

Woodrow Wilson, 1856—1956

Francis G. Wilson

FEW INTELLECTUALS, if any, will fail to note the centennial year of Woodrow Wilson. For Catholics it is a time of reflection, since in many ways Wilson was in fact the friend of the kind of world most Catholics would like to have. At the same time, there were situations in which Catholics found themselves in sharp conflict with Wilson.

Those who write and speak on Wilson today are concerned chiefly with his "Progressivism" as Governor of New Jersey and as President, with his wartime leadership, the treaties of peace and the League of Nations. Those whose focus is the Progressive era stress the change in Wilson's economic views and are disposed to deny any important continuity in his thought. On the other hand, those who are interested in the war and the peace do not consider his earlier periods important in the formation of the character of the wartime President, and certainly not as important as the war and the post-war years. Yet it is apparent that if one considers his early writings—the very first article in defense of cabinet or responsible party government, or the notable books such as *Congressional Government*, *The State*, *Mere Literature*, *An Old Master* and *Constitutional Government*—then there is ground for believing that much of the later Wilson is to be found in the young scholar and teacher.

In detail, there are strongly progressive elements in *The State*, for Wilson adopts the undoctrinaire theory of the Greco-Roman world on state function, and there was no *laissez-faire* theory in Greece and Rome. He moved easily from *The New Freedom* to the adoption of the New Nationalism in 1916. There are other impressive continuities in Wilson's thought. Public addresses to religious groups indicate that Wilson remained loyal to his youthful religious views, and that he was orthodox in his Presbyterianism. Nor is there anything to suggest there were notable changes in his philosophical points of view from his youth until his death.

Might not one say, as well, that the 19th century's profound conviction that an era of peace would be ushered in by industrial society was the background of

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a theory of world organization, such as was fostered by men like Elihu Root and Andrew Carnegie? Did not the Hague Peace Palace and the Hague Organization prophesy the future League of Nations?

I

In 1879, Henry Cabot Lodge, then editor of the *International Review*, accepted Woodrow Wilson's first published article, "Cabinet Government in the United States." It was a theme Wilson adhered to during much of his life, and one that was soon renewed in *Congressional Government*. Leadership in the constitutional state was the problem on which most of his political ideas converged.

Leadership, again, was rooted in his conception of institutions, and the model of all successful leadership was, for him, British parliamentary government. I think it is only gradually that Wilson came to admire the three-power system embodied in the American Constitution, and that probably only as he became an executive and a political leader. Walter Bagehot's interpretation of the British Constitution seems to have been one of the books that most influenced Wilson's political thinking. The leaderless American system was contrasted in his mind with the newly democratic and highly organized British-cabinet system.

Yet it seems clear that Wilson's consciousness of the need of party responsibility was a slow growth, probably greatly inspired by the writings of Lord Bryce. In the end he accepted the principle of Presidential government under the Constitution, and in practice his formulation of Presidential power was one of the greatest of the contributions he made to American government. Since Wilson's time, a President has been admired almost in proportion to the effectiveness and strength of his leadership.

Our parties are necessary to hold the American government together, said Wilson, for nowhere else in the world is the electoral machinery so complicated and "nowhere else in the world is party machinery so elaborate or so necessary." In the final analysis, Wilson made no attempt to import the English system of cabinet government, and he recognized that it could not be applied universally, particularly in the Latin societies. Free government was a habit of the English race. But democracy is not possible in many lands, for "it is a quick

intoxicant or a slow poison to France and Spain, a mere maddening draught to the South American states."

II

It is always appropriate to inquire about the weaknesses, great or small, of a public figure, but particularly of a political leader who was also an intellectual. Woodrow Wilson must have read more than his writings indicate. He did not need to depend upon quotations from others, since as a master of the English language he could express their ideas better or more eloquently.

Walter Bagehot and Edmund Burke are the twin luminaries in his appreciation of Englishmen, and the restricted character of Wilson's historical vision is reflected in his concentration on these two. In *The State* some German writers are cited, but the scholarship of the Latin world is marked by its absence. Though he was always religious, one misses in his writings a recognition of religiously inspired literature.

He must have read Jeremy Bentham and the Mills, both father and son. One may guess his anguish at the tortured and unrevised sentences of Bentham and the wearisome ponderosities of John Stuart Mill; still we would like to know what critical process went on in his mind at such a time.

