”²⁶ The Fourteen Points, announced in January 1918, were to be a statement of general rules as well as specific terms for peace in Europe. Beyond this, Wilson did not go, assuming that the League should work out its mechanism of interaction experimentally as it dealt with issues of world order. His presumption was that once a commitment had been freely undertaken by member states to live internationally under a rule of law, it was up to the League to prescribe the details of its conduct as it faced the challenges to its mandate.²⁷

Wilson’s third assumption was that while the world desperately needed to end arms races, the League must recognize there would be occasions on which it might be obliged to use force. “Mere agreements may not make peace secure,” he observed in January 1917. “It will be absolutely necessary that a force be created as a guarantor of the permanency of the settlement so much greater than the force of any nation now engaged or any alliance hitherto formed or projected that no nation, no probable combination of nations could face or withstand it. If the peace presently to be made is to endure, it must be a peace made secure by the organized major force of mankind.”²⁸ Later, Wilson was to retreat from such a radical suggestion, with its implication that a supranational government would have at its disposal forces so powerful. The League was not to have an independent military force nor its own financial resources, and its Council had to be unanimous for collective deterrence of aggression to take place. The League was not a world government.²⁹

WILSONIANISM IN PRACTICE

Nationalism, democracy, a liberal world economic order, a system of collective security, a moral commitment to leadership in such an arrangement on the part of the United States: this

was the Wilsonian project of liberalism for world order after 1918. In the interwar years these ambitions came to naught. No way was found to integrate the Soviet Union, born of that war, into the European balance of power, while the threat of communism domestically put a heavy strain on democratic forces throughout the continent. Except in Czechoslovakia, democracy was unable to find fertile soil in Eastern Europe, where a zone of weak states looked with fear alternatively at Berlin and Moscow. After 1929, a weakly structured system of international trade and finance buckled under the weight of the Depression. After fourteen years of effort, democracy collapsed in Germany in 1933 with the rise of Hitler. Democratic forces in France and Britain lost their self-confidence. The United States refused to join the League of Nations and lapsed again into isolationism.

During the 1920s, a leading explanation of the failure of Wilson's ambitions had to do with the conduct of the president himself. Wilson abandoned his principles, the argument went, and in the process betrayed the hopes of those European democrats who held to them, the Germans most of all. The president then compounded his mistakes in Paris by failing to convince his fellow Americans of the importance of his program. America's subsequent isolationism—the Senate's rejection of the Paris Treaty, the Republican victory in the presidential election of 1920, Washington's inability to stop the economic crisis in Europe thereafter or to counter the rise of fascism—was certainly not the intended consequence of Wilson's policies. Nevertheless, isolationism was the regrettable but not surprising result of a style of leadership that was too abstract and too moralistic to anticipate the difficulties of implementing such a visionary policy. This was the essential charge of influential commentators at the time, such as John Maynard Keynes, Harold Nicolson, and Walter Lippmann, all devoted Wilsonians in 1918, who were sorely disappointed by the peace settlement. Keynes's indictment is the most trenchant and famous ever made of Wilson. Under the pressure of quicker, sharper men in Paris who fought for national interests only (especially French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau), Wilson lost his balance, so Keynes maintained, and permitted a "Carthaginian Peace: ... if ever the action of a single individual matters, the collapse of the President has been one of the decisive moral events of history."³⁰

The most obvious way to criticize Wilson in terms of his own principles was to cite the conditions imposed on the defeated Germans at Versailles. In 1917 Wilson had made a critical distinction between the German militaristic autocracy and the German people. But the peace settlement forced the new republican government of Germany to sign a "war guilt clause" assuming Germany's sole moral responsibility for the war, saddled that country with reparations on a scale that appeared ruinous, and deprived it of territories while forbidding its unification with Austria in a way that goaded to anger German nationalism. What had happened to Wilson's call in 1917 for a "peace without victory?"

Victory would mean peace forced upon the 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. Only a peace between equals can last.

