Woodrow Wilson was disliked in his own lifetime, by some even loathed\(^1\). The reasons advanced for this range from academic rivalries and disputes during his tenure at Princeton, to a certain severity of character arising out of his Presbyterian upbringing\(^2\), a self-satisfied sanctimoniousness, a wilful intolerance of opposition, a certain remoteness, much wishful thinking, and an inability to accept human failings. These factors are countered, in the record of his private life, by his genuine love for members of his own family and, in the public historical record, the loyalty of some of his lieutenants and advisors in the face of open hostility from others in the president’s entourage\(^3\).

Above all, however, stands his astonishing rhetorical ability, which often carried his listeners away into a belief in the possibility of realizing the impossible, and translated, for many of them, into genuine devotion.

Out of all this has come the myth of Wilsonian idealism, which is not a personal attribute of the man himself\(^4\), but a conceptual outgrowth of the rhetoric of one who consistently presented himself as the disinterested, humble and righteous “interpreter of the general will” - the personification, made manifest in his own words and deeds, of a dynamic national unity forged in the fires of conflict. The concept has become attached to the man, and has generated an ongoing ideological myth, but it is still only a concept.

In personality, Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush could hardly be more different. No-one would argue for rhetorical charisma or even intellectual sophistication in George W. Bush, and the personal sentiments one is perhaps most likely to find among Americans in relation to him are, on the one hand, among long-time Republicans for example, a reflexive loyalty to the party’s man and, on the other hand and quite commonly, acute embarrassment that someone of such limited intellect and ability (though not lacking in cunning) is president of the United States.

These factors are important to bear in mind when thinking about Wilsonianism, that “legacy which won’t die” (Gottfried, 1990) and which is partly responsible for the analogies between the administrations of Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush commonly made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the Iraq invasion in March 2003. Some of these were outlined concisely by philosopher Peter Levine in a 2006 blog post:
“Each man represented the party then based in the South and West, with a tradition of distrusting eastern elites and the federal government. Both ran on platforms of decentralization and localism. Yet both dramatically expanded the power of the federal government: Wilson through the Federal Reserve Act, the Federal Trade Commission Act, and child labor laws; Bush through No Child Left Behind and the Patriot Act.”

“Both presidents spoke in favor of personal freedom, but each was responsible for undermining civil liberties. Wilson’s Espionage and Sedition Acts (respectively, of 1917 and 1918) were the worst legislative assaults on free speech since 1800. Wilson’s government also deported immigrants who held radical views and jailed Eugene V. Debs—who had run against Wilson in 1912 and won six percent of the vote—for speaking against the war.” Levine does not believe Bush to be as bad as Wilson on civil liberties, but others disagree.

Both consistently disparaged Congress and, once in the White House, attempted to expand presidential power. (As a political scientist, Wilson had argued strenuously against checks and balances.) Both employed "heavies" to enforce presidential and federal power (A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover; John Ashcroft and John Yoo) (Levine, 2006, online).

These analogies have little to do with the personalities involved, except perhaps to the extent that frustration and vindictiveness are translated in both cases into the application of coercive force. They were particularly appropriate in the context of domestic policy, because “post 9/11” was a time when – exactly as in 1917-1918 - public attentions in the U.S. were sharply focused on the interconnected issues of national security, patriotism, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the defeat of evil by force. In both cases, a demonized foreign enemy harbouring sinister anti-American (and indeed anti-civilizational) intentions was paraded all over the media, to be pilloried by an enragéd and vengeful public opinion, metaphorically at first - and soon enough by a once again fired-up national unity, putting its practical faith today in long-range precision-guided weaponry, where the original Wilsonians had relied on sheer numbers (2 million Americans crossed the Atlantic in 1917-1918).

Whereas the all-purpose government-promoted hate figure in 1917 was the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the focus of official and popular venom in 2001 was Osama bin Laden (soon forgotten, however, in favour of the less elusive and more serviceable demon Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq†). The technology of the poster had given way to the video clip, but the message was still a visual one, and the devil was personified, as he always had been, in the un-American
tyrant of the day, an evil monster oppressing of his own largely helpless and innocent people and worthy to be overthrown.

