A Political Autobiography

Thomas Woodrow Wilson’s earliest memory was of hearing, at the age of four, that Abraham Lincoln had been elected President and that there would soon be a war.¹ His father, the Reverend Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, was one of Georgia’s most prominent Presbyterian ministers and, despite his Yankee heritage, an ardent Southern sympathizer.² Both of Wilson’s parents were Northerners; in the 1850s, they had moved from Ohio to Staunton, Virginia (where Wilson was born in 1856), and eventually to Augusta, Georgia, where the Civil War overshadowed Wilson’s childhood. As his eighth birthday approached, he witnessed the solemn march of thousands of Confederate troops on their way to defend the city against Sherman’s invasion. He watched wounded soldiers die inside his father’s church and pondered the fate of the ragged Union prisoners confined in the churchyard outside. Soon he would see Jefferson Davis paraded under Union guard through the streets and would recall standing “for a moment at General Lee’s side and looking up into his face.”³

Wilson once commented, “A boy never gets over his boyhood, and never can change those subtle influences which have become a part of him.”⁴ It is an important fact that he experienced, at an impressionable age, the effects of a great war and its aftermath. It may also be that the
The foregoing incidents later exerted “subtle influences” on his sense of purpose in the creation of the League of Nations.

Yet undoubtedly the central influence on Wilson’s early personal development was his upbringing in a Presbyterian household. “The stern Covenanter tradition that is behind me sends many an echo down the years,” he told an English audience in December 1918. Indeed, in most of Wilson’s pre-presidential writings and speeches, Christian doctrine played an essential, though not exclusive, role in his political thought. John M. Mulder has argued that the key to understanding Wilson’s “years of preparation” is the Presbyterian covenantal religious tradition, the spiritual curriculum that the elder Wilson imparted to his son.

The covenantal tradition itself harked back to the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac and the agreement between God and his people, who, in exchange for their obedience and faith, would receive his blessings and protection. Dr. Wilson taught young “Tommy” that even individual success inhered in obedience to divine law. Moreover, in a world filled with struggle between good and evil, service to God was that much more imperative. Wilson venerated his “incomparable” father and dutifully appropriated the lessons. For example, shortly before graduating from Princeton, he wrote in his journal, “If God will give me the grace I will try to serve him . . . to perfection.”

Since the early national period, American Presbyterians had expanded the idea of the covenant to account for their perception of a special relationship between the United States and Providence; the new nation, they believed, would prosper as long as it remained righteous. Dr. Wilson embraced this concept, along with another—one that held that the nations of the world also were administered in harmony with God’s moral law. This “theology of politics” constituted a comprehensive scheme in which the individual, the church, society, and the nations of the world were all properly juxtaposed in the firmament. Mulder’s thesis—that Wilson wove covenant theology into practically every aspect of his existence—is instructive. In his father’s well-ordered philosophy of life and politics, Wilson apparently found both emotional and intellectual self-assurance. With his Princeton classmate Charles A. Talcott, for instance, he formed a “solemn covenant” in a joint quest to “acquire knowledge that we might have power.” He portrayed his forthcoming marriage to Ellen Louise Axson in 1885 as “a compact,” and suggested that they create “an Interstate Love League (of two members only that it may be of manageable size),” complete with a constitution. “Then,” he added, “we can make by-laws at our leisure as they become necessary.”

Wilson exhibited a penchant for constitutional order in other realms as well. At the rather advanced age of seventeen, he founded the imaginary “Royal United Kingdom Yacht Club,” with “Lord Thomas W. Wil-
son” as commodore, and went so far as to stipulate punishments for breaches of conduct, divisions of command, and regulations for regattas.\footnote{12} Three years later, at Princeton, he wrote the constitution for the Liberal Debating Club, “founded upon the fundamental principles of \textit{Justice, Morality, and Friendship}.”\footnote{13} Throughout most of his academic career, he founded or revamped debating societies—as a law student at the University of Virginia, as an attorney in Atlanta, as a political science graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, and as a professor at Wesleyan University.\footnote{14} Although too much should not be inferred from them, these exercises do provide certain insights into Wilson’s creation of the League of Nations. Writing constitutions, or covenants, served a number of functions: they brought order and rationality to anarchic conditions; they promoted the cause of democracy through political debate and emphasized the Christian duty to perform good works; and they could be applied to virtually any sphere of human endeavor—even to affairs of the heart or to the setting of goals for a career in politics.

