

services, tolerated them, or prohibited them. In any case, no master, according to the narratives, succeeded in preventing the slaves from maintaining a separate identity from the whites through the institution of religion.

## THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL BIAS ON WOODROW WILSON'S POLITICS OF NEUTRALITY

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*The Historical Research Methods course at Eastern requires students to analyze a section of a college textbook for historical accuracy. What follows is Michael Kruger's assessment of one interpretation of Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter the First World War.*

A second factor pulling the United States into [World War I] was the deep-seated feelings of President Wilson himself.... Wilson had long admired the British people and their form of government. Although technically neutral, the president strongly, although privately, favored the Allies and viewed a German victory as unthinkable.... Hence, although Wilson asked Americans to be neutral in thought as well as in deed, in fact he... [was] neither.<sup>1</sup>

In the above passage there are many contentions which may be disputed. This essay will examine the evidence that history provides us and, thus, verify or refute the passage's main points. I will primarily address Woodrow Wilson's views of Great Britain and Germany, the causes and effects of his neutral stance, and the question of whether the United States' eventual entry in to the first world war was influenced by any biases President Wilson may have had. In the end, it will be apparent that while Wilson was indeed personally biased towards the British, he did not let this bias affect his actions as president.

The United States has long been considered a melting pot, composed of immigrants and their descendants from a multitude of nations around the world. Because the largest number of these peoples came from Europe, it should come as no surprise that World War I had the potential to cause tremendous divisiveness across the country; declaring war on any of the numerous belligerent powers threatened to "rend the unity of America."<sup>2</sup> Thus, it was in the best

<sup>1</sup> Susan D. Becker and William Bruce Wheeler, *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, vol. 2, *Since 1865*, 2d ed., (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters*, vol. 5, *Neutrality, 1914-1915* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., Inc., 1935), 17.

interests of the nation to adopt a policy of neutrality towards all aggressor nations. Such a policy was outlined by President Wilson in a speech delivered before the Senate on August 19, 1914, in which he stated: "Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned."<sup>3</sup> In the same speech, he also asked that all citizens remain "neutral in fact as well as in name."<sup>4</sup>

While the president espoused neutrality, there is ample evidence showing that he was personally partial to the Entente Allies. In *Wilson the Diplomatist*, Arthur S. Link, the premier Wilson historian and biographer, claims that "on two, perhaps three, occasions during the two and a half years of American neutrality [Wilson] avowed to close friends his personal sympathy for the Allied cause."<sup>5</sup> This assertion is consistent with information taken from other sources which depict Wilson as pro-British. Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's authorized biographer, points out that Wilson's ancestors and personal heroes were British. Even more convincing than this evidence, however, is the fact that Wilson's "first and greatest book advocated a reconstruction of the American governmental system in the direction of the British. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Moreover, author John Morton Blum claims that "Wilson could not help but share" the English cause because, among other things, "he had always believed. . . that American history was simply an extension of British experience."<sup>7</sup>

Contributing to Wilson's enthusiasm for the British cause were his strong reservations about the Germans. The principal evidence for this view comes from an August 30, 1914 entry in the diary of Wilson's most trusted advisor, Edward Mandell House. Wilson evidently told House "that if Germany won [the war] it would change the course of our civilization and make the United States a military nation," a thought Wilson abhorred. He also apparently expressed horror at German treaty violations, especially in regard to Belgium, and disappointment in "the German people as a whole."<sup>8</sup> Such an attitude could

3 John Randolph Bolling, comp., *Chronology of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1927), 190.

4 *Ibid.*, 191.

5 Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: the Diplomatist* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 35.

6 Baker, 64.

7 John Morton Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*, ed. Oscar Handlin (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1956), 95.

8 Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 462.

account for his subsequent reactions to stories of German atrocities. According to Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Wilson "would not read of them and showed anger if the details were called to his attention."<sup>9</sup>

There are, of course, those who point out that Wilson also had positive feelings towards the Germans. Foremost among these is, once again, Arthur Link. In one work, "Wilson and the Ordeal of Neutrality," Link cites Wilson's profound admiration for "German contributions to modern history."<sup>10</sup> In another, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality*, Link argues that Wilson's original emotional reaction to the war was anti-German, but, after careful analysis, he concluded "that Germany is not alone responsible for the war, and some other nations will have to bear a portion of the blame in our eyes."<sup>11</sup>

Whether Wilson's personal biases actually affected American policies will be addressed later. If we were to judge from face value, however, it would appear as if they did. The rest of the world certainly thought so. In April of 1915 House reported that the French believed Wilson to be pro-German.<sup>12</sup> Such an opinion was echoed in Britain by 1916.<sup>13</sup> The Axis powers, on the other hand, viewed Wilson as pro-Entente Allies.<sup>14</sup> These discrepancies in opinion were derived from the effects our neutrality had upon the two sides of the war and, in several instances, from what appeared to be inconsistent policies.

