

**Woodrow Wilson, Congress & Foreign Policy:  
The Education of a Neophyte  
An Introductory Essay  
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For Better or Worse?”  
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*One of the greatest of the President’s powers I have not yet spoken of at all: his control, which is very absolute, of the foreign relations of the nation. The initiative in foreign affairs, which the President possesses without any restriction whatever, is virtually the power to control them absolutely.*

--Woodrow Wilson (1908)

As a political scientist and historian, Woodrow Wilson’s understanding of the president’s role in foreign policy, as it had evolved over the course of the republic, was not much different than his later understanding of it as president, or, for that matter, how most Americans today view the president’s preeminent position in foreign policymaking.

The epigraph above is taken from the third of eight guest lectures Wilson delivered at Columbia University in 1907 while he was president of Princeton.<sup>1</sup> The lectures, published in 1908 as *Constitutional Government*, were his attempt to update his 1885 classic, *Congressional Government*, which was accepted as his Ph.D. dissertation while at Johns Hopkins University.

**Wilson the Scholar on Congress and the President**

In his preface to a 1900 edition of *Congressional Government*, Wilson noted the book was becoming rapidly out of date due to two developments: the emergence of party government under a strong Speaker of the House, and the emergence of a strong presidency as the U.S. became an international player following the Spanish-American War: “When foreign affairs play a prominent part in the politics and policy of a nation, its Executive must of necessity be its guide: must utter every initial judgment, take every first step of action, supply the information upon which it must act, suggest and, in large measure, control its conduct. The President of the United State is now...at the front of affairs....”<sup>2</sup>

Wilson picked up on this theme in his 1907 lectures. While noting that the President cannot conclude any treaty without the consent of the Senate, Wilson added that he can guide the diplomacy at every step of the way and need not disclose any step of negotiation until it is complete. Once it is, “the government is virtually committed,” and, “whatever its inclination, the Senate may feel itself committed also.” The President, Wilson continued, “can never again be the mere domestic figure he has been throughout so large a part of our history....Our President must always, henceforth, be one of the great powers of the world, whether he act greatly and wisely or not...He must stand always at the front of our affairs, and the office will be as big and as influential as the man who occupies it.”<sup>3</sup>

Some suggest that Wilson's view of the all-powerful presidency in 1907, particularly when it came to foreign affairs, is the same view he carried with him into the White House in 1913, and that was his downfall in 1919 and 1920 in failing to persuade the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles over the League of Nations issue. However, this overlooks Wilson's more nuanced and flexible views of presidential-Senate relations spelled out in a later one of his 1907 lectures. Whereas the more rigid view above appears in his lecture on the presidency, in his subsequent lecture on the Senate, Wilson recognized that the leaders of the Senate are more conservative men who are likely "to magnify the powers and prerogatives of the body they represent and to stickle for every privilege it possesses...." The Senate is "not at all likely to look to the President for leadership or to yield to the House upon any radical differences of opinion or of purpose." And Wilson continued:

Particularly in its dealings with the President has the Senate shown its pride of independence, its desire to rule rather than to be merely consulted, its inclination to magnify its powers and in some sense preside over the policy of the government.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson went on to observe that the attitude of "rivalry and mutual mistrust" that has marked dealings between the President and Senate has increased over the years, and this has especially been the case in foreign affairs. This becomes especially problematic "when, as sometimes happens, the Senate is of one political party and the President of the other," in which case the dictation of policy "may be based not on the merits of the question involved but upon antagonisms and calculations of advantage."

Wilson advised that in such instances, the President "may himself be less stiff and offish, may himself act in the true spirit of the Constitution and establish intimate relations of confidence with the Senate on his own initiative," not waiting until after his plans are completed, "but keeping himself in confidential communication with the leaders of the Senate while his plans are in course."<sup>5</sup>

Had Wilson taken his own advice as President, and included Senators of both parties in his delegation to the Paris peace talks in 1919, things might have turned out differently. Conferring with them after the fact, and after Republicans took control of the Senate in 1919, was not sufficient.<sup>6</sup>

