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tra guerra e dopoguerra

a cura di

Lorenzo Benadusi, Daniela Rossini, Anna Villari

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WILLIAM R. KEYLOR

Wilsonian Internationalism and the Test of Time

1. *Introduction*

The ambitious project for a new international order of peace and justice that America's twenty-eighth president promulgated in the last year of the Great War and then strove to incorporate in the postwar settlement at Versailles has long been the subject of heated scholarly debate. With the advent of the Cold War, self-described realists led by George F. Kennan denigrated what they regarded as Woodrow Wilson's naïve, idealistic, unrealistic assumptions about the nature of international relations; they seemed totally irrelevant to a world order in which two nuclear-armed superpowers were locked in a ferocious competition for global dominance. But the end of the Cold War led to a sympathetic reassessment of the much maligned legacy of Wilson.

In the decade following the end of the Cold War a succession of historical studies resurrected the project for world order that Wilson articulated at the end of the First World War and hailed it as a harbinger of the emerging international order that seemed to be taking shape in the last decade of the twentieth century. Works such as Frank A. Ninkovich's *The Wilsonian Century* and Tony Smith's *America's Mission: The United States and the World-Wide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*,¹ heralded not the "end" of history, in Fukuyama's notorious phrase, but rather the

1. Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001; Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2012.

return to an “earlier” historical moment.² In the brief window of opportunity between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the twin towers, the Twentieth century seemed to be ending in a way that belatedly confirmed both Wilson’s ultimate faith in a safe and stable world free of war *and* his specific prescriptions for how to get there.

In light of this recent historical revisionism, I would like to explore the question of whether the key principles of Wilsonian statecraft deserve their reputation as durable guides to world peace and security. Was Kennan right to repudiate his early critique and to admit that Wilson really was a man ahead of his time? In short, have his major ideas stood the test of time? To address this question, I would like to focus on four fundamental concepts that Wilson unveiled in his wartime speeches and then fought for tenaciously at the conference table in Paris: universal democracy, world disarmament, collective security, and national self-determination.

2. Universal democracy

Let me begin with Wilson’s deeply held belief that the prospects of peace in post-war Europe would be decisively advanced by the proliferation of democratic political institutions across the Continent. Appropriating the idea of democracy as the instrument of perpetual peace from the writings of eighteenth-century thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, and Thomas Paine, Wilson transformed this abstract theory into a concrete war aim after the American intervention in the Great War. His famous reference to «the war to make the world safe for democracy» could have been better put by reversing the word order of that memorable phrase: what he really seemed to be saying was that «after this war, democracy would make the world safe». Why? Because representative political institutions would empower citizens to compel their governments to pursue peaceful policies and prevent their leaders from dragging them into another lethal and destructive war, as he believed had occurred in 1914. The underlying assumption of this view, of course, was the classical liberal faith in the essential benevolence of human nature. If governments could be held accountable by their

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

intrinsically pacifist electorates, the result would be peace, stability, and security in the world.³

The collapse of the monarchical autocracies of the Central Powers ignited a brief flurry of exhilaration among Wilson's growing band of admirers on both sides of the Atlantic. For a fleeting moment it seemed that the wreckage of the recent war would give rise to a stable new European order composed of democratically elected governments that would be responsive to the humane, moderate, peaceful inclinations of their citizens. On the eve of the peace conference, however, the defects of this principle were promptly revealed in the expressions of public sentiment in the victorious countries. Wilson had failed to recognize that the politically empowered citizens of Britain, France, and Italy, after so many years of suffering, sacrifice, and privation on the battle front as well as on the home front, would become much more belligerent, demanding, and uncompromising than their democratically elected leaders. Indeed, it was the fear of appearing too "weak" and "insufficiently aggressive" in the quest for land and money, not the reverse, that shaped the negotiating position of the peacemakers who wrangled with Wilson at the conference table.⁴

As for the successor states of the defeated powers, it would become evident in the course of the next two decades that the war and the peace settlement did not make the world safe for democracy in their part of the world. By the beginning of the next war in 1939, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were ruled by autocratic governments of one kind or another, not to speak of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Liberal democracy seemed a spent force rather than the wave of the future.