But did the analogy readily translate into the sphere of actual foreign policy formulation? Did it suffer or change in the transition? And did it perhaps lose some of its force even domestically, because the immediate emergency receded as no further major terrorist incident struck America in the years following September 11, 2001?

As Peter Levine notes in connection with foreign policy, Wilson (in 1916) ran on a platform of staying out of the war, but in the following year took the US into a conflict that killed 126,000 Americans. “He justified U.S. entry on the allied side as a way to make the world safe for democracy, to end all wars, and to punish Germany for attacking American civilians at sea.” George W. came into office on a “humble” foreign policy platform, resistant to nation-building, “but he invaded and attempted to remake a foreign country, saying that he wanted to punish terrorists, expand democracy abroad, and reduce the chances of future wars in the region. In both cases, critics of the war said that the real motivations were economic” (Levine, 2006, online).

In June 2006, Lloyd Ambrosius, reviewing an abundant literature by commentators who have seen parallels between Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush, wrote that these two presidents “both led the nation into war for the avowed purpose of protecting traditional values and institutions at home and of expanding these throughout the world, promising to make freedom and democracy the foundation for peace. They assigned a redemptive role to the United States, fighting evil to create a new international order” (Ambrosius, 2006: 509).

And in her new book Joan Hoff, taking advantage of the growing sense of perspective provided by the ongoing wars of attrition in Afghanistan (now in its seventh year), Iraq (soon to enter its sixth year) and the perpetual ‘war on terror’ (named at least twenty years ago when Ronald Reagan and his secretary of state George Schultz denounced “the evil scourge of terrorism,” a plague spread by “depraved opponents of civilization itself”), goes beyond the analogy to place both Bush and Wilson in a long tradition of “Faustian foreign policy:”

“Presidents beginning with Wilson have revealed themselves willing to enter into “pacts with the devil” in foreign policy matters. [...] Wilson entered into a series of mini-Faustian bargains both before and after World War I, as have most presidents since, particularly in time of war” (Hoff, 2007: Introduction).

One might add that it is not only presidents who have made pacts with the devil, but their trusted advisors as well, for at least one of whom, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the arming the ‘enemy of my
enemy,’ without thought for the long-term consequences in blowback, was barely worth a second thought.

The Wilson-Bush analogy gained further traction, however, with President Bush’s second inaugural address and its imagery of fire, echoing Wilson’s own second inaugural, in which he had evoked “a new unity.. forged... amidst the fires that now blaze throughout the world” and expressed the hope that “In their ardent heat we shall, in God’s Providence, let us hope, be purged of faction and division, purified of the errant humors of party and of private interest.”

Throughout the Bush administration’s period of office the analogy has been further reinforced by a debate which simmered constantly below the radar. That debate was over the extent to which U.S. foreign policy had been ‘hijacked’ by special interests (or, in the Wilsonian phrase, “private interests” and “faction”). This is an investigative path which is fraught with hazard by reason of its politicization, but evidence of the force of banking and Zionist interests is strong in both Wilson’s decision to abandon his mediation efforts in Europe in 1916 and to bring America into the Great War in the following year, after he had been re-elected, and Bush’s decision, broached immediately the administration entered office (at the National Security Council meetings on January 30 and February 1, 2001), to invade Iraq and pursue the wider “war on terror.” The concept of that war, as we have seen, was not new, but the neconservatives had made a substantial and sustained ideological and strategic contribution to it from early on in the preceding decade.

In the 2006 article I have mentioned above, Lloyd Ambrosius went on to say, however, that in focusing excessively on Bush and Wilson’s common ideology, commentators had neglected differences between ends and means in these two presidents’ foreign policies, and argued that Bush’s “willingness to use... pre-emptive war to achieve traditional Wilsonian goals” was “unprecedented.” But it was precisely the change of emphasis acquired from the ideological and strategic inputs of the neoconservatives which had worked to produce the “unprecedented” nature of the new Bush national security strategy.

