

Bush in Wilson's Footsteps -
How Wilsonianism is still influential in US Foreign Policy today

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1.0 Introduction

This paper is going to examine the legacy of the 28th president of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, and in how far his approach to international affairs is still a factor in the conduct of US foreign policy. A concept that has become over time known as Wilsonianism. First the current debate on these issues is going to be described, since the ideas of Wilson where, and still are, so influential, this debate is in reality two: One is about the person of Woodrow Wilson, and his time, and the second debate is that of his legacy, and in how far it is still alive today¹. The two main monographs used as a historical background are Allan Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation*², and for more detail on the diplomatic, or political developments of the times Henry Kissinger's book *Diplomacy*, both of which have been quoted regularly. The analytical part of the paper is going to focus on Wilson's legacy today, and in how far the current administration of George W. Bush is applying the ideals of Wilson, or if not, why not. As a source to make these points clear the inaugural address to his second term is used, for reasons explained in more detail in chapter 3. In order to be able to really try to draw parallels between these two approaches to foreign policy, Wilson's 14 Points are going to be dealt with also. The last part, before coming to the conclusion, is going to point out the differences between Bush and Wilson, with regard to the approaching of issues in other countries. This paper argues, that the current administration is acting upon something that can be called *realistic Wilsonianism*³.

2.0 Current Debate

¹ since the debate of Wilsonianism has a lot to do with current political developments, it is hard to stay clear of a political approach, and give a purely historical account of the debate. Given the topic of this paper, this is obviously also true for the paper itself.

² Brinkley, Alan: *The unfinished nation : a concise history of the American people* 3rd ed. Boston : McGraw-Hill, 2000

³ for reasons of making paper more readable Wilson, Wilson's administrations etc. stand synonymously for his advisors, and policy makers, since one person (even the president) never makes his decisions all by himself). The same is obviously true when the Bush administration is talked about.

Ever since Woodrow Wilson had put forward his idea of 'The League of Nations', even though it was not his idea, since the British foreign Minister Grey introduced the idea already in 1915⁴, Wilsonianism had always been part of the US foreign policy. Over the course of time it has been differently received by scholars in the US, and abroad. But overall Wilson remains a positive figure within history. The current debate seems to focus upon on the one hand the person of Woodrow Wilson, and how he tried to get his idea of the league of nations accomplished, and on the other hand there is his legacy of Wilsonianism, and how his ideals survived him, these two major streams in the current debate will be shortly examined at this point.

2.1 The Historical figure of Woodrow Wilson

Highly moralized, Wilson seems to be the intellectual father of his successors in office. Only his contemporaries did not see him as positive as he became seen over time. Given the circumstances of his time, this was not surprising, Wilson was president in a time when Isolationism was very much in what most Americans believed, an obstacle FDR had to face 30 years later, when he tried to lead the US into another World War, which did not have too much to do with the US interest. The USA always stayed within its Western Hemisphere, and when President Monroe established the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, it was never disputed that the USA would only intervene on behalf of that doctrine. H.W. Brand even argues that '...he knew American politics and history, and he knew that involvement in a foreign war was bound to be a loser at the polls. For this reason, if for no other, he hesitated long before taking any steps that moved America away from neutrality between the belligerents.'⁵ This suggests that even Wilson, often portrayed as an idealistic president

⁴ Kissinger, Henry *Diplomacy* P.223 ff New York : Simon & Schuster, 1994

⁵ Brand, H. W. Woodrow Wilson and the Irony of Fate Diplomatic History P.506

had his power motives in conducting campaigns. Brand closes his article with a common sentiment in regards to President Wilson: The 1920 election marked a return to historic patterns. Americans refocused on their domestic concerns, and not for another two decades did anyone imagine that foreign affairs ought to have anything to do with American elections. Ironically, when they did, they began to realize that Wilson wasn't so wrong.⁶ Ever since FDR, up until George W. Bush, US presidents in-cooperated these ideals into their foreign policy.