### **Wilson the Presidential Campaigner on Foreign Policy**

Foreign policy issues did not figure prominently in the 1912 election campaign or in the two major party platforms. Both platforms included planks on Russia and the Philippines, though they differed in their approaches. The Democratic platform reaffirmed the position of the the Philippine Democracy in national convention against the policy of imperialism and colonial exploitation in the Philippines and elsewhere and condemned the U.S. "experiment in imperialism as an inexcusable blunder." It went on to favor the immediate declaration of national purpose to recognize the independence of the Philippine Islands "as soon as a stable government can be established," while retaining such lands as may be necessary for U.S. coaling stations and naval bases.<sup>7</sup> The Republican platform was much briefer on the subject: the U.S.

responsibility toward the Philippines “is a national obligation which should remain entirely free from partisan politics.”<sup>8</sup>

On Russia, the Democrats commended the House and Senate for terminating the 1832 treaty with Russia, and pledged support for rights of American citizens at home and abroad, “irrespective of race or creed,” and their right to expatriation. The Republicans commended the actions of the President and Congress to seek a treaty with Russia that would recognize the absolute right of expatriation and will prevent discrimination against Americans, whether native of foreign born, regardless of race, religion or political allegiance, and recognize the right of asylum in the U.S.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Wilson made scant mention of foreign policy matters on the campaign trail. The 1913 compilation in book form of selected campaign speeches that Wilson considered “the more suggestive portions of my campaign speeches,” and “an attempt to express the new spirit of our politics,” did not include one foreign policy speech.<sup>10</sup> Titled, *The New Freedom*, which Wilson’s ambitious progressive program came to be called (in purposeful juxtaposition to Theodore Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism”), the book dealt with such subjects as individual liberty, government reform and transparency, monopolies (or trusts) and the tariff.

The campaign was apparently so bereft of any mention of foreign affairs that one pacifist editor, publicist and director of the World Peace Foundation in Boston, Edwin Doak Mead, wrote to Wilson in early August to complain that he “was profoundly disappointed that there was no single word in the Baltimore platform touching the great matters of world peace and order, which to so many of us seem incomparably the most imperative issues of the present time.” Moreover, Doak said he was further disappointed that Wilson made no mention of the subject in his nomination acceptance speech at Sea Girth, N.J., a few days earlier, though, “I recognize that no man in your position can deliver his whole gospel at one time.” Doak concluded that his public endorsement of Wilson editorially would depend on his answer. The footnote to the letter in Wilson’s papers indicates that “Wilson’s reply is missing in all Wilson collections...”<sup>11</sup>

Wilson might have referred him to a speech he made earlier that year in Philadelphia to the Universal Peace Union. In that speech Wilson’s idealism and the link between internal and international justice and freedom came through clearly: “...the same exploitation and injustice within our borders applies to international questions. Just as soon as we are just to the people in the United States, justice and equity in China and in Manchuria will follow.” Appealing to his fellow citizens, Wilson continued, “Let us change that which is wrong. Let us place our eyes to the horizon and here again raise lights as beacons to mankind, once more to serve the people of [with] justice and the cause of peace.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps still smarting from Doak’s critical letter in August, Wilson included one of his fullest statements on foreign policy during the campaign in a message read to Democratic rallies across the country, just prior to the election on November 2, 1912, again reflecting the universal nature of his idealism:

We must consider our foreign policy upon the same high principle. We have become a powerful member of the great family of nations. The nations look to us for standards and

policies worthy of America. We must shape our course of action by the maxims of justice and liberality and good will, think of the progress of mankind rather than of the progress of this or that investment, of the protection of American honor and the advancement of American ideal rather than always of American contracts, and lift our diplomacy to the levels of what the best minds have planned for mankind.<sup>13</sup>

### **Wilson as President on Congress and Foreign Policy**

Shortly after his election as President, Wilson confided to a former Princeton faculty colleague, "It would be an irony of fate if my administration has to deal chiefly with foreign problems; for all my preparation has been in domestic matters."<sup>14</sup> As Presidents before and after him have learned, they have no control over fate, and Wilson was bitten early in his presidency.