Thus it is no surprise that not all those commentators would have agreed with that the idea of pre-emption was unprecedented. But the fact that this question was raised at all is revealing of the ongoing – and effectively not new - policy debate about whether it is necessary to strike the enemy before he has a chance to strike you, a strategy which is particularly apt when one is trying to deal with the key elements of the terror tactic - surprise and suicidal ‘human weapons’ to which conventional (and certainly traditional ‘Cold War’) strategies have no effective answer.

More significantly for the long term, however, and again going beyond analogy to continuity, both Ambrosius and Hoff locate these presidents in the foreign policy tradition of Wilsonianism, the one

Likewise Jeffrey Engel of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A &M university, in a talk given in late 2006 entitled “The Face of Evil,” goes even further in the continuity stakes, arguing that “American policymakers consistently code their foreign adversaries as evil men,” and “justify their foreign policies as beneficial to the oppressed peoples forced to live under the thumb of explicitly identified tyrants.” He continues,

“...Iraq provides only the latest example. ”We have no quarrel with the Iraqi people,” George Bush stressed in 2003. ”They are the daily victims of Saddam Hussein’s oppression.” Remove Hussein, he argued, and American and Iraqi problems would fade away.

This diplomatic mantra, that Americans wage their wars against evil despots for the benefit of oppressed peoples, did not originate with Bush. Rather, all twentieth-century Presidents have personified their enemies, beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s 1917 claim that “we have no quarrel with the German people. [...]”

Today, as in Wilson’s day, policymakers employ this language to alleviate fears of foreign casualties, as bullets fired in the name of liberty rhetorically strike not innocent civilians, but instead the chest of the tyrant.” (Engel, 2006, online)

This historical pattern, which in Engel’s argument goes right back to Jefferson, “contributes not to the democratic peace so often discussed, but instead to a distinctly un-Kantian world of perpetual conflicts between an ever-enlarging global “people” and the tyrants that would oppress them.”

I have my doubts as to whether the figure of “the people” is “ever-enlarging:” the number of tyrants is necessarily quite small, and in the propaganda of U.S. foreign policy the focus of demonization shifts from one nationalist leader to another according to how much strategic importance attaches to his country’s resources at any given moment, or how much of a threat he is judged to represent to the ambitions of empire. Thus we may find that Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is the demon of today, Ahmedinejad of Iran the demon of tomorrow, Fidel Castro of Cuba the still troublesome demon of yesterday, with Hitler the ghost stalking them all. But, like Osama, they may turn out to be unserviceable if they resist or survive for too long: so the public relations investment in their monstrosity needs to be short-term, renewable, able to be withdrawn quickly in the event they should prove able to outwit and outmanoeuvre the empire. These are all monsters that the US goes abroad seeking to destroy, and a never-ending supply of them (not necessarily an
ever-increasing supply) is required in order to satisfy the domestic myths, but equally their “cunning” may confound those purposes from time to time, - perhaps, in Castro’s case, in perpetuity.

Where are those domestic myths? They rest, says Joan Hoff, on exceptionalism, “the country’s view of its moral and physical uniqueness among nations,” and a certain invulnerability on which Woodrow Wilson had been able to base his universalist creed of the United States’ “self-possession,” whereby everything America touched - justice, democracy, self-government – it “made holy,” because it operated out of a sense of disinterest and universal service to the world.

“Such beneficent selflessness arose from the fact that the United States, according to Wilson, had no “reason to fear that from any quarter our independence or the integrity of our territory” could be threatened and because as a Christian nation the country “exemplif[ied] that devotion to the elements of righteousness...derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”

“This exceptionalist belief in the county’s “rightness” and military capability led to the corollary that it should at the same time protect itself from the evils of the world whenever American principles were perceived to be rejected or ignored or under attack.”