The idea of a League of Nations was a concept foreign to the US public at Wilson's time, mainly for two reasons for one they did not see the necessity to get involved outside their sphere of influence⁷, and the other reason was the fact that by joining the League they were bound to a legal framework where they had to assist foreign countries which they did not have anything in common. It was to no-one's surprise when the ratification failed in congress, when Wilson brought it before it in 1919. An article published 4 years after the failure of the ratification expressed this fear as follows: But even in countries where democracy if, the representation attained is an amorphous mixture of good and bad, of selfish and unselfish in which, when governments deal with one another on the ground of foreign policy, the selfish shows a marked tendency to predominate, thereby exasperating their mutual relationships.⁸ The fear in Wilson's time was hence not only the ties to a international league (which was believed to be a league of governments not of nations⁹), but that by being tied to such a supranational institution one would not know what

6 Ibd. P. 512

7 ever since the first president of the USA George Washington made it clear, that he thought any involvement with another power, and the signing of alliances treaties threatening the US get entangled to foreign countries, the attitude of most of the US public has been relatively isolationistic.

8 Jacks, L.P. A League of Nations as a League of Governments? The Atlantic February 1923

9 ibd.

kind of governments one had to deal with. This might be hard to foresee with other democracies, but it is most certainly impossible to do with non-democratic countries.

But over time, it became a dominating factor in the US foreign policy, some even argue it is the destiny of the US (and other Anglo-Saxon Countries) to pursue notions of Wilsonianism¹⁰, while most foreign policy specialists would not go that far, they still argue for a reasonable influence of Wilson's ideals. But even though Wilson has been analyzed by many different angles, as Elizabeth McKillen writes in a review of John Milton Cooper's Book *Breaking the heart of the world : Woodrow Wilson and the fight for the League of Nations* the voice of the other still is being neglected. Teddy Roosevelt and the Jingoist movement of his time, for example have been assessed from a gender point of view¹¹. The current debate over Wilson needs to give less attention to the well-studied few at the center of power in Washington, D.C., and far more to those who remained on the peripheries of power whether due to geography or to their class, race, and gender¹² as McKillen rightly points out.

2.2 Wilsonianism as Wilson's Legacy

The other debate that is going on is the legacy of Wilson's ideals, which is summarized as Wilsonianism, Ambrosius defines this term as follows: ...identified, in retrospect, as Wilsonianism. His liberal internationalism embraced the principles of (1) national self-determination,...(2) Open Door economic globalization...(3) collective security...(4) progressive History...¹³ This second debate seems to be more of something going on within

10 Mead, Lawrence M. Why Anglos Lead The National Interest Winter 2005/2006

11 Hoganson, Kristin: Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1998

12 McKillen, Elizabeth The Unending Debate over Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations Fight Diplomatic History

13 Ambrosius, Lloyd E. Wilsonianism: *Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* New York : Palgrave Macmillan 2002

the field of Political Science then that of History, because there is still some arguments today in how far current foreign policy of the US is still influenced by the ideals of Wilson (something this paper is also going to attempt). This Wilsonianism is also called liberal Internationalism, an approach within US foreign policy which, especially after 9/11, became more important, even though the Bush administration did follow a more unilateralist approach, which runs contrary to the original idea of liberal Internationalism. A unilateralist, militaristic foreign policy is not working: ...and September 11 proved that isolationism is no longer an option. Now is the time, before liberal principles are further misapplied, complacency returns, or the international system created by Roosevelt and Truman deteriorates beyond repair, to reassert an aggressive brand of liberal internationalism, reviving tested strategies to meet a range of new challenges. The rightful heirs of Wilson should reclaim his liberal legacy and fortify it through the determined, smart use of power. By reinvigorating the traditional tools of liberal internationalist statecraft, progressives can rebuild a grid capable of powering the world reliably and safely for years to come¹⁴ Even though this is said by a progressive (left) analyst it does describe the situation rather well, in how far Wilsonianism is claimed by the left and the right, since both want to make the world safe for democracy, only by different means. The left by using international organizations, hence they are more wilsonianistic, because just like Wilson, they too believe in multilateral action, whereas the right keeps its historical skepticism towards joining any international organization which would imply the dependence on other countries, just like it has been in 1923.