Only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit.³¹

Wilson may have thought to save himself from the brutality of the peace with the promise of the League. Yet according to Lippmann, Nicolson, and company, not only was this a doubtful gamble given the compromises he had to make to achieve it and the volatile tempers of the times, but the president made repeated mistakes in his efforts to persuade the American public of the wisdom of the accords. Thus, Wilson should not have made the congressional elections of November 1918 a test of loyalty to his program. Or he should have taken a bipartisan delegation with him to Paris in January 1919 (prominent friendly Republicans such as Taft or Root, for example). Most importantly, when the treaty came up for Senate ratification in November 1919 and again in March 1920, he might have accepted reservations to the provisions for the League that would not have substantially compromised its operations. In all of these respects, Wilson significantly damaged the prospects that his fellow citizens would willingly engage themselves in a dramatic shift in American foreign policy toward a prominent and permanent engagement in European politics.

Was the president's stubbornness due to his Calvinism, as many have maintained; to his shaken physical state and the toll this took on him psychically, as more recent work has suggested; or again, to the changing role of the presidency in American life?³² Whatever the verdict, Wilson could have promoted his policy far more skillfully than he did.

Yet, suppose that Wilson had been in full possession of his faculties and had built a bipartisan consensus around his ideas. Would the world then have been made safe for democracy? To put the question of Wilsonianism in these terms is to shift the focus of analysis from the president and his program to the world in which it was to operate.

Circumstances in Europe created four major categories of objective difficulties for Wilson's plans: the character of Allied (and especially French) demands for the postwar settlement; the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on class tensions in Europe (even more than on relations among states); the prospects for democracy over the medium term in Germany; the situation politically in Eastern Europe, a largely agrarian region with ethnically mixed peoples.

The first of these obstacles to Wilson's vision—French security concern with respect to Germany—was the most politically charged matter at the Peace Conference.³³ The determination of America's allies—and the French in particular—that Germany would be made to pay dearly for the war proved tremendously costly to Wilson. Without Franco-German reconciliation, what chance could there be for liberal democratic forces to join hands across national boundaries? How could a liberal economic order be maintained; how could the League function effectively? Under Georges Clemenceau's leadership, the French were working to divide and bleed Germany to such an extent that its preponderance over France would forever be ended. Whereas Wilson proposed to control German power by integrating it into a more united Europe, the French proposed to deal with the problem by dismembering the country.

Clemenceau's war aims (not the most radical expressed in France) made short shrift of Wilson's call for "peace without victory." In the east, in addition to favoring maximum boundaries for Czechoslovakia in the peace settlement, the French supported maximum Polish claims (for Upper Silesia and Danzig especially, as well as for eastern Galicia)—all to have strong allies against Germany in the region. To the south, the French prevented Austrian unification with Germany. In the west, the French not only expected the return of Alsace and Lorraine but also coveted the Saar and influence over an autonomous Rhenish state on the left bank of the Rhine. So much for Wilson's ideas of Franco-German rapprochement or his notion of extending the principles of national self-determination to the Germans and Austrians.³⁴

As for reparations, the Germans would pay dearly. So much for the ideas of an integrated European economic system where the advantage of each is maximized by the advantage of all. Even if Clemenceau was only thinking defensively, and even if later economists were skeptical as to how damaging the reparations actually were, here was the old-fashioned world of power politics of a direct and brutal sort.³⁵

Wilson's problem with the French was aggravated by a negotiation process at the Peace Conference, where the French could find support from the British or the Italians on specific matters. In addition, the complexity of the issues, the time involved, the calls for revenge in the United States as well as among the allies—all of these wore down an already physically exhausted Wilson. "Hang the Kaiser;" "squeeze the orange til the pips squeak": this was the mood outside the conference walls. And what were Wilson's alternatives? As even his critics have conceded, had he walked away from the conference the British and French positions might have hardened and the new democratic leaders in Germany been handicapped even more in their functions.³⁶ Perhaps the League could set right what the peace settlement had so badly compromised, or so Wilson must have hoped.