The main intellectual activity of Wilson’s academic career was the pursuit of more perfect government at all levels. \textit{Congressional Government} (1885), his doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins, is the best-known of such works. Inspired by Walter Bagehot’s \textit{The English Constitution} (1867), Wilson argued that the American Constitution was inferior to its cousin. He singled out for special censure the diffuse congressional committee system, which he described as chaotic and irresponsible. \textit{Congressional Government} represents Wilson’s first step toward the kind of critical understanding and mastery of the American political system that in part accounted for his early legislative successes as President. The book received lavish reviews and established his professional reputation.\footnote{15} (It is also epigraphically rich in irony. “The treaty-marrying power of the Senate,” he wrote, “. . . made the comparative weakness of the executive very conspicuous.” With the upper house, the President could never deal “upon a ground of real equality,” he lamented. “The Senate always has the last word.”\footnote{16})

The most mature work of Wilson’s early career was probably “The Modern Democratic State” (1885), a little-known benchmark—and a prospectus for many of his subsequent essays—in his lifelong reflections on the nature of democracy, political leadership, relations among nations, and the future of the United States.\footnote{17} “Democracy,” he wrote, “is the fullest form of state life . . . for a whole people”—chiefly because it made politics “a sphere of moral action” and strode inexorably toward “the universal emancipation and brotherhood of man.”\footnote{18} The United States had been able to practice democracy to a relatively full degree, Wilson believed, because it possessed none of the traditions and institutions—such as entangling foreign alliances and standing armies—that hindered “the free ac-
tion of social and political forces.” Yet democracy was both means and end—“It is a stage of development . . . built by slow habit. Its process is experience.” In order to put down firm roots, democracy required a well-educated and enlightened people, wide public debate, a citizenry with a common purpose, and “not the habit of revolution, but the habit of resolution.” Other countries, therefore, could attain democracy only by steps, “through a period of political tutelage,” before their people would be ready to take “entire control of their affairs.”

From such a conservative perspective, Wilson was expansively optimistic about the future. He attributed the apparent recession of autocracies and monarchies in the late nineteenth century to the proliferation of public education and democratic institutions; therein beamed the promise of “the establishment of the most humane results of the world’s peace and progress.” In a “covenantal” conclusion, he equated the supreme objective of both the nation and the individual: “The goal of political development is identical with the goal of individual development. Both singly and collectively man’s nature draws him . . . towards a fuller realization of his kinship with God.”

Most studies of his political career emphasize that Wilson entered public life virtually an unreconstructed Jeffersonian who clung to the concept of the negative state even as he sought the presidential nomination as a progressive Democrat. Yet his intellectual life did not always hew a straight and predictable path. The political and economic upheavals of the final two decades of the century posed unsettling challenges to Wilson’s serenity. The trend toward concentration of enormous wealth and power in the hands of a few “Captains of Industry” mocked his perception of political reality. Moreover, the two major parties responded uncomprehendingly to the fitful growth of organized labor and agrarian insurgency. These developments caused Wilson to rethink his views on the proper role of government in constructing a modern political economy. His ruminations in the late 1880s and early 1890s are quite compelling; they entertained the possibilities of an American commonwealth that would at once preserve individual liberties, serve as the guardian of the public interest, and harmonize conservative and radical values.