A month before Wilson's inauguration, the liberal president of Mexico, Francisco Madero, was murdered in a military coup. Madero had ousted a 42-year old dictatorship just two years earlier, and replaced it with a constitutional democracy. That was short lived as the forces of Victoriano Huerta ousted Madero and restored a military dictatorship over the country. Although Wilson was advised by the State Department to recognize the new regime in accordance with international norms, Wilson refused, saying, "I will not recognize a government of butchers."<sup>15</sup>

Not content with the passive act of non-recognition, Wilson decided to become actively involved in trying to change the political situation in Mexico. Wilson sent two informal emissaries to Mexico to assess the situation and report back to him, a journalist and former governor. The latter emissary delivered a message to Huerta from the President, demanding the he hold immediate elections and not stand as a candidate himself. The message was rejected and the mission was a failure.<sup>16</sup>

Wilson subsequently appeared before a joint session of Congress on August 27, 1913, to report on these developments. It should be remembered that Wilson was the first President since John Adams to appear personally before Congress (inaugurations being the exception). Jefferson had discontinued the practice because he thought it smacked too much of the King's speech from then Throne. Wilson was a great believer in the power of rhetoric, and a joint session was the perfect venue for the President to use his powers of persuasion on Congress and on the American people. To this day, Wilson still holds the record for the most addresses to Congress—two dozen in all, half of which dealt with issues of foreign policy, war and peace.

Wilson biographer John Milton Cooper, Jr., notes that Wilson's first foreign policy speech before Congress as president served several purposes. Not only did he want to ward off criticism and drum up public and congressional support for his policy politically but diplomatically, "he wanted to send signals to the Mexicans by eschewing intervention and arms sales...for now." Moreover, Cooper continues, Wilson was outlining "a larger design to guide his administration's policy forward," notably his idealistic tone regarding self-government and a "model for international conduct" based on "the self-restraint of a really great nation."<sup>17</sup>

Wilson's address on Mexico was his third appearance before Congress—the first two messages dealing with the tariff, currency and bank reform. Wilson made clear he felt it was his obligation to keep Congress apprised of important foreign developments: “It is clearly my duty to lay before you, very fully and without reservation, the facts concerning our president relations with the Republic of Mexico.” Wilson wanted to make clear that the U.S. involvement in Mexican affairs was a matter of duty, neighborly interest and sympathy,” and not driven by selfish interests:

The peace, prosperity, and contentment of Mexico mean more, much more, to us, than merely an enlarged field of or commerce and enterprise. They mean an enlargement of the field of self-government and the realization of the hopes and rights of a nation with whose best aspirations, so long suppressed and disappointed, we deeply sympathize. We shall yet prove to the Mexican people that we know how to serve them without first thinking how we shall serve ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

Wilson told Congress that Huerta's rejection of his call for elections was an “unfortunate misunderstanding,” and attributed it to Huerta's doubts that the emissary was authorized to speak for the current administration. Although Wilson advised an approach of patience, self-restraint and true neutrality, his efforts would eventually lead to several armed interventions by U.S. troops, without the authorization by Congress. Wilson did not consider such forays as “intervention,” which he defined as a full-scale invasion with the goal of imposing “a government upheld by a foreign power as a consequence of a successful intervention.” As one historian has explained it, Wilson “defined intervention only as a conquest and believed that all other forms of pressure and interference were acceptable.”<sup>19</sup>

Wilson's unique view of legitimate versus illegitimate interference in the affairs of another country, led to several ill-fated U.S. forays into Mexico, beginning in April, 1914—all over the issue of whether Mexico had paid proper tribute to the U.S. flag after briefly taking American sailors into custody at a Mexican port. Wilson did confer with the chairmen and ranking minority members of the House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations committees over a plan of action. And while he told a joint session of Congress on April 20, 1914, that he “could do what is necessary without recourse to Congress,” he did not want to act in a matter of such possible grave consequences, “except in close conference and cooperation with both the Senate and House.”<sup>20</sup>

The House quickly voted, 337 to 37, for a resolution drafted by the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, recognizing the right of the President to employ armed forces to enforce the demands made upon Huerta for unequivocal amends to the government of the U.S. for the affronts and indignities committed against it. The measure was still being considered in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Wilson went ahead anyway and ordered a thousand Marines and sailors ashore at the port of Veracruz. In the resulting firefight, 19 U.S. troops were killed and 71 wounded, while 126 Mexicans were killed and 195 wounded. When Republicans in the Senate heard of the President's actions, they reacted angrily, denouncing Wilson's decision to go to war over a trifle. There was an angry backlash in Mexico as well from forces on both sides.<sup>21</sup>