It is also interesting to note, that Wilsonianism seems to have an universal appeal(at least within the western democracies), because as Robert Kaplan points out: It is ironic that the driving intellectual force behind this effort to solve Europe's security crisis

14 Nossel, Suzanne *Reclaiming liberal Internationalism* Foreign Affairs March-April 2004

through a creation of a supranational legal institution was an American, Woodrow Wilson.¹⁵ Which was true shortly after WWI seems to be even more true in the 21st century, while the Europeans cling to international institutions, such as the UN, NATO, and of course the EU, the US seem to go their own way.

3.1 Wilson's 14 Points

This chapter is going to use Wilson's 14 Points¹⁶ as an example to point out the ideology in Wilson's approach to foreign policy, 3.2 is going to apply these principles to the Bush's administrations take on foreign policy issues!¹⁷ This speech was delivered in 1918, at a time when the outcome of WW I could be foreseen, since the Germans were struggling in holding their positions. In this speech he outlined his vision that: a general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.¹⁸ This (later-on) called League of Nations, was designed, so ...that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation...¹⁹ Here Wilson clearly states his vision to make the world safe for democracy, the main focus of Wilsonianism. This main focus, or point of Wilson, to make sure that a sort of framework is established, a legal basis for nations to deal with one another. This was a point of view by other contemporaries of Wilson, John Dewey for example pointed out that: Nothing has brought international relations to greater dispute from the stand

¹⁵ Kaplan, Robert Of Paradise and Power P13

¹⁶ Speech delivered by Woodrow Wilson on January 8th, 1918

¹⁷ obviously a whole paper itself could be written about this speech, but here only certain points are going to be looked at with some detail

¹⁸ Wilson, XIV. Point

¹⁹ Wilson

point of law than the tendency to write certain guarantees into treaties of peace and then fail to furnish any methods for making these guarantees effectual.²⁰ It also cannot be that the US is using unilateral approach ...since the United States has no intention of becoming a crusading Don Quixote of nations, this demand means precisely a permanent international government whose power shall be even more executive and administrative than judicial.²¹ Interestingly enough these principles only apply for for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world, hence any civil war would not be dealt with according to the charter of such an institution. Only if another sovereign state is attacked by another and deprived of her freedoms, does the league take on actions (clearly an approach the Bush administration departed, but this is going to be dealt with in 3.2). But his vision did not only fail because of the denied ratification in the senate in 1919, but moreover because: A statesman who looks forward to a peaceful world based upon international cooperation will not drive a hard bargain with the very nations upon whose collaboration he feels most dependent.²² Wilson could not afford to make a separate peace settlement with the Axis, because this attempt to save his league and his vision for peace this way would have been doomed from the beginning as well. So maybe, as some have argued, Wilson was a man not right for his time, but then again, he might just have been an idealist, who could not read the signs of the negotiations, and power politics, as they have been applied prior to the signing of the Versailles treaty.

²⁰ Dewey, John *The Middle Works Vol. 11: 1918-1919* Southern Illinois University Press Carbondale 1982 136

²¹ Dewey 138

²² Hofstadter, Richard :*The American political tradition and the men who made it* New York, Knopf, 1973 P. 253

3.2 Wilsonianism in Bush's Foreign Policy

In these paragraphs President George W. Bush's inaugural address to his second term as president of the US in 2005 shall be examined, and analyzed, in how far, he even though, (as described under point 2.0 The Current Debate), he belongs to an administration, which, at least up until 2006 did not put too much confidence into multilateral agreements, and did follow a policy of a coalition of the willing. These paragraphs are going to look at the discrepancy between Wilsonian Ends, meaning establishing free market economies, and democratic constitutions in so called rouge states, and the approach a conservative government (or at least the current administration anyhow) is taking. The choice of the inaugural address is due to two main reasons, one in 2001 (when Bush took office) the republican party followed a more isolationistic course in foreign policy, and secondly, in 2005 it became apparent, that the US might not be as successful in their war on terror as they would have planned.²³ The elections of 2004 were very close, and not only did Bush win by a very small margin against his democratic opponent John Kerry, but it also became very apparent, that the US was divided in half. Therefore Bush's speech was very much anticipated, because the American people expected him to lay out the path for the next four years. Interestingly enough his speech is almost entirely concerned with foreign policy issues, and the domestic problems seem to be neglected, the main issues he is talking about on a domestic agenda were 1) To give every American a stake in the promise and future of our country, we will bring the highest standards to our schools, and build an ownership society 2) In America's ideal of freedom, the public interest depends on private character -- on integrity, and tolerance toward others, and the rule of conscience in our own lives. Self-government relies, in the end, on the governing of the self.²⁴ So only