But the idea that the expansion of democratic institutions was the surest guarantee of international peace and stability was resurrected by Franklin Roosevelt during the Second World War, and would later become a fundamental feature of American foreign policy during the Cold War. But whenever that mission conflicted with overriding goal of thwarting the global threat posed by the Soviet Union, a succession of American presidents would not hesitate to combine neo-Wilsonian rhetoric about the

3. Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1995.

4. William R. Keylor, *Versailles and International Diplomacy*, in *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*, eds. Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald Feldman, Elisabeth Glaser, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 469-505.

defense of the free world with opportunistic alliances with anti-Communist dictatorships, as the names Diem, Somoza, Pahlevi, Mobutu, and Pinochet will attest.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Communist bloc rekindled the old Wilsonian faith in democracy as the catalyst of world peace. That conviction reached its apex under the presidency of George W. Bush, who came to regard the spread of democratic institutions across the globe, especially to the volatile region of the Middle East, as the most effective means of restoring global stability to the post-9-11 world. The Kantian theory of the democratic peace, which had earlier been resurrected and provided with academic respectability in the pages of learned journals of political science, found its most ardent champion in the Oval Office at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁵ The conservative Republican chief executive who launched the war on terror in 2001 became the unexpected heir to the original project of the progressive Democratic president during the Great War, who had prematurely envisioned the spread of democracy as the key to forging a peaceful world. But we need only conjure up the names of Mubarak, Musharraf, and the House of Saud to remind ourselves that, as in the Cold War, the Wilsonian mission to promote the spread of democracy during the War on Terror will of necessity be sacrificed when more urgent goal of winning that war requires it.

3. *World disarmament*

Now let me turn to the second component of Wilson's plan for perpetual peace: the dream of world disarmament. The first serious proposals for preventing war through the imposition of restrictions on the weapons of war were first aired at the Hague Peace Conference of 1899. But it was the nine million deaths on the battlefields of the Great War that generated the first sustained campaign to curtail the production and use of the weapons that had made such carnage possible. Convinced that one of the principal causes of the war had been the competitive arms race among the great powers, Wilson envisioned an international system of arms control

5. The most succinct definition of Democratic Peace Theory is Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1997; see also *Democratic Peace in Theory and Practice*, ed. Steven W. Hook, Kent OH, Kent State University Press, 2010.

as one of the most effective means of preventing a recurrence of the recent bloodshed. The peace settlement of 1919, which famously imposed restrictions on the capacity of defeated Germany and its former allies to wage war, also included a less well known provision, inserted at Wilson's behest, for "universal" disarmament. The targeted restraints imposed on the defeated powers was justified as part of this broader plan for world disarmament that was expected to be implemented later. The first successful agreement on arms control in the history of the modern world, the Washington Treaty of 1922 that imposed strict limitations on the combined tonnage of battle-ships constructed by the major naval powers of the world, set the precedent for multilateral negotiations to limit the weapons of war.⁶

But the attempts to establish general limits on land and airborne armaments proved uniformly unsuccessful. When the long-delayed conference dedicated to the achievement of this goal was finally convened in Geneva in 1932 it was doomed from the outset because of France's steadfast insistence on retaining its military superiority over Germany in the absence of iron-clad security guarantees, while Germany demanded the right to rearm in the absence of a general disarmament that would bring France down to its own level. After Hitler's accession in 1933, by scrupulously democratic means, we should recall, Germany's withdrawal from the conference the resulting escalation of the arms race in Europe dashed all hopes of arms control through the end of the Second World War.

With the advent of the nuclear age in 1945, the failure of the Acheson-Lilienthal-Baruch Plan for the transfer of all nuclear weapons to the custody of the new United Nations, followed by the first successful Soviet atomic test in 1949, ushered in the costly and dangerous strategic arms race between the world's two superpowers that all had feared. As had been the case in the two decades after the Great War, hopes for arms control vanished when the two Cold War blocs reverted to competitive arms buildups as the only reliable way to ensure national security and deter aggression.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of a nuclear exchange, the dormant Wilsonian dream of general disarmament resurfaced once again. The two superpowers joined other nations in a long series of negotiations that imposed significant limits on the global arms race: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons

6. *The Washington Conference, 1921-22: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability, and the Road to Pearl Harbor*, eds. Erik Goldstein and John Maurer, London, Routledge, 1994.