In Hoff’s view, it was to preserve the myths involved in this conflation of exceptionalism, invulnerability, endless prosperity, and periodic loss of innocence that America’s presidents had time and again resorted to Faustian pacts. “The cumulative effect of these greater and lesser “deals with the devil” to impose American values and win foreign policy conflicts at any cost reached such an apex during the Cold War that even critics of U.S. diplomacy did not think the Cold War Faustian bargains could be surpassed following the fall of Communism. Yet they were confounded and often silenced by government propaganda in the wake of September 11 as the United States embraced any unsavory government that promised to fight terrorism.”

The post 9/11 period then, for Hoff, has been a failure to realize the promise of the high plateau of victory and potential reached at the end of the Cold War, compounded by the rotten expediency of the Bush II administration’s new Faustian pacts with the likes, for example, of Karimov of Uzbekistan:

“Without too much exaggeration one could say that upon entering the new millennium the United States was at the height of its myth-affirming powers. Unfortunately, instead of triggering new domestic perspectives and a reassessment of its Cold War foreign policies, the tragic events of September 11 simply reinforced the country’s view of its moral and
physical uniqueness among nations as it tried to compensate for its most severe encounter with vulnerability. [...]

Thus America has erred, in Hoff’s view, by “trying to stop time and impose its hegemony indefinitely on the rest of world,” perpetuating the wish that things (meaning that conflation of exceptionalism, hurt innocence, prosperity, and invulnerability) would never change, in spite of the evidence of a new vulnerability and other emerging limitations on both power and prosperity. The implicit denial of the need to look inward, and the casting of blame outward, was evident in President Bush’s words in January 2005: “After the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical - and then there came a day of fire. We have seen our vulnerability - and we have seen its deepest source. For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny [...] violence will gather.”

The outcome of all this, for Hoff, is that there is a continuing lack of awareness and discussion of the limits to American power:

“There has been little public re-evaluation of how the United States obtained the unprecedented position of power in the world that it now occupies. This means that even after the terrorist attacks, most Americans continue to perceive themselves as blessed and deserving, never questioning the domestic or foreign price of the victory in the Cold War. There is little recognition that hubris about the country’s ability to maintain its current unrivaled position in the world may not be the best basis on which the United States should continue to conduct itself. Thus, although September 11 exposed U.S. vulnerability, most of the country’s leaders still cling to certain Cold War foreign policies that are no longer germane in an age of random terrorism, including the idea that the United States is always an innocent victim on the world stage.” (Hoff, 2007: Introduction).

The Limits to Power

In an echo which returns us to the Wilson era, Lloyd Ambrosius also highlights the presidential attitude towards limitations of American power as a key factor in any discussion of ends and means of foreign policy. He himself addresses the topic specifically in the case of the Armenian genocide of 1915:

“Wilson’s rhetoric might soar through the clouds as he outlined his global vision of making the world safe for democracy, but he was far more prudent in practice. He offered his ideals as universal principles, but he also exercised caution and self-restraint... [...] Both during and after the Great War, Wilson refused to send U.S. troops into the Middle East to protect
the Armenians from the Turks and later the Bolsheviks... His rhetoric was universal but his actions were circumscribed, reflecting the limits of American power and also of his ideology that promised more than he could deliver. Wilson’s unwillingness to intervene in the Middle East even to help the Armenians, a white Christian people, was hardly a legitimate precedent for Bush’s later pursuit of democratic transformation throughout the entire region” (Ambrosius, 2006: 521).

What this analysis does not explore is Wilson’s reasons for not intervening, which stemmed from the fear that American missionaries in Turkey might be subjected to treatment similar to that which had befallen the Armenians. Prudence was not necessarily born of calculation, but rather of fear, and that fear fatally exposed the ideological conceit of Wilson’s grand vision. Theodore Roosevelt, in a position of comfortable distance from decision-making, was characteristically forthright in his condemnation:

“The Armenian massacre was the greatest crime of the war, and failure to act against Turkey is to condone it; because the failure to deal radically with the Turkish horror means that all talk of guaranteeing the future peace of the world is mischievous nonsense; and because when we now refuse to war with Turkey we show that our announcement that we meant ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ was insincere claptrap.”