²³ also, even though the comparison is not at all justifiable, 9/11 was a chief reason for the US to abandon its isolationism, just like the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and in 1917 the continued submarine fight of the Germans, convinced the American people to join the WW I

²⁴ Bush speech delivered on January 20th 2005

two out of the many issues addressed in his speech concern domestic policy, on the one hand he is promoting a more self reliant citizen (which indeed is a very republican ideal), and on the other hand is calling for more tolerance between the citizens. Interestingly enough he is specifically mentioning Islam as well in his approach towards tolerance²⁵. This can be interpreted as a sign towards the countries in the middle east, to demonstrate that he, and his administration (or even the people of the US at large) are not bias in any way towards any religion.²⁶

The other parts of his speech exclusively focus on foreign policy, either of things already accomplished, such as the honoring of the ones who gave their lives for liberty, and how For half a century, America defended our own freedom by standing watch on distant borders. After the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical -- and then there came a day of fire ²⁷. Here he draws an analogy to history, how, ever since WW II it has been America s duty to defend the world, what was formerly known, or acted out, as the containment policy is now the war on terror just like Bush s predecessor in office, it is up to him to light the fire of democracy and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world. ²⁸ Here again he is expressing the deep conviction of the US, that they are destined to bring the flame of democracy into the world.

The day of fire clearly refers to 9/11, without which it is doubtful the Bush administration would have ever left its isolationistic approach (but this is pure speculations, of course).

This speech combines two aspects, on the one hand in how far the US are in danger and

25 ibd.

26 obviously it can be argued that this has nothing to it, and is mere populism rather than any real political agenda.

27 ibd.

28 lbd.

how it has been attacked but how likely it is that they shall be attacked again, and therefore what measures, and sacrifices have to be taken.

The more interesting parts of the speech however, and which are being more discussed in more detail as well, are concerning the future. The road map in how the US will not back down from the path it has chosen in the past, and how it will continue to walk on this path, no matter what the cost: We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this Earth has rights and dignity and matchless value...²⁹. The phrase the expansion of freedom in all the world could have been used by Wilson, when he promoted to make the world save for democracy. This is exactly what Wilson was trying to achieve with his 14 points (as discussed in the previous chapter). Bush is even going beyond Wilson, he claims that ever since the founding of the US it has been in the interest of all the US citizens, and its governments to promote freedom and democracy. It was Wilson though who took this a step further and expanded the Monroe Doctrine even beyond its original realm of influence, the Western Hemisphere.³⁰. Ever since then it was part of the US foreign policy (except the years between the two world wars) to promote democracy in the world. The following chapter is going to discuss in how far the Bush Doctrine is moving away from the idealistic approach of Wilson, but still seeks to reach Wilsonian Ends .

3.3 Departure from Wilson's ideals

²⁹ ibd.