"American neutrality did work greatly to the benefit of the Allies" as they were allowed complete access to U.S. markets, a privilege denied the Germans by the British Navy.<sup>15</sup> However, several policies were simply "disadvantageous to the British." For instance, a ban on loans to belligerent governments prevented the British from purchasing American-made products, because it limited their monetary resources. This ban, more than any other action, led the British to believe that Wilson was pro-German.<sup>16</sup> The Germans, on the other hand, pointed to several instances in which Wilson had been willing to compromise with the British, but not with the Central powers, after each had violated U.S.

9 Link, *The Diplomatist*, 35.

10 Arthur S. Link, "Wilson and the Ordeal of Neutrality," in *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 89.

11 Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 52-53.

12 Charles Seymour, ed., *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1926), 1-417.

13 *Ibid.*, 2-52, 260.

14 *Ibid.*, 251.

15 Link, *The Diplomatist*, 36.

16 *Ibid.*, 37.

17 Charles Seymour, *American Diplomacy During the World War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1934), 17.

neutrality, as a sure sign that he was Pro-Entente.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the facts just presented, the inherent personal biases of Wilson and his apparent violations of neutrality, Link contends "President Wilson tried as hard as any man could have done to remain neutral," and, in fact, succeeded in doing so.<sup>18</sup> The most obvious evidence supporting this claim is the manner in which Wilson dealt with the two opposing sides. Yes, the Entente fared better than the Central powers, but only because the British, to a great extent, controlled the sea. The policies regarding the two sides were ultimately equal; in fact, Wilson strived to ensure that this was so. For instance, he prevented "the sale of submarine parts, and hence parts for any naval crafts," to belligerents, as this would be "contrary to . . . strict neutrality," this hurt the British more than the Germans as Germany already had naval manufacturing facilities. Likewise, Wilson's ban on loans to belligerent governments, which I have already mentioned, had a profound negative effect upon the British.<sup>19</sup>

One may inquire, then, about the apparently inconsistent method with which Wilson compromised with the British, but not the Germans, after both had violated U.S. neutrality. Was this not in itself a violation of neutrality by the American president? To answer this question one must examine Wilson's rationale for his policies. As it turns out, his reasoning hinged upon the types of violations that each side had committed.<sup>20</sup> For the most part, the British violated American property rights; U.S. trading vessels were frequently delayed while the British searched them and seized any materials they considered contraband.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the Germans violated neutral rights by declaring unrestricted submarine warfare, a policy which potentially endangered the lives of American citizens.<sup>22</sup> Wilson viewed this German tactic "as an attack upon humanity." It was his opinion that while property losses could be redressed through financial means, "there could be no compensation for lost lives." Thus, he refused to compromise with the Germans on any question of neutrality until this issue was resolved. Wilson's personal conviction regarding the value of human life, not personal like or dislike for a specific country, led to this seemingly inconsistent policy.<sup>23</sup>

18 Arthur S. Link, ed., *Woodrow Wilson: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 173.

19 Link, *The Diplomatist*, 37.

20 Seymour, *American Diplomacy*, 18.

21 *Ibid.*, 35.

22 This fear was realized on May 7, 1915 when the *Lusitania*, a passenger liner, was torpedoed

without warning, resulting in the deaths of 128 Americans. Link, *The Diplomatist*, 56.

23 Seymour, *American Diplomacy*, 17-18.

As it is obvious, then, that the United States was in fact neutral during the war, the question remains as to why Wilson adopted this policy despite his own personal opinions. To answer this question one must look in part to his speech of August 19, 1914, in which he made his original appeal for neutrality. Although this speech focused upon neutrality as a method of reducing divisiveness within the United States, it also touched upon Wilson's loftier objectives.<sup>24</sup> In essence, Wilson wished to "perform the healing task of reconciliation once the nations of Europe had come to some sense," and to lead the world to a permanent peace.<sup>25</sup> This, then, partially accounts for the United States' neutrality, as well as Wilson's persistent calls throughout the war for a "peace without victory."<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of Woodrow Wilson's post-war aspirations, however, there was yet another all-important factor in his decision to remain neutral: the great majority of the American public did not want to become involved. Quite simply, the population felt that the United States had no physical interest in the war and consequently, that the country should maintain its traditional, isolationist stance. Wilson, keenly aware of this sentiment, felt that as a representative of the people, he had a duty to act upon their wishes.<sup>27</sup> This view was eloquently set forth by Wilson himself in a January, 1916 address in Milwaukee:

Governments have gone to war with one another. Peoples, so far as I remember, have not, and this is a government of the people, and this people is not going to choose war.... We do not want the question of peace and war... entrusted too entirely to our Government. We want war, if it must come, to be something that springs out of the sentiments and principles and actions of the people themselves....<sup>28</sup>

In light of this viewpoint, the post-war objectives of Wilson, and the United States' obviously unbiased method of dealing with both Central and Allied powers, the major contention in this essay's opening paragraph is invalid. Regardless of his personal prejudices, Woodrow Wilson was, in deed, neutral.

24 Bolling, *Chronology*, 191.

25 Link, *A Profile*, 174.

26 Earl Latham, ed., *The Philosophy and Policies of Woodrow Wilson* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178.

27 Link, *The Diplomatist*, 32.

28 Woodrow Wilson, *President Wilson's Addresses*, comp. George McLean Harper (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1918), 158.