Convention, the Biological Weapons Convention, the Limited and then the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the two Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties, and other such agreements seemed to represent a belated vindication of Woodrow Wilson's earlier plea for limits on the weapons of war as a means of promoting world peace.

In spite of this impressive record of arms control agreements in the last three decades of the Cold War, the Wilsonian goal of "general disarmament" has remained as elusive as ever. Just as the imposition of "unilateral" restrictions on the defeated powers in the Treaty of Versailles was conceived of as merely the first step in the process of "universal" disarmament, the non-nuclear states signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in the expectation that the five nuclear weapons states would reduce and eventually liquidate their own stockpiles as part of an agreement leading to "general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."⁷ In fact, the five declared nuclear states – not coincidentally the permanent five of the U.N. Security Council – resolutely reserved the right to retain and upgrade their nuclear arsenals while continuing to insist that non-nuclear states observe the ban on developing nuclear weapons of their own. Just as Germany rejected the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles on the grounds that the other great powers had reneged on their commitment to establish a system of general disarmament, India, Pakistan, and Israel declined to sign the treaty that preserved the nuclear monopoly of the five nuclear states and proceeded to develop a nuclear capability in order to assure their own security in a dangerous regional environment. North Korea signed the NPT but withdrew from it in 2003. In the meantime the hopes of imposing limits on "conventional" arms were dashed, as the major powers of the world eagerly competed with one another to market their military hardware for reasons of national interest or commercial gain, or both. In short, the Wilsonian project for general disarmament as a means of reducing the likelihood of war, has periodically resurfaced to inspire negotiations on arms control that produced a number of notable achievements. But that process has never succeeded in bringing about the elimination, or even the substantial reduction, of offensive weapons in the arsenals of the great powers. The result of that failure has been a succession of competitive arms races and lethal wars in the years from the armistice of 1918 right up to our own day.

7. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>.

4. *Collective security*

The third Wilsonian idea that I would like to address is the one for which he is best remembered: the ambitious project for an international organization based on the principle of collective security that would make the Great War, in his memorable phrase, the war that ended all wars. Borrowing the ideas of Republican statesmen at home such as Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft and high Tories in Great Britain such as Lords Walter Phillimore and Robert Cecil, he made the concept the centerpiece of his program at the peace conference. France's Georges Clemenceau energetically resisted the idea of replacing the traditional instrument of diplomacy that had prevented the outbreak of a Europe-wide war for a century after the Congress of Vienna – the formation of alliances among sovereign states to preserve the international order through a balance of power – with the untested scheme for a League of Nations. Obligated to accept Wilson's pet project in order to obtain territorial and financial advantages he sought, the French premier attempted (through his representative, Leon Bourgeois) to endow the proposed organization with a permanent military force and general staff in order to bolster its deterrent power. But once Wilson rejected this French proposal as a reversion to the old discredited tradition of militarism, the League of Nations was born with a fatal flaw.⁸ After the United States refused to join the new international organization, the European powers were driven to resurrect the old Bismarckian, pre-Wilsonian system of alliances as a more reliable means of preserving peace on the Continent.⁹

The Wilsonian concept of collective security was revived by Franklin Roosevelt toward the end of the Second World War. But the pragmatic, Realpolitik side of Wilson's former Assistant Secretary of the Navy led him to envision a post-war world order in which the world's great powers, which he designated without the slightest hint of embarrassment as "the Four Policemen," would keep the peace in the regions of the world they controlled: the original four gendarmes – United States, the Soviet Union,

8. William R. Keylor, *Collective Security and Regional Security in U.S. Foreign Policy at the End of the Great War*, in «Annales du Monde Anglophone», 14 (2001) [2003], pp. 31-38.

9. William R. Keylor, *Wilson's Project for a New World Order of Permanent Peace and Security*, in *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Ross Kennedy, Malden, MA, Wiley Blackwell, 2013, pp. 470-491.

