



Wilson in the White House

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The presidency of Woodrow Wilson from 1913 to 1921 was not good for the cause of liberty.

Wilson was clearly infected by the 'progressive' ethos of the era. He was strongly interventionist, pushing for legislation to reduce the length of the standard working week, to restrict child labour and to provide disability insurance. He attempted to reconcile this greater role for government with the traditional Jeffersonian ideas on which his Democratic Party was based, by arguing that the Declaration of Independence no longer provided answers for contemporary problems. He was confident that were Jefferson still alive he would recognise that, unlike in 1776, all men were no longer created equal. As with most 'if so and so were alive today' arguments, this one is not very convincing.

Wilson's presidency was also a disaster for blacks, as he promoted measures which delivered



greater segregation throughout the public service. Furthermore, it was a period of rising racial tensions and Wilson did little to stop increasing numbers of lynchings and other attacks on blacks. And, once the United States entered the war, he imposed an income tax and introduced the Alien and Sedition Acts, measures which were as heavy-handed an attack on free speech as those promulgated by John Adams in 1798.

Yet, in some respects, Wilson's Democrats were better for the cause of liberty than their Republican contemporaries. The Democratic platform on which Wilson stood in 1912 was headlined by a call for the immediate lowering of the 'high Republican tariff' which was 'the principal cause of the unequal distribution of wealth'. The election of the Republican William McKinley to the presidency in 1896 had marked a shift to higher tariffs (as well as immigration restriction and foreign adventurism), which continued under the following Republican presidents, Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. One Republican senator had secured a high tariff on imported textiles forcing people to buy over-priced products, a lot of which came from mills owned by the very same senator.

Wilson himself was a committed free-trader. As a young lawyer in Georgia he addressed a visiting Tariff Commission to explain how the tariff unfairly taxed the agricultural sector in the South and West. His eight years in the White House provided something of a pause in the onward march of protectionism. Within months of his departure from office in 1921, the Republican-controlled Congress introduced the highest tariffs in American history.

In a range of other policy areas, Wilson also had sound views. He had an instinctive dislike of debt describing it as 'short-sighted finance'; vetoed anti-immigration bills, supported votes for women, and opposed Prohibition, the first constitutional amendment to reduce citizens' rights.

This biography provides clues to the development of Wilson's approach to politics and policy, but they are often confusing ones. Author A. Scott Berg describes the young Wilson as 'an avowed Federalist – an ardent admirer of Alexander Hamilton; a believer in dominant central government', but later writes that 'Wilson challenged the Hamiltonian doctrine that those with the biggest asset in the government should serve as trustees for the rest of the nation'.

Similarly, when it came to British figures, Wilson appears to have been a man of eclectic tastes admiring Gladstone and Bright, but also being 'inspired' by some of Thomas Carlyle's ideas. Wilson would be far from the only individual to harbour such a diverse range of likes, but this work would have benefitted from a greater effort from the biographer to weigh these seemingly contradictory views and assess what they all meant for Wilson's intellectual development.

Wilson's career prior to becoming a politician had largely be spent on university campuses, principally Princeton, where he had been professor of politics and the author of several works on aspects of American history. He secured his first political office as governor of New Jersey just two years before he ran for the presidency.

When, in 1912, Wilson became the first Democrat to win a presidential election for twenty years, he was greatly assisted by a split in the Republican Party. Incumbent President Taft had to



compete with both Wilson and previous Republican President Roosevelt, now running under the banner of the Progressive Party. Wilson won easily getting 42 per cent of the vote compared to Roosevelt's 27 and Taft's 23, which gave him a then record 435 Electoral College votes.

Wilson's rapid rise meant he was a comparative political cleanskin, who believed that he did not owe anything to anyone. Upon his election, he readily dispatched numbers' men and others seeking preferment, telling one who claimed that his work had helped Wilson gain office that, 'God ordained that I should be the next president of the United States. Neither you nor any other mortal could have prevented that.' Imagine if Tony Abbott had said that!

Wilson commented that 'it would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs', which of course was what happened once the fatal shot had been fired at Sarajevo. He took what can be seen as a centrist approach to US participation in the war, not rushing to join the fray as some, such as Roosevelt, urged, nor remaining in the isolationist camp for the duration.

Given that Wilson took America into the war the following year, the irony was that his main selling point in his 1916 re-election campaign was that 'he kept us out of war'. It was a particularly close election, Wilson defeating the Republican Charles Evans Hughes by just 277 Electoral College votes to 254, a result achieved by winning California's thirteen delegates, with a margin of just 3,806 votes.

Perhaps more than for the war itself, Wilson is remembered for his post-war internationalist vision, which was frustrated by other nations at the Peace Conference and then by Republicans in the Senate. While Wilson was prepared to compromise at the former to secure the Treaty of Versailles, he was unwilling to make concessions to secure Senate ratification of the League of Nations. He believed he would have been able to bring enough pressure onto wavering senators but for the collapse of his health while on a barnstorming tour of western states in September 1919.

A stroke soon after his return to Washington meant that Wilson remained largely incapacitated for the balance of his presidency. As Berg comments, 'Presidents traditionally speak of the isolation of the White House, but none has been as removed as Woodrow Wilson – confined for months to a bed, and hearing no direct news.'

Berg has received acclaim for biographies of characters such as literary editor Max Perkins, film producer Samuel Goldwyn and aviator Charles Lindbergh, plus flak for a memoir of his twenty year friendship with Katharine Hepburn published just twelve days after her death. While this is his first political effort, he did have a long-standing interest in Wilson stemming from the 11th grade when his mother gave him a book called *When the Cheering Stopped* which dealt with Wilson's decline. He has now provided his own evocative description of this extraordinary situation.

The difference between Wilson's abilities before and after his stroke is given greater emphasis in this study by Berg's particularly high regard for his subject's pre-stroke talents. This is captured best when Berg describes how Wilson put together his speech to Congress arguing that the



United States should enter the war:

For this momentous address, he summoned the country's most successful speechwriter, one of its foremost historians, one of its first political scientists, one of its most elegant wordsmiths, a spiritual thinker to provide moral grounding, and, finally, his most trusted stenographer to get it all down on paper. There in the second-story study, Woodrow Wilson sat alone.

In fact, this was not even true, as his second wife Edith was with him at the time.

In most other matters, both public and personal, Berg takes Wilson's side, for instance accepting that he did not have an affair with the infamous Mrs Peck. Despite the sympathy of the author there remains something slightly unappealing about Wilson, a man who ended up falling out with his closest confidants at both Princeton and the White House – Jack Hibben and Colonel House – when they eventually disagreed with him.

The blurb for this book says that 'you can't understand the United States in the 20th century without understanding Woodrow Wilson'. Don't let the hyperbole put you off. Wilson is definitely important and this work is a highly readable account of his life.