³⁰ see Kissinger 224

Even though Joseph S. Nye is not to be associated with the Bush administrations' foreign policy, he gives a good summary of their approach to Wilsonianism: The neoconservatives, many of whom split off the Democratic Party after Vietnam, stress the importance of democracy, but drop Wilson's emphasis on international institutions. They do not want to be held back by institutional constraints and see our legitimacy coming from our focus on democracy.³¹ Where Wilson believed in the establishment of an international order, and the signing of legal treaties in order to have a framework of contracts, which are binding to all of those who sign them, the Bush administration is seeking a more unilateralist approach. Interestingly enough, this is done in order to reach the same goals as Wilson would have done, to bring democracy into the world. There are some who argue to promote a policy of *Soft Power*³², its most prominent proponent being Nye, meaning to put more emphasis on the attraction of US values, and culture, but as Carnes Lord (and many others) have argued this poses a problem, because: ...le *soft power* est pour les États un instrument plus difficile à mettre en œuvre que le *hard power*, et ce pour deux raisons: d'une part, beaucoup de ses ressources clés sont hors de contrôle des États... It is simply not efficient enough, because *soft power*, even though being attractive and having an influence, is hard to control. And more importantly it is almost impossible to follow a policy of pure *soft power*, without using *hard power* as well. The Bush administration has realized the short coming of such a *soft power* approach. Just like Wilson, it is clear to the policy makers, that this kind of policy just cannot have any reasonable success, in the short term. The real difference between Wilson and Bush lies more in the accomplishing of a democratic world: where Wilson believed in a clear set of rules, and contracts, Bush seems to be more inclined to use his intuition, and does not so much rely on the UN, or other international agreements, which have been originally initiated by his predecessor

³¹ Nye, Joseph S., Jr.: *Soft power: the means to success in world politics*, Public Affairs, 2005 141

³² *Soft Power* is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence. Simply put, in behavioral terms soft power is attractive power. In terms of resources, soft power resources are the assets that produce that attraction. Nye P. 6

Wilson. While Wilson put forward his idea of a league of nations, Bush follows an idea of a coalition of the willing. One could even argue, Bush has realized the shortcomings of Wilson's model, and tries to accomplish the same ends, by different means. Where the ratification of the treaty of Versailles failed in the congress, and in Europe as well, Bush seeks allies who are willing to support his actions, and then follows his task.³³ This can be called, as Francis Fukuyama has done a realistic Wilsonianism³⁴, the goals are still the same, but time has shown, how the UN, or NATO, are bodies which clearly are not up to the challenge to react to threats which occur without warning.³⁵

4.0 Conclusion

As the preceding chapters, and paragraphs have shown, Bush and his approach towards foreign policy are in fact not that far apart from what his predecessor Wilson had in mind when he was promoting his internationalism. Just like Wilson, the goals of Bush is to make the world safe for democracy, true the approach is a very different one. But, like this paper has pointed out, the world of Woodrow Wilson was very much a different one, from our times, ever since WW II, the American people, not only have been used to their country being involved abroad, but it became part of their tradition. So when Bush declared war on Afghanistan (or Al-Qaeda) in 2001, it came to nobody's surprise, that they not only supported this war, but embraced the idea of preventing further threats and freeing the people of Afghanistan. And the fact, that at the turn of the 20th century, the

33 Whether or not this is an approach which will eventually lead to success, or is the best approach available shall not be discussed in this paper.

34 Fukuyama, Francis *Zurück zu Woodrow Wilson* FAS 19.03.2006 P. 15

35 again, the third war in the Gulf cannot function as a good example, since as it turned out later-on, the war was already in the planning long before, hence the UN would have had enough time to focus its attention on this particular issue.

American people preferred a more isolationistic approach, and also again after WW I ended, up until FDR let them back into another World War³⁶. The legacy of Wilson survived almost a hundred years, and the speech of Bush made it clear, that it will not be abandoned any time soon, the closing remarks of Bush's speech clearly point into the future, while drawing on history: "When the Declaration of Independence was first read in public and the Liberty Bell was sounded in celebration, a witness said, "It rang as if it meant something." In our time it means something still. America, in this young century, proclaims liberty throughout all the world, and to all the inhabitants thereof. Renewed in our strength -- tested, but not weary -- we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom. Thus this paper is going to quote David M. Kennedy at the end :

Wilson's ideas continue to dominate American foreign policy in the twenty-first century. In the aftermath of 9/11 they have, if anything, taken on even greater vitality. Whether America and the world are the better for that Wilsonian ambition is a question whose definitive answer lies in the future. ³⁷

³⁶ but just like Wilson had his troubles convincing the American people to support his decision to go to war, FDR was very cautious to approach this subject. It seems to be a pattern within the US history that an horrendous event has to take place, before the American people are ready to engage into war abroad, for a more detailed treatment of this look at John L. Gaddis *Surprise, Security and the American Experience* 2004

³⁷ Kennedy, David M. What WW owes to WW The Atlantic March 2005

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