Great Britain, and China – would eventually be joined by France to become the five permanent members of the decision-making body of the new United Nations Organization. This was the continuation of the wartime alliance that Clemenceau had failed to persuade Wilson to endorse after the Great War.

Indeed, the term “United Nations” originally referred not to the international body that was being planned, but to the military coalition against Germany. But the fatal flaw that had hampered the League—the absence of military force to give teeth to its dictates—would severely reduce the effectiveness of its successor. With the outbreak of the Cold War, the Wilsonian principle of collective security would be superseded, as it had been after the Great War, by the old Bismarckian tradition that Wilson had thought he had consigned to the dust bin of history. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which authorized member states to band together to provide for their mutual defense, paved the way for a new world order dominated by “regional” security systems that were formed “outside” of the international organization and which became the principal instruments of the global rivalry between Washington and Moscow. The old concept of the balance of power, another remnant of the “old diplomacy” that Wilson had sought to banish forever at the Paris Peace Conference, reappeared in the new form of the nuclear “balance of terror.”¹⁰ For both superpowers the policy of mutual deterrence – the threat that each would annihilate the other in response to aggression – became the preferred means of preserving the peace.¹¹

With the end of the Cold War, President George W. Bush briefly hailed the advent of a “New World Order” in which the United Nations would finally play the powerful role in world affairs that its founders had envisioned. The deployment of a multinational military force under the auspices of the Security Council to expel the Iraqi army from Kuwait in 1991 led

10. William R. Keylor, *Le rôle des organisations internationales de sécurité pendant et après la guerre froide: Sécurité collective ou sécurité régionale?*, in *Des Conflits en mutation? De la guerre froide aux nouveaux conflits: essai de typologie de 1947 à nos jours*, eds. Danielle Domergue-Cloarec, Antoine Coppolani, Paris, Editions Complex, 2003, pp. 343-349.

11. William R. Keylor, *The United Nations' Record as the Guardian of Global Cooperative Security*, in *The Legacy of the Cold War: Perspectives on Security, Cooperation, and Conflict*, eds. Vojtech Mastny, Zhu Liqun, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, pp. 81-122.

some to predict that the Wilsonian concept of collective security had finally come into its own. A year later the new U.N. Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Galli, provided a further source of optimism on that score with his ambitious proposal titled *Agenda for Peace*, an updated version of the old French proposal that Wilson had rejected in 1919 for an on-call, standing army for the international organization to deter or, if need be, repel aggression across the globe.

Alas, there would be no new world order, and no reinvigorated United Nations as the guarantor of collective security. Instead, the world body was hamstrung by the challenges that erupted in the Balkans during the 1990s. When the U.N. proved incapable of halting the violence caused by the breakup of Yugoslavia, the United States preemptorily assumed the role of unilateral peacemaker in that volatile region, single-handedly forcing a diplomatic settlement of the Bosnian Civil War and providing a military solution to the conflict in Kosovo under the aegis not of the United Nations, but of the “regional” alliance it dominated, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The attacks on 9/11, and the ensuing war on terror launched by the administration of George W. Bush, further undermined the authority of the United Nations as the United States and other countries scrambled to defend themselves against a threat posed not by sovereign states that could be called to account for their actions in the world body, but rather by non-governmental terrorist groups operating in the shadows across national frontiers. In short, the Wilsonian project of collective security as a means of preserving the peace, despite a succession of determined efforts to implement it in the course of the past nine decades, has never succeeded in dethroning the resilient traditions of regional alliances, ad hoc coalitions, and unilateral interventions inherited from the distant past.¹²

5. *National self-determination*

Let me conclude with a look at the famous – or as I will argue, infamous – Wilsonian principle of national self-determination. This simple,

12. William R. Keylor, *The Legacy of Wilsonianism : A Retrospective Evaluation*, in *Les Etats-Unis entre Uni- et Multilatéralisme de Woodrow Wilson à George W. Bush*, eds. Pierre Mélandri, Serge Ricard, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008, pp. 311-326.

straightforward, seemingly innocuous idea – that people residing in a particular geographical area have the right to govern themselves – has led to the breakup of multinational empires, the disintegration of nation states, and many wars and civil wars ever since Wilson first adumbrated it before a joint session of Congress on 11 January 1918.