Coming back to the present day, Walter LaFeber writes, with similar if more circumspect frankness, “When the history of U.S. foreign policy in the immediate post-9/11 years is more fully written, it will have to include not only the political and policy figures who misunderstood their nation’s history and, consequently, historical choices, but the writers who did nothing to counter such illusions. The illusions included the nature of American power and the natures of human beings” (LaFeber, 2007: 423).

We may tentatively conclude, with LaFeber, that presidents then and now are “mugged by reality,” that is to say, they discover, often as their period of office nears its end, that there are practical limits to the exercise of power and to the reach of words, whether in the form of “divinely inspired” rhetoric or perpetual malapropism. Here too at the last is one further, and seemingly almost counterfactual parallel between Woodrow Wilson, the apostle, and George W. Bush, the joker.

References


February 2008

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Notes

1 “I never expected to hate anyone in politics with the hatred I feel toward Wilson,” declared Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. King George V described Wilson on first meeting him as “an entirely cold academic professor... an odious man.” “Former President Grover Cleveland, a member of the board of trustees [of Princeton] had called Wilson a dishonourable man who was careless about facts and had a volatile, vindictive temper” (Fleming, 2003a: 3).

2 "A mentally ill, pitiless, mythomaniac, ...an enlightened man who believed himself in direct communication with God, guided by an intelligent power outside of himself...." – Sigmund Freud on Woodrow Wilson.

3 “Without [Joe] Tumulty, Woodrow Wilson might never have become president. The shrewd, genial Irish-American from Jersey City had shepherded Wilson through the wilderness of New Jersey machine politics when he ran for governor in 1910. Tumulty had stayed loyal. In Washington, Tumulty had been equally valuable in dealing with Congress and the press during Wilson’s first term. He combined abundant charm with shrewd judgement and tact. Nevertheless, after Wilson’s re-election in 1916, the president fired Tumulty Why? Because Edith Galt Wilson and Colonel House had advised him against having an Irish-Catholic in his White House. [...] Tumulty had been the target of attacks by anti-Catholics and politicians jealous of his influence – often one and the same... Tumulty wrote Wilson a sad letter....” (Fleming, 2003a: 21)

4 In his war message to Congress on April 2, 1917, Wilson said, “We are glad...to fight... for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included.” Yet by the end of his nationwide tour, in September 1919, in which he canvassed for public support for U.S. membership of the League of Nations, the rhetoric was entirely stripped down: “The real reason that the war we have just finished took place was that Germany was afraid her commercial rivals were going to get the better of her, and the reason why some nations went into the war against Germany was that they thought Germany would get the advantage of them.” - The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Vol. 63: 45.

5 Samuel Walker, professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska, argues that “On civil liberties issues, Bush clearly has the worst record of any president. He has led an all-out assault on the separation of church and state, abortion rights and gay and lesbian rights. The USA PATRIOT Act is packed with threats to freedom of speech and due process protections. His administration has justified holding people indefinitely
without charges, and in a broader sense it has made sweeping claims that it is not bound by legal precedents
or existing human rights standards” (Walker, 2005: online).

6 “The war on terror involves Saddam Hussein because of the nature of Saddam Hussein, the history of

7 Joan Hoff. 2007. A Faustian Foreign Policy From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of
Perfectibility (Cambridge: CUP).

8 “By our efforts, we have lit a fire as well - a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power, it
burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of

9 Woodrow Wilson, Second Inaugural address - March 5, 1917.

10 The commentators Ambrosius selects are David M. Kennedy, “What ‘W’ Owes to ‘WW,’ Atlantic 295
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Policy and How It Changed the World (New York: Routledge); idem., 2004. Power, Terror, Peace, and

11 President George W. Bush, Second Inaugural, January 20, 2005