In August 1887, Wilson read Richard T. Ely’s pioneering study, The Labor Movement in America (1886). Within a few days, he composed an essay (buried in his papers until 1968) entitled “Socialism and Democracy.” The central idea behind state socialism, he wrote, “is that no line can be drawn between private and public affairs which the State may not cross at will. . . . Applied to a democratic state, such doctrine sounds radical, but not revolutionary. It is only a[n] acceptance of the extremest logical conclusions deducible from democratic principles long ago received
as respectable. *For it is very clear that in fundamental theory socialism and democracy are almost if not quite one and the same.* They both rest at bottom upon the absolute right of the community to determine its own destiny and that of its members.” 25 Wilson’s meditations on the conditions of social and economic life in the United States grew mainly out of his concern over “a monstrously changed aspect of the social world”—the aggrandizement of giant corporations that threatened to swallow up, not only individuals and small businesses, but democratic government itself. “In the face of such circumstances,” he asked, “must not government lay aside all timid scruple and boldly make itself an agency for social reform as well as political control?” 26 Indeed it should, he concluded. But democracy had yet to undertake “the tasks which socialists clamour to have undertaken.” 27

Two years later, in *The State*, a comparative study of government in Europe and the United States, he went a step further. “The modern industrial organization has so distorted competition as to put it into the power of some to tyrannize over many, as to enable the rich and strong to combine against the poor and weak.” 28 On one level, “we ought all to regard ourselves as socialists,” he went on. For they were right to condemn “selfish, misguided individualism; and certainly modern individualism has much about it that is hateful, too hateful to last.” 29 Thus, because of “the power of unscrupulous or heartless men,” it was necessary for the state to regulate monopolies, to establish maximum hours and standards for safe working conditions, and to put an end to child labor. 30 (In the first advanced course in political economy he taught at Princeton, in 1891, he considered, along the same lines of argument, the salutary role socialism might play in the United States. 31)

Wilson would enter the White House at the beginning of a new epoch in world history, one characterized by profound revolutionary movements—in particular, in Mexico and Russia. These revolutions were informed by the socialist critique of industrial capitalism and presented fundamental challenges to the prevailing political and economic systems of the great powers. Wilson, of course, fell far short of the intellectual coherence that Eugene V. Debs eventually achieved in integrating socialist principles with Christianity and the American democratic and revolutionary traditions. But it is nonetheless significant that, unlike any other chief executive, he had ascribed a considerable degree of legitimacy and had devoted serious thought to socialist theory long before he became president.

During the Great Depression of the early 1890s, Wilson searched for a compass. He found it in Edmund Burke, his new philosophical “master.” Populist victories in 1892 and the violence surrounding the Pullman strike in the summer of 1894 had apparently increased his appreciation
for Burke’s famous condemnation of the excesses of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{32} At the same time, he abhorred the unwillingness of the political leadership of the Gilded Age to tear off the blindfolds of laissez faire and respond to the demands of a new day. To be sure, the center of gravity of his political thought remained relatively conservative, as his statement in a lecture on Burke, “It is both better and easier to reform than to tear down and reconstruct,” would suggest.\textsuperscript{33} Yet he also admitted that revolutions were sometimes both necessary and productive of good.\textsuperscript{34}

Revolution or no, Wilson preferred Burke as a general guide to lasting political change—Burke and his emphasis on the process of law.\textsuperscript{35} As he refined his thinking on the proper role of the state, he began to apply to international society his conception of the process of change and social improvement.\textsuperscript{36} From 1892 to 1894, Wilson taught courses in international law at Princeton. In these lectures—arguably one of the most important sources on his ideas about international relations before 1913—he synthesized his thought about the nature of democracy, public debate, reform, the state, sovereignty, and man’s responsibility to God.\textsuperscript{37}

As he had done in his interpretation of democracy, Wilson emphasized that international law actually was “not made,” as such. Rather, it was the result of organic development—“a body of abstract principles founded upon long established custom.” Quoting Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, he equated the law of nations with the law of Nature, “which binds different states together in a humane juridical society, and which also secures to the members of different states a common protection of law for their general human and international rights.”\textsuperscript{38} In the second lecture of the series, Wilson asked, “Do the nations of the world constitute a community?” He answered himself in the affirmative, stating that three things had brought into being a community, of sorts, among nations. The first was the recognition of Roman law as the basis of all Western legal systems. The second was the simple fact of commerce—in ideas as well as in goods. The third and most vital component was Christianity.\textsuperscript{39} According to Wilson, Christianity had prepared the way for international law by establishing standards of morality and common principles of “civilization” and education. In another lecture, he also maintained that Christianity promoted the growth of international law because the concept of the fatherhood of God implied the brotherhood of man, which, in turn, created natural bonds between nations.\textsuperscript{40} “Regardless of race or religion,” there existed “fundamental, vital principles of right” proceeding from God and human reason that all enlightened people held in common; this, he said, constituted “the universal conscience of mankind.” Hence, any nation could be admitted into the community if it recognized the “common principles of right.”\textsuperscript{41}