A second obstacle to Wilson's liberal democratic internationalism outside his power to control came from the triumph of Lenin in Russia. Wilson had welcomed the fall of the Czar in March 1917, but he did not approve of the Bolshevik Revolution that November. Yet he kept a careful distance, justifying the small number of troops he sent to the Soviet Union in terms of continuing the struggle against Germany. "The word 'Bolshevik' covers many different things," he declared at the Peace Conference in March 1919. "In my opinion, to try to stop a revolutionary movement is like using a broom to sweep back a spring tide. ... The sole means of countering Bolshevism is to make its causes disappear. Moreover, it is a perilous enterprise; we don't even quite know what its causes are."

Given this caution, Wilson temporized, apparently hoping either that the Revolution would turn more moderate or that it would collapse due to internal conditions. Although the president wanted the Soviets to be invited to the peace conference, the United States had no fixed policy toward the Soviet Union during its critical deliberations. As his comments of May 1919 reveal, his overtures were based on caution: "We can recognize none of these [rival] governments as the government of Russia, and we must bind them to a procedure which will lead to the formation of a regular democratic government. If they resist, we can break off relations with them."³⁷

The French deplored Lenin's success for the fact that the revolution had expropriated important French investments and denied Paris the reassurance of an ally to the east to counter Germany. Whereas this concern might have reconciled them to closer relations with Berlin, the French were not to be moved.

Perhaps most importantly, by splitting the left and by terrifying the right, the Russian Revolution dimmed the prospects for democracy in Germany and Eastern Europe even more, while complicating political matters in France, Spain, and Italy. In Germany, the right became more assertive, the democratic left more moderate. In Eastern Europe, the new democratic regimes installed from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Black Sea were soon swept from power as the region deliberated its predicament between Moscow and Berlin.³⁸ In short, the consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution seriously complicated Wilson's hopes for a peace based on democratic regimes in Europe by weakening the ranks of the democrats, who experienced a new wave of assaults from extremes to their right and left.

The third obstacle to Wilsonianism in the interwar period came from the prospects for democracy in Germany. Wilson had wanted the Kaiser to abdicate and representatives of a new German republic to negotiate the surrender, which the Germans understood would be based on the Fourteen Points. Had the settlement followed these expectations, might the democratic promises of 1848 finally have been realized for Germany? Certainly the democratic parties there would have received a bigger boost: the German right would not have been able to lay so much blame on republican forces for the defeat; important bourgeois interests might have viewed the new regime more favorably; the tensions involved with the hyperinflation of the early 1920s, incurred while making reparation payments, would have been avoided; immediate membership in the League would have prompted a greater sense of democratic comradeship. Hence the poignancy one feels in the words of the final capitulation of the newly formed German republican government to the stiff ultimatum of the victors:

The German people, after their terrible sufferings of these last years are without means of defending their honor against the outside world. Yielding to overpowering might, the government of the German Republic declares itself ready to accept and to sign the peace treaty imposed by the Allied and Associated governments. But in so doing, the government of the German Republic in no wise abandons its conviction that these conditions of peace represent injustice without example.³⁹

Yet it is difficult to make an unequivocal argument that a "peace without victory" would have guaranteed the consolidation of democracy in Germany. It should be remembered that in the late 1920s, "the spirit of Locarno" spelled a period of rapprochement among the democrats of Britain, France, and Germany, when for a time it appeared the curse of the Great War had been lifted. Democracy did sink roots in German soil before 1933, but not deeply enough to hold the spectre of Hitler at bay; probably not deeply enough even had the peace been on generous terms.⁴⁰ Wilson never proposed to dispossess the old German ruling class of their privileges. Although the Kaiser went to live out his days in Holland and the aristocrats' undisputed political preeminence was now clearly over, the social heart of German militarism

continued to beat. Irredentist claims persisted to the east with millions of Germans living in Poland and Czechoslovakia especially. Economic affairs remained dominated by mercantilist cartels. And the Depression still fell in all its fury on a frightened people, where a militant left aligned with Moscow had broken with the democratic left, and where an unrepentant right used the threat of a communist revolution to justify its own outrages against the democratic order.