Huerta, recognizing his situation was hopeless, fled to Spain in mid-July. However, that did not end Wilson's interventionist inclinations. In 1916 Wilson ordered General John Pershing and 6,000 troops (later increased to 12,000) into Mexico to pursue Pancho Villa who had killed American civilians along the border. While the Senate considered several joint resolutions authorizing military action in Mexico in retaliation for Villa's massacres, no votes were taken on them. It was only with the anticipated onset of America's entry into World War I that allowed Wilson to call Pershing and his troops home. As historian Clements recounts, "by 1920, [Wilson] could no longer believe that American intervention would benefit the cause of progress in Mexico instead of the selfish interests of businessmen. Ironically, he could no longer justify intervention to himself. He gave up the policy not because he had decided it was mistaken or ineffective, but because its support by greedy men had corrupted it and made it unacceptable."<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

Woodrow Wilson underwent a steep learning curve in his early efforts to improve the political situation south of the border. His experiences reveal a new President, untutored in the ways of foreign affairs, feeling his way forward in trying to do the right thing as seen by his idealistic and intellectual lights. There is a view of Wilson as being too hard-headed and morally rigid to take the counsel of others and compromise his beliefs. In the case of Mexico, and later with the ratification efforts over the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson did meet regularly with the appropriate leaders of Congress and its committees, both in seeking counsel and trying to persuade others to accept his positions (though in the latter instance he was more willing to listen and teach than to compromise). He learned there is a limit to the powers of the bully pulpit, and that Congress had both a fierce independent spirit of its own as well as a tendency to move quickly with the President during foreign crises when the public was behind him.

It is this duality of presidential-congressional relations that has marked the course of relations between the branches throughout our history. Presidents have learned, sometimes the hard way, that it is best to take Congress into their confidence and counsel earlier, rather than later, on grave matters of state. There is no assurance that Congress will always act wisely in response to such presidential requests for counsel. What is important is that Congress be invested in the resulting policy so that the national purpose and mission are clear both to the American people and the rest of the world.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New Brunswick New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in Politics*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2004), preface to the 15th edition, lix-lxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *Constitutional Government*, 77-79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 139-140.

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of Wilson, the Senate and the Versailles Treaty fight, see Don Wolfensberger, “Woodrow Wilson, the Senate and the League of Nations Fight,” An Introductory Essay, Congress Project Seminar on “Congress, the U.N. and the War Power: From Korea to Libya,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Monday May 16, 2011, at: <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/wolfensberger4.pdf>>.

<sup>7</sup> Democratic Party National Platform, 1912, *The Encyclopedia of the Democratic Party*, George Thomas Kurian, editor (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997), 474.

<sup>8</sup> The Republican Party National Platform, 1912, *The Encyclopedia of the Republican Part*, George Thomas Kurian, editor (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997), 474.

<sup>9</sup> *Encyclopedia of the Democratic Party*, 498; and *Encyclopedia of the Republican Party*, 473.

<sup>10</sup> Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1913), vii-viii.

<sup>11</sup> From Edwin Doak Mead, Boston, August 10, 1912, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur Link, editor (Princeton, N.J., 1978), vol. 25, 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> “A News Report of an Address in Philadelphia to the Universal Peace Union, Feb. 19, 1912, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 25, 181-183.

<sup>13</sup> “A Message to Democratic Rallies,” Nov. 2, 1912, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 25, 502-503.

<sup>14</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., “Making a Case for Wilson,” *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War, and Peace*, John Milton Cooper, Jr., editor (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Kendrick A. Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed account of Wilson’s interventions in Mexico, see, Don Wolfensberger, “Congress and Woodrow Wilson’s Military Forays Into Mexico,” An Introductory Essay, Congress Project Seminar on “Congress and U.S. Military Interventions Abroad,” Monday, May 17, 2004, at: <<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ACF18F1.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 240.

<sup>18</sup> An Address on Mexican Affairs to a Joint Session of Congress, Aug. 27, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 27, 227-228.

<sup>19</sup> Clements, 98.

<sup>20</sup> “An Address to Congress on the Mexican Crisis,” April 20, 1914, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 29, 471-474.

<sup>21</sup> Clements, 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 102-103.