Wilson had thus reduced the objective of international law to a moral
and legal system somewhat akin to his father’s theological world order, altered now in subtle ways by his reading of Burke (and perhaps by his tentative understanding of socialism). In this instance, the objective was to substitute “disorder and invasion of right which provoked war” with “ordered relationships and recognized obligations” that promoted “a moral sense of community among states.”\(^4\) Furthermore, girding this community were the “imperative forces of popular thought and the concrete institutions of popular representation,” or, to put it another way, the promise of democracy—“the rule of counsel, the catholic spirit of free debate . . . [and] the ascendancy of reason over passion.”\(^4^3\)

By the winter of 1894, then, Wilson had established, at least in a general sense, a theoretical rationale for a genuine community of nations. None of this is to insist on absolute linearity; but on the whole his academic strivings suggest, if not a final destination, then surely an indication of direction—the subterranean intellectual context of the Wilsonian origins of the New Diplomacy.

As much as the domestic social and political upheavals of the late nineteenth century altered Wilson’s thinking about the state, so, too, did the pulse of events beyond American shores. The period from the late nineties to his entrance into politics in 1910 afforded him many opportunities to speak and write about American foreign policy, particularly after Admiral Dewey’s portentous victory at Manila Bay.

“A brief season of war has deeply changed our thought and has altered, it may be permanently, the conditions of our national life,” Wilson observed in a memorandum entitled “What Ought We to Do?” in August 1898. Like most citizens, he had accepted President McKinley’s rationalization that the purpose of the war with Spain was to give Cuba self-government.\(^4^4\) The subsequent annexation of the Philippines, however, nettled him for a time. (In his forthcoming History of the American People, he would underscore the “inexcusable aggression” of the United States in the Mexican War and condemn the seizure of territory to which it could claim “no conceivable right except that of conquest.”\(^4^5\)

The Treaty of Paris set off an intense national debate. Many Republicans justified their advocacy of imperialism as a corollary to reform of domestic life. Overseas expansion—“spreading the American dream,” one historian has described it—suddenly became an integral part of the “historical mission” of the United States. More decisively, it promised the likely cure for a stagnant economy burdened by huge surpluses. But Americans could also bring to the Filipinos democracy and constitutional order, along with the benefits of capitalist development. Then, too, a toehold in the Far East had already been established by hundreds of Christian missionaries, whose reports back home stimulated other agendas. To
celebrated advocates of an expanded navy, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan, the Philippines seemed the perfect agent to advance the interests of the United States against great powers already on the scene in Asia. Thus, the retention of the archipelago would provide a permanent base for an American naval presence in the Pacific, as well as a way station for Christian and capitalist pilgrims alike, on route to their respective China markets.46

Not a few Democrats saw the same things. Even Eugene Debs, in 1894 (the year of his conversion to socialism), had written that the “heathens” of Asia must “open their ports and admit the civilizing influence of commercial nations.” Though he opposed the Philippines annexation on racial grounds, Debs deemed Hawaii “a coaling station for the United States, and this government must needs protect itself in this regard.”47 For its part, the Democratic party demanded independence for the Philippines in its national platform of 1900 when, for a second time, William Jennings Bryan was nominated for President.48

Wilson, however, did not subscribe completely to the party line. “It was my personal wish at the time that we should not take the Philippines,” he told a Connecticut audience the year before. But the important question now was, “what are we going to do with them?”49 The acquisition of a small empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific would “make the politics of the twentieth century radically unlike the politics of the nineteenth,” he wrote in the Atlantic Monthly after Bryan’s defeat. “It is only just now that we have awakened to our real relationship to the rest of mankind.” The American form of self-government was “by no means the one necessary and inevitable form,”50 but Providence had nonetheless chosen the United States to nurture the conditions precedent to self-government, to enter into a small-scale international covenant under the aegis of imperialism, and “make the government in our new possessions the best it can be.”51