A fourth and final major obstacle to liberal democratic internationalism in the postwar era comes from an assessment of the prospects for democracy in Eastern Europe in the belt of states from the Baltic in the north to the Black Sea and the Adriatic in the south. In this largely agrarian region, democracy alarmed the traditional elites almost as much as Bolshevism, while economic difficulties and ethnic and border tensions resulting from the peace settlement increased tensions markedly. Authoritarianism was an ever-present temptation, often to preempt attempts to seize government by the extreme right. All the states of the region began the interwar period as democracies; by the early 1930s only one remained.⁴¹

Czechoslovakia was the single exception, the one country where Wilson's ideas bore fruit. A democratic government was recognized by the Allies in October 1918 and stayed in power until the final German onslaught in 1939. Czechoslovakia is an interesting example of the kind of circumstances where liberal democratic internationalism did provide a practical framework for American foreign policy.

The most important factor explaining the success of democracy in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period is that there was no traditional right there and no obvious social base for an authoritarian reaction. The country was born from a fragment of an empire and thus there was no native monarchy—the Slovaks having been under Hungarian rule, the Czechs under Austrian. Nor was there a Czech or Slovak landed elite with which the new republic had to deal. Instead, most of the large land owners were Germans or Magyars. By 1920, a reform bill had provided for the redistribution of these lands to small farmers, who became enthusiastic supporters of the republic and whose Agrarian party combined elements of both the Czech and Slovak populations (as well as some Magyars and Ruthenians—a Ukrainian people—aware that conditions then became better for them than for their bretheren in other lands).⁴²

By historical coincidence, then, Czechoslovakia came into being as a “bourgeois” republic. A Social Democratic movement had an established pedigree before independence and was solidly republican. The Communist party harbored no revolutionary illusions but cooperated with the new democratic order. It helped that the country was rich—in 1937, the Czech regions enjoyed a per capita income higher than France. A solid middle class had the skills to administer the government ably, under the leadership of such outstanding democrats as Thomas Masaryk and Eduard Benes. When the farmers rallied to the republic, the democratic consensus was firmly established. In addition, the country was economically balanced between agrarian and industrial activities, which helped to mitigate the economic difficulties that beset the area generally during the interwar years.

Tensions between the country's ethnic groups did seem at times to threaten political stability. Of its population of 14 million, more than 3 million were German, seven hundred thousand were Hungarian, and three hundred thousand were Ruthenians. The Germans and

Hungarians were accustomed to belonging to the dominant ethnic group under the former imperial system. They did not reconcile themselves easily to Czecho-slovakian sovereignty and could complain that the Paris settlement had deprived them of the right to the national self-determination that had been afforded to others.

Nor were relations between the dominant Czechs and Slovaks smooth (as their separation in 1992 into two countries was to demonstrate). Historically, they had lived separate political lives; their first joint association was in the state founded in 1918. Moreover, the relative economic backwardness of the Slovaks and their cultural provincialism meant that they resented the more prosperous and secular Czechs and their leading role in the affairs of the new regime. Whatever the Czech efforts, they were never able to overcome a tendency on the part of many Slovaks to want more autonomy—and a corresponding willingness of some Slovaks to flirt with right-wing ideologies when the temptation arose.

Nevertheless, it is possible to speculate that these very tensions helped Czechoslovakian democracy. A single dominant ethnic group could have proved more hostile to minorities; it might have sacrificed certain democratic freedoms for the sake of ethnic advantage. By having to bid constantly for Slovak support, the Czechs had to ensure the viability of a system of mutual understanding and compromise. Meanwhile, both communism and fascism could be seen as foreign to the democratic cast of Czechoslovakian nationalism.

This ethnic compromise was worked out within a political system borrowed in part from the French Third Republic. The president was elected by the legislature, which also selected a cabinet. Thanks to proportional representation, Czechoslovakia had a multiparty system—cabinets typically counted the participation of five parties. In other Eastern European countries (and in France) such a party system made governing coalitions difficult to sustain. In Prague the cooperation of Czechs and Slovaks proved crucial. Though there were fourteen different cabinets in power between 1920 and 1938, multiparty democracy survived. When the country fell to Germany it was a moral loss of the first order to the West.