Might he not have found friendship among the Oxford Idealists, such as Thomas Hill Green? One does not know. Henry S. Maine is rewarded with a word of refutation. Moreover, there is little mention of his American contemporaries. George Santayana is not noted, and Wilson made no effort in his political thought to mediate between the flashing minds of William James and Josiah Royce. We miss the impact of Cardinal Newman or Lord Acton on his pages, as well as of a striking list of other great 19th-century figures.

But the criticism most to be leveled against Woodrow Wilson is that of an unimaginative historicism. No doubt he knew through his education much about the more than twenty centuries of classical experience recorded in the Greek and Latin tongues. But history became for him mostly a restricted version of Burke. One notes with astonishment that Wilson hardly mentions the rights of man, the natural law or the moving phrases and deeply-rooted philosophy of the Declaration of Independence.

Instead of using the concept of the law of nature used by our forebears, Wilson speaks of it on at least one occasion in Huxley's sense, and in *The New Freedom* he declared that we should go to Darwin rather than Newton in our search for it. To see in natural law not a moral rule but the physical laws of the universe was for him, one might say, a Presbyterian aversion; for natural law as a statement of an objective moral order is historically and characteristically a Catholic point of view.

One must have a measure of sympathy with Wilson's Burkean dislike of the French Revolution. Of Burke, he said:

He hated the French revolutionary philosophy and deemed it unfit for free men. And that philosophy is in fact radically evil and corrupting. No state can be conducted on its principles. . . . The history of

England is a continuous thesis against revolution; and Burke would have been no true Englishman had he not roused himself, even fanatically if there were need, to keep such puerile doctrine out (*Mere Literature*, pp. 155-156).

Wilson might well have seen, had he understood the Latin mind at all, that one may resist the French Revolution without rejecting natural law and rights. One must not throw out the baby with the bath water.

Had Wilson understood something of Latin culture, he might not have stood idly by while he permitted the persecution of the Church in Mexico, where in fact he was supporting another species of the liberals he so disliked in France. In 1880 he had argued that the Catholic Church was a menace to American institutions. Where the Roman generals failed against the Germans, so did the "Romish priests" (*The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* [1925], R. S. Baker and W. E. Dodd [editors], I, 60ff). During the Mexican crisis he bitterly resented Catholic criticism of his support of Mexican "liberals." Neither Wilson nor Bryan was willing to consider appointing a Catholic ambassador to Mexico at this time, and an aspirant for the post such as the Hon. Dudley G. Wooten was not given serious consideration.

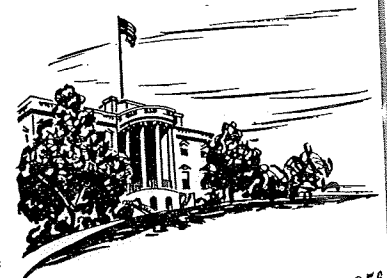
III

If Wilson saw Burke at times with a sharp but excessively narrow focus, he returned in the end to a larger view, when he struggled in 1919 with disorder at home and the spread of communism in Europe. His great message of December 2, 1919, when he was contending with illness, is yet one of the most prophetic in his long line of public papers. For more than two years he had considered the Russian Revolution and the Communist movement. His mind had finally been shaped on one of the greatest of contemporary issues.

In effect, Woodrow Wilson provided America with its fundamental policy toward communism, a policy from which there have been only short-term deviations. Congress, he said, should enact legislation which permits the Government to deal

. . . in its criminal courts with persons who by violent methods would abrogate our time-tested institutions. With the free expression of opinion and with the advocacy of orderly political change, however fundamental, there must be no interferences, but toward passion and malevolence tending to incite crime and insurrection under the guise of political evolution there should be no leniency. Legislation to this end has been recommended by the Attorney General and should be enacted.

Intellectual styles have been changing in America since the days of Wilson. Today's intellectuals are often hesitant to affirm the moral values that inspired Woodrow Wilson. When we



America • DECEMBER 15, 1956

are as radically empirical as William James, we lose an appreciation of the philosophical character of Wilson's thought. For in him history and metaphysics seem blended together with simplicity and without ostentation.

If one should ask how the political ideas of Woodrow Wilson should be classified in accordance with philosophical traditions in the West, I believe it can be said that he was an Aristotelian. Such, indeed, is the characteristic method of thought of the political scientist who is concerned with historical development. It is the characteristic attitude of those who believe that wisdom and admonition may be gained from history.