Wilson was not inattentive to the prospects of expanding American trade. Even in his initial contemplation of the Philippines, he rhetorically asked himself, “Which nations shall possess the world?”52 He agreed with the views of his friend and former student Frederick Jackson Turner, whose “frontier thesis” of American history implied that the United States required greater foreign markets in order to sustain its prosperity.53 “Our frontier disappeared less than fourteen years ago and now a new one has been given us in the Philippines,” he said in an address on the Constitution in 1904.54 And to numerous audiences he rehearsed a theme that he first struck in the Atlantic: “The East is to be opened and transformed, whether we will or no; the standards of the West are to be imposed upon it; nations and peoples which have stood still the centuries through are to be quickened, and made part of the universal world of commerce and of
ideas which has so steadily been a-making by the advance of European power from age to age."

Wilson actually referred to himself as an imperialist on two occasions and once disparaged “the anti-imperialist weepings ‘that came out of Boston.’” Even so, in the Atlantic article, he admitted that things were not in such fine shape at home “that we might . . . divert our energies [solely] to tasks beyond our borders.” The main task of the United States was “to moderate the process in the interests of liberty.” Indeed, for every sentence he uttered on commerce, he spoke two on the moral responsibility of the United States to sustain its historic idealism and render the service of its democracy. In this way, Wilson attempted to distinguish his own set of imperialist assumptions from the colonialism practiced by the European powers and implicitly endorsed by many Americans during the first decade of the century. Typically, he said it was the country’s duty “to keep faith also with the people of the Philippines . . . by showing them the way to liberty without plundering them or making them our tools for a selfish end.” On the eve of his entrance into public life, he said: “We have come out upon the stage of international responsibility from which we cannot retire. . . . [A]nd in proportion as we discover the means for translating our material force into moral force shall we recover the traditions and glories of American history.” During his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912, he made no pretense of where he assumed the dialectical charge reposed: “I believe that God planted in us visions of liberty . . . that we are chosen and prominently chosen to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty.”

Yet Wilson still had not explained how all of this would come to pass or pointed to the instrumentalities that might give coherence and form to his conception. He found provisional answers to that question—how the mission might be accomplished—in the work of organized peace-seekers of the early twentieth century. Since the founding of the American Peace Society in Boston in 1828, this movement had developed as a collective reform impulse based on the principle that war was inconsistent with Christianity. By 1900, its ranks were filled by inchoate groups of religious pacifists, imperialists and anti-imperialists, free-trade liberals, and so-called conservative legalists. Together, they exerted their energies on behalf of Anglo-American friendship, arbitration treaties, and, most conspicuously, American participation in the Permanent Court of International Arbitration, established by the First Hague Convention in 1899.

Because of the nature of its composition, the loose coalition almost completely unraveled during the controversy over self-determination and overseas expansion in 1900. Two main factors contributed to a renascence
during the next decade—anxiety over the growing rivalry among the great powers of Europe, and, especially, faith in the idea of human progress rekindled by the gathering momentum of reform at home. By 1912, the peace movement had undertaken programs of public education that stressed Christian morality as the primary ingredient of progress and had made specific proposals for multilateral arbitration agreements and international courts, disarmament, and world federation. Like Wilson, many proponents of this crusade had become imbued with the notion that every problem in society could be solved through education, enlightened reason, and democratic efficiency. They were convinced that the United States was unique among nations, and that it possessed the exceptional capabilities to bring peace and progress to the world.

Wilson himself had first written about world federation in 1887. In “The Study of Administration,” he had contemplated “the confederation of parts of empires like the British, and finally of great states themselves,” which would constitute “a wide union . . . of governments joined with governments for the pursuit of common purpose.” In 1908, he joined the American Peace Society, appeared regularly at peace gatherings, and later lent his support to President Taft’s arbitration treaties with England and France. Peace-seekers played a measurable role in the development of Wilson’s internationalism. Their influence on him was not altogether decisive; but they helped prepare the soil that he was soon to till. He breathed deeply of the same heady atmosphere that they breathed and shared their confident vision of the future. He also maintained a steady correspondence with the leaders of the movement and supported many of their specific aims. As President of the United States he would incorporate into his own program their proposals for arbitration of international disputes and disarmament, and others pertaining to world federation. At length, however, Wilson’s impact on the peace movement would prove greater than its impact on him.