Wilson's relationship to Czechoslovakian democracy began with diplomatic support for that country's creation in 1918, and with his call for secure borders for it in 1919. As statements by the republic's foreign minister and later President Eduard Benes demonstrate, Wilson's League of Nations was indeed the kind of international guarantee a vulnerable democracy such as Czechoslovakia needed after 1920. But the achievement of Czechoslovakian democracy was fundamentally an act of these peoples themselves. At certain moments, Wilson's efforts were critical, but far from decisive. Similar ambitions along the length of Eastern Europe—in Poland or Yugoslavia, for example—fell on far less fertile soil.

To recapitulate: Wilson's effort to create a liberal democratic alternative to the forces of reaction and revolution foundered not so much on his style of leadership as on the social and political reality he faced in Europe. No observation about Eastern Europe could have been more mistaken than that of Thomas Masaryk, saying the war had left the region "a laboratory atop a vast cemetery."⁴³ Despite the upheavals of the war, Europe was not a tabula rasa, but a continent of social and political forces and in fierce contention. Hence, Wilson's project was thwarted by a French determination to be done with the German menace, by the Bolshevik

Revolution, by splits on the left and the resurgence of the right in Germany, by the agrarian social structures of Eastern Europe with class and ethnic antagonisms of great intensity, and by an American nationalist opinion reluctant to see its national security involved in dangerous new foreign entanglements.

THE DILEMMA OF AMERICAN POLICY IN EUROPE

As with his policy toward Latin America (reviewed in the last chapter), so too with his policy toward Europe, Wilson failed in his efforts both to root democratic forces in countries where they were struggling to take power and to establish a stable new configuration of power among the states of the continent. German democracy was not robust; Franco-German rapprochement did not occur; outside Czechoslovakia, democratic forces were weak in Eastern Europe; the Russian Revolution remained militant; communist parties in Western Europe sapped democratic forces; fascism came into power in Italy in 1922, encouraging like-minded movements to duplicate its success; no way was found to counter economic nationalism and the destructive impact of the Depression that began in 1929; collective security proved unable to halt Italian aggression in Ethiopia or Japanese attacks on China; and the American people and Congress refused to identify the national security with an active hand in the protection of liberal democracy in Europe.

Was there a better guide than Wilsonianism as to how America should defend its legitimate concerns in the founding of a stable European order friendly to this country's interests? Between 1940 and the early 1950s, the most influential thinkers in this country on the proper conduct of American foreign policy—Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr—took special pains to use Wilson as a negative example, a textbook study of how foreign policy should not be formulated. For these analysts, Wilsonianism stands for the American penchant to conduct its foreign conduct by moralizing about it, by assuming that somehow democracy is a panacea for the world's problems. In their eyes, liberal democratic internationalism betrays a vein of naive and Utopian idealism ill-fitted to effective participation in global politics. The affliction did not start with Wilson nor end with him, but his presidency marks its high-water point. Realism, the dominant school of international relations theory in the United States, was founded at this time by these men and built its concepts by consciously pitting itself against the basic tenets of Wilsonianism.

Thus, referring to the settlement of 1919, George Kennan wrote:

This was the sort of peace you got when you allowed war hysteria and impractical idealism to lie down together in your mind, like the lion and the lamb; when you indulged yourself in the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image; when you dismissed the past with contempt, rejected the relevance of the past to the future, and refused to occupy yourself with the real problems that a study of the past would suggest.⁴⁴

In Hans Morgenthau's words:

In the end, Wilson had to consent to a series of uneasy compromises, which were a betrayal of his moral principles—for principles can, by their very nature, not be made the object of compromise—and which satisfied nobody's national aspirations. These compromises had no relation at all to the traditional American national interest in a viable European balance of power. Thus Wilson returned from Versailles a compromised idealist, an empty handed statesman, a discredited ally. In that triple failure lies the tragedy not only of Wilson, a great yet misguided man, but of Wilsonianism as a political doctrine.⁴⁵