The revolutionary is, I think, likely to be Kantian, if he is not Marxian; he is surely materialistic, if one considers the whole impact of dialectical materialism on modern man. He may be an existentialist in the athe-

istic sense, or a pragmatist and a believer in radical empiricism.

In contrast, the Christian Aristotelian believes that we can know real beings and essential structures; that there is a free spiritual principle in man; that God exists and has a providence over us; that there is a universal order and moral law; and that man has an effective choice in shaping his social world. These propositions shine forth in the writings, speeches and public documents of Woodrow Wilson from his student days until his last public statements, made as he lay ill and partially paralyzed. These propositions can be detected in his thinking over a period of more than forty years. The directions of his thought changed at times; but in the deeper sense of the word I believe that Woodrow Wilson was a consistent man. He was always a dedicated but moderate reformer.

Woodrow Wilson: Another View

WOODROW WILSON AND THE POLITICS OF MORALITY

By John Morton Blum. Little, Brown, 199p. \$3.50

Robert Hillyer observed recently that there never has been nor can be a definitive life of anybody; the same crystal will change color with every shift of time. John Morton Blum makes no claim to have written a definitive life of Woodrow Wilson. He readily acknowledges his dependence on such standard biographers as Ray S. Baker and Arthur S. Link. But he does hold the Wilson crystal high and records a careful spectral analysis of the changing colors.

A few years ago George Kennan sketched an outline of moralism in American foreign policy since the turn of the century. This present volume fills in the outline of one of the period's leading exponents of moralism in politics. The early pages trace Wilson's Presbyterian background and genteel education. The chapter on Wilson as "Prime Minister" of Princeton is the best. The author shows that Wilson at Princeton lived, in a microcosm, the pattern that would characterize his public career. His years in Washington were the years at Princeton writ large.

During the three years after his inauguration Wilson completed reforms at Princeton that influenced the whole of American higher education. Though highly competent in the academic field, he relied on advice and sought the opinions of his faculty. During this period his ministry was singularly successful. To these years of academic reform cor-

responds the period of his early success in achieving the basic objectives of the progressive movement during his first administration in Washington.

His political-science studies aptly prepared him for the job. Still he relied on men like Brandeis for advice and counsel. The happy result in the welding of popular aspirations with the partisan objectives of the Presidential and congressional wills depended on his executive leadership. Both in the field of academic reform at Princeton and in the field of domestic legislation in Washington Wilson was an outstanding success.

In contrast, Wilson's last years at Princeton are a history of dismal defeat. He was beaten in his attempts to reform the social life of the college by abolishing the upper-class eating clubs; he had to surrender in the fight over the location of the graduate school. In a field where he was much less competent, he would never seek advice. Like a Prime Minister whose program had been rejected, all he could do was resign.

Similarly, in contrast to his success in his domestic program in Washington, Wilson's foreign policy was a failure. In all the years of his self-conscious preparation for high public office, Wilson admitted he had given very little thought to the conduct of foreign affairs. This is seen in his bungling in Mexican politics, in the uncertainty of his neutrality policy, which sowed peace and harvested war. Wilson's erratic course to war took the turn marked by convictions confused but genuine.

Wilson's was a 19th-century intelligence, obsolescing at a rapid

rate, and this obsolescence the war accelerated. Conscience and intellect . . . stood still while the race of time transfigured the world they understood The President went one way, his Congress, his constituency, indeed his world, another, until he stood at last alone.

Men everywhere, he presumed, held his ideals. His fellow peacemakers, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Makino and Orlando, held the ideals of national self-interest only. "Each, though Wilson could not believe it, represented the temper of his own countrymen while the President increasingly did not."

Though he brought home a treaty to a people predisposed to accept it, he was soon maneuvered into a position of tactical immobility. His inflexibility made him see his opposition as immoral. The defeat of the Treaty and the League was inevitable.

John Blum has done an excellent job in analyzing this aspect of Wilson's character. Wilson came so close to triumph that his failings nag where those of a lesser man might not be noticed. The tragedy was not just Wilson's but his times'. The events of a later period fastened the meaning of what he stood for in the consciousness of his successors.

After he died they revered his principles, they resurrected the substance of those he held dearest—the League in the United Nations, Article X in the intervention in Korea. In fact his ideas are so much a part of modern life that one is startled to realize he was born a hundred years ago this December.

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