Henry Kissinger once observed that “the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.” However knowing, Kissinger’s comment does not assay the potential for growth and change, or for regression, in significant historical actors; nor does it reckon with personal ambition. Perhaps more perceptively than any other politician at any time, Abraham Lincoln explained how history compensates biography. “It is to deny what the history of the world tells us is true to suppose that men of ambitions and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us,” Lincoln said in an address at the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, in 1838. “And when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passions as others have done before them. Towering genius
disdains a beaten path. . . . It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving free men.”

Woodrow Wilson may or may not have been a towering genius. But he surely scorned roads traveled by illustrious predecessors and thirsted for distinction—ultimately, at a considerable expense to himself and, his harsher critics would say, to the United States as well. On his thirty-third birthday, he wrote in his “Confidential Journal” the stunning question: “Why may not the present generation write, through me, its political autobiography?” Since adolescence, he had wanted to become “a leader of men.” As a law student at the University of Virginia, he inscribed calling cards with “Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Senator From Virginia.” Throughout his academic career he wrote many pieces about the charismatic personalities—Burke, Bismarck, Gladstone, Washington, and Lincoln—whom he admired. Real statesmen, he averred, were those “who stood alone at the inception of a movement and whose voices . . . [were] the more sensitive organs of society—the parts first awakened to consciousness of a situation.” To his fiancée, Ellen Axson, he wrote the most premonitory lines of all, in 1885: “I have a strong instinct of leadership, an unmistakably oratorical temperament, and the keenest possible delight in affairs. . . . I have a passion for interpreting great thoughts to the world; I should be complete if I could inspire a great movement of opinion, if I could read the experiences of the past into the practical life of the men of to-day and so communicate the thought to the minds of the great mass of the people as to impel them to great political achievements.”

Wilson did not have much hope for personal fulfillment as he came to his majority during the Gilded Age. Once the Spanish-American War raised critical questions of foreign policy to a new prominence, however, his contempt for the office of president changed markedly. In a new edition (1900) of Congressional Government, he wrote that President McKinley was now “at the front of affairs, as no president, except Lincoln, has been since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when the foreign relations of the new nation had first to be adjusted.” In his final scholarly work, Constitutional Government in the United States (1908), he predicted that “the office will be as big and as influential as the man who occupies it.”

In Theodore Roosevelt’s ascension, Wilson could not have found a brighter illustration of this. But vicarious experience could not satisfy him much longer. Great missions, he stated in 1904, were made by “the drawing of individuals together into a net formed by the conceptions of a single mind, and the greater the organization, the more certain you are to find a great individuality at its origin and center.” Suffice it to say that, in
1912, a unique and profound intersection occurred in the history of the United States and the life of Woodrow Wilson when, on the forty-sixth ballot, the Democratic party nominated him for President. For he had already committed himself to the pursuit of perfecting democratic constitutional order as he understood it—not only within the United States, but also, where practicable, in places where it did not exist. He had already set out, at least intellectually, upon a quest for a community of nations—through the proliferation of democracy and appropriate amendments to international law as well as through an emphasis on the concept of Christian fellowship. Eventually, with the League of Nations, he would attempt to strike, in a sense, the supreme covenant between God and the United States.

In 1901, Wilson agreed to write the preface for Harper's Encyclopedia of the United States. The final sentences of the essay, entitled “The Significance of American History,” revealed at once the disposition of a discerning historian and that of a victorious politician and captured the perilous assumptions and aspirations of the “American Century” to come: “The life of the new world grows as complex as the life of the old. A nation hitherto wholly devoted to domestic development now finds its first task roughly finished and turns about to look curiously into the tasks of the great world at large, seeking its special part and place of power. A new age has come which no man may forecast. But the past is the key to it; and the past of America lies at the center of modern history.” If Wilson had consciously tried to do so, he could not have composed a more fitting epigraph for his own and the nation’s ensuing “political autobiography.”