Walter Lippmann's charges were even harsher, for they allege that Wilson's mistakes set the stage for the rise of fascism and the inability of the democracies to rally effectively to the challenge:

To end the struggle for power, Wilson sought to make the nations powerless. The Wilsonian principles stipulate that the nations should disarm themselves physically and politically and then entrust their independence and their vital interests to an assembly of debating diplomats. ... The cynicism which corroded the democracies in the interval between the two German wars was engendered by a moral order which was in fact a moral frustration ... which, insofar as its prohibitions had influence in disarming the nations, disaggregating alliances, and disrupting great states, was a preparation not for peace under the law but for aggression in the midst of anarchy.⁴⁶

How, then, should American foreign policy have been formulated? These writers consider themselves realists. They insist that the national interest should be determined rather strictly by calculations of the relative amount of power among states, with a view of preventing threats to the existence or independence of the United States. Seen from this perspective, the only obvious antagonist of the United States in world affairs at that time was Germany, which Washington should forthrightly have mobilized to contain. They have no patience with the "idealism" of a "utopian," "moralistic" crusade to change the character of international relations by making states democratic, such as Wilson advanced, for this talk only put a smokescreen over the essential matter of dealing with German power.

Lippmann put the argument first and best, declaring in 1943, in words that he meant to apply to Wilson, that Americans

have forgotten the compelling and, once seen, the self-evident common principle of all genuine foreign policy—the principle that alone can force decisions, can settle controversy, and can induce agreement. ... [Hence] a policy has been formed only when commitments and power have been brought into balance. This is the forgotten principle which must be recovered and restored to the first place in American thought if the nation is to achieve the foreign policy which it so desperately wants.⁴⁷

Morgenthau insisted on much the same point when he wrote:

What passed for foreign policy was either improvisation or—especially in our century—the invocation of some abstract moral principle in whose image the world was to be made over. ... embracing everything, it came to grips with nothing. In part, however, it was a magnificent instrument for marshaling public opinion in support of war and warlike policies—and for losing the peace.⁴⁸

In a word, the realists maintained that Wilson did not adequately appreciate the character of “power politics” or the “balance of power” in his deliberations, by which they meant the need to contain German power so that it would not dominate the continent, a turn of events that would have been seriously threatening to American national security. In Lippmann’s view, for example, Wilson failed to explain to the American people why the country went to war: “The reasons he did give were legalistic and moralistic and idealistic reasons, rather than the substantial and vital reasons that the security of the United States demanded that no aggressively expanding imperial power, like Germany, should be allowed to gain the mastery of the Atlantic Ocean.”⁴⁹

These charges ask for an indictment that the evidence does not warrant. Thus, Wilson was not a pacifist, and his proposals for disarmament are best understood as confidence-building measures among states, not as a reluctance to back commitments with force, as Lippmann suggested. Again, the League of Nations was not to have either financial or military resources independent of the states that participated in it, and its Council had to act by unanimous agreement; the League was not to be a world government. More, the call for self-determination was not intended as a blank check for secessionist movements. Wilson respected economic, strategic, and historical considerations that had to be weighed against nationalist feelings; it was only toward the end of the war that he finally resigned himself to the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian empire rather than to seeing it reconstituted as a democratic federalist structure.

But most importantly, Wilson intended the League to be the vehicle to bind the United States permanently to a management role in world affairs. Whatever the shortcomings of the details in his plan, American membership in the League might well have provided the check on Germany that Wilson’s critics allege his naivete and moralizing prevented him from establishing.

For Wilson, the vital issue at the Peace Conference was the League; for his critics, it was Germany. Yet the League’s very existence implicitly addressed the essential issue for Europe from 1871 until 1945 (and perhaps once again today): the German question. Given Germany’s population, economic strength, militaristic history, political structure, and geography, could it live peacefully with its neighbors? Were the only alternatives to destroy it or be conquered by it? American leadership of the League portended that Germany might be contained by American power. Once contained, domestic reforms might be consolidated so that Germany could live with its neighbors by progressively shedding its militaristic elements in favor of

developing itself as a democracy capable of interacting peacefully with the other states of Europe. But even without German reforms, membership in the League would automatically tie America into the European balance of power and so safeguard American national security.

Wilsonianism did, therefore, meaningfully address the critical issue of what to do about Germany. If the League's fundamental purpose was to check aggression against weaker states created by the dismemberment of the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires after 1918, if its collateral ambition was to foster democratic government and liberal international economic exchange, then what better safeguard could be put on German power? As a way of addressing the growing presence of the Soviet Union in world affairs, it offered a useful forum as well.

In addition to the League, Wilson had two other ways of influencing Germany. His preferred approach was to control German power by absorbing it into a liberal economic, political, and military arrangement that would effectively integrate Germany with its neighbors (especially France) and the United States. Here was the germ of the American idea after 1945 to push for European integration based on Franco-German rapprochement. Wilson also agreed to join the British in guaranteeing France against German attack in a treaty independent of the League. The Senate defeated this latter project along with barring American membership in the League.

It is true, of course, that the failure to deal generously with Germany in 1919 meant there was a sympathy on the part of many European liberals for German displeasure with the peace settlement. In turn, this sympathy, in combination with an antimilitarist prejudice, contributed to a liberal inability to deal with the rise of Hitler. But to suggest, as Walter Lippmann did, that the entire liberal peace program was actually little more than an exercise in fomenting the next war is to lay far more of a charge on Wilson's shoulders than is deserved. It is as if the impact on German politics of the Russian Revolution or the Depression of the 1930s were somehow of trivial importance given the blinders Wilson allegedly placed on liberals' appreciation of the German question. In fact, it is precisely the antidemocratic, mercantilist, and militaristic Third Reich that a proper Wilsonian should be primed to oppose from the first. (The same point can be made against those who allege that FDR's willingness to try to work with the Soviet Union was Wilsonian.)

Nor do Wilson's critics—the unreconstructed advocates of balance of power thinking—demonstrate how they would have handled European affairs better. What reason is there to think that a Germany dismembered in 1919 might not have found a way to rise and avenge itself (perhaps in league with the Soviet Union)? Within a few years, the British were beginning to suspect France of hegemonic ambitions in Europe, while no way was found to work with the Soviet Union—tinder enough for another war, one might say, had Wilson's liberal peace program never been mooted. Would a world that denied the power of nationalism, spurned the appeals of democracy, been uninterested in liberal international economic practices, and made a recourse to arms the first duty of states been such an attractive alternative to Wilson's vision? In short, it is far from obvious that Clemenceau's formula for handling Germany was more farsighted than Wilson's. Wilsonianism may have been a failure after 1919, but the realists

indicate no more realistic way to proceed.

Fail though it did at the time, the virtues of Wilson's policy for the postwar world were threefold. First, it acknowledged the fundamental political importance of nationalism, seeking to direct rather than to repress its energy. Second, it sought to channel the demands for popular sovereignty contained in nationalism in the direction of democratic government, and away from authoritarian or totalitarian regimes (though the latter—a particular curse of the twentieth century—was not yet clearly visible when Wilson was in office). Third, it attempted to provide a structure of international institutions and agreements to handle military and economic affairs among democratically constituted, capitalist states. In all of these respects, American national security thinking followed Wilson's lead after 1945. Again today, in the aftermath of the cold war, we can see the prescience of his proposals as we deliberate the problems of nationalism in Eastern Europe, the course of Western European integration based on Franco-German understanding, and the need for organizational mechanisms to provide for the peaceful formulation of a gamut of issues from the economic to the military.⁵⁰

It is commonly observed that politics as an art requires pursuing the desirable in terms of the possible. The dilemma of leadership is to decide when it is weakness to fail to exploit the inevitable ambiguities, and therefore possibilities, of the historical moment, and when it is foolhardy to attempt to overcome immovable constraints set by a combination of forces past and present. Since options are always open to some extent, greatness requires creating opportunities and taking risks within the limits set by history.

While the constraints of history nullified Wilson's hopes, his efforts did not totally contradict the forces of his time. Democratic nationalist forces did exist in Germany and parts of Eastern Europe. If it was unlikely that the Bolshevik Revolution would ever have turned in a democratic direction, it was not until 1921 (with the Tenth Party Congress, which established iron discipline within the Communist party, and with the crushing of the Kronstadt mutiny, a sailors' uprising against Lenin's rule) that its totalitarian cast was definitely set. If it was unlikely that democracy would consolidate itself in Germany given the rancors of the right, the splitting of the left, and the rigors of the Depression, it certainly was not until after 1930 that this became manifestly evident. Again, although the Senate had repudiated the League in 1919–20, it could reconsider its position, as at times the American government seemed interested in doing. In short, Wilson's gamble on the forces of democracy and collective security (which in practice would have been the balance of power under another name) was not totally unrealistic. And what were his other options? Indeed his greatness as a visionary comes from how close to success his program came. Suppose America had joined the League in good faith, an organization basically of his devising? By that single act, the course of history might have been changed, for it would have committed the United States to the maintenance of a European equilibrium containing Germany.

The best evidence of the power of Wilsonianism, however, comes from its resurgence in American foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II. Bretton Woods, the initial plans for the United Nations, the hopes for Western European integration that lay behind the occupation of Germany and the Marshall Plan—all this was essentially Wilsonian in inspiration (even

when operationalized by people like Keynes and Kennan who saw themselves as opponents of Wilson's position in Paris in 1919).⁵¹ In the late 1940s, Wilsonianism was thus to have a success that it was denied in the early 1920s. But it was in the late 1980s that Wilson's time truly arrived. Of all the extraordinary developments connected with the end of the cold war in 1989, surely one of the most noteworthy was the way Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" for Europe—with its insistence on the importance of national self-determination, democratic government, and collective security—echoed Wilson's appeals of seventy years earlier.

Accordingly, when Czechoslovakia's President Vaclav Havel addressed an emotional joint meeting of Congress on February 21, 1990, the first American he mentioned was Woodrow Wilson, whose "great support" in 1918 for Czech and Slovak nationalists had meant that they "could found our modern independent state." Havel acknowledged the spirit of Wilsonianism as well: that small nations deserve to be free; that their sovereignty should be based on national self-determination, which in turn implies the establishment of constitutional democratic government; that the intercourse of nations should be based on nondiscriminatory, liberal economic arrangements; and that democratic states should defend their common interest against the threat of selfish aggrandizement and war. Finally, he declared:

Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being. ... We still do not know how to put morality ahead of politics, science and economy. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility—responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success.⁵²

It was in recognition of Wilson's spirit—and not simply his actions—that during the interwar years so many boulevards, statues and parks in Rumania, Poland, Yugoslavia, and especially Czechoslovakia were named after him. In the aftermath of the most terrible war the world had seen, many of the peoples of Eastern Europe regarded Wilson as a liberator, indeed as a founding father of their new-born states.⁵³

Unlike most statesmen, then, Wilson deserves to be measured not on the basis of achieving the ends of his policy in their time, but by the magnitude of his efforts and the influence they continued to have in later years. Seen from the perspective of the mid-1990s, three-quarters of a century since he left office, Wilson's concern that nationalism abroad be turned in the direction of democratic government for the sake of the American national interest seems soundly conceived. Writing in 1889 on "Leaders of Men," Wilson had declared:

Great reformers do not, indeed, observe time and circumstance. Theirs is not a service of opportunity. They have no thought for occasion, no capacity for compromise. They are early vehicles of the Spirit of the Age. They are born of the very times that oppose them. ... Theirs to hear the inarticulate voices that stir in the night-watches, apprising the lonely sentinel of what the day will bring forth.⁵⁴