It is important to note that there is nothing in this passage from Wilson's speech suggesting that the borders of the newly created nation-states that would emancipate the "oppressed populations" on the Continent should be drawn along ethnic, racial, linguistic, or religious lines. The essence of his doctrine of self-determination was his faith in "popular sovereignty", in government through the consent of the governed, without any connotations of ethnicity. Indeed, the American president had originally favored some form of autonomy for the national minorities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire rather than dissolving that enemy state into its constituent ethnic components. But the moderate, circumspect language of his original formulation was overwhelmed by the potent force of ethnic nationalism that erupted throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the closing stages of the war. Representatives of the long-suppressed ethnic and linguistic minorities in this area bombarded the peacemakers in 1919 with strident demands for "national self-determination," hailing the American president as their inspiration and savior. The final result was a collection of successor states of the defunct multinational empires that were based on the principle of "blood" and "tongue" rather than "citizenship".¹³

It soon became evident, however, that the intermingling of populations in the course of the past several centuries of migration had foreclosed any possibility of establishing ethnically homogeneous political units. The newly created states on the continent inevitably contained large, dissatisfied minorities that promptly invoked the very principle of national self-determination that had served as the justification for the creation of the new state in the first place. Provisions were written into the peace treaties to protect the rights of these minorities under the supervision of the League of Nations, as Carole Fink has demonstrated; but these safeguards ultimately proved illusory.¹⁴ Hitler skillfully exploited the principle of national

13. Derek Heater, *National Self-Determination: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy*, London, Palgrave-McMillan, 1994.

14. Carole Fink, *The Minorities Question at the Paris Peace Conference*, in *The Treaty of Versailles*, pp. 249-274.

self-determination to justify the Third Reich's annexation of German-speaking Austria and the German-speaking borderlands of Czechoslovakia in his successful campaign in the 1930s to revise the territorial settlement of Versailles. By liberating Europe's oppressed nationalities, the principle of national self-determination was supposed to serve as the foundation of a durable peace by removing what Wilson regarded as a major cause of war.¹⁵ Instead, it became one of the most potent ideological weapons wielded by the Nazi regime to bring about the end of peace.

As was the case with the three other Wilsonian concepts I have been examining, the principle of national self-determination was revived by Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Second World War, from the Atlantic Charter to the Declaration on Liberated Europe. At Potsdam President Truman would acquiesce in a solution to the problem of ethnic minorities that the peacemakers of 1919 never dared to contemplate.¹⁶ After 1945 it would result in the creation of the most ethnically homogenous states in the history of the European continent. The expulsion of some thirteen million German-speaking inhabitants of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other polyglot political entities in Central Europe, whose only crime was their ethnic heritage, linked the principle of national self-determination based on ethnicity to the brutal, inhumane policy of compulsory population transfer—or what would later be called “ethnic cleansing.”¹⁷

In the early 1990s two political creations of the Versailles settlement, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, disintegrated into their ethnic components, the former by peaceful means, the latter after bitter conflict and much bloodshed. The Soviet Union dissolved into fifteen ethnic-based independent republics. Secessionist movements promptly emerged in several of the Soviet successor states—Chechnya in the Russian Federation; Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan; and Transnistria in Moldova. In the meantime separatist agitation by the Basques and Catalans in Spain, the Corsicans in France, and so on kept alive the cause of ethnic-based self-determination into our own century.

15. William R. Keylor, *The Principle of National Self-Determination as a Factor in the Creation of Postwar Frontiers in Europe, 1919 and 1945*, in *National Frontiers and the Two World Wars*, ed. Carole Fink, Basel, Berg, 1996, pp. 37-54.

16. Alfred de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Expulsion of the Germans*, Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

17. Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2002.

6. *Conclusion*

So, have the four Wilsonian principles treated in this article stood the test of time? I am sorry to have to conclude that the first three have decidedly not. The hope of promoting world peace by the spread of democracy, by general disarmament, and by collective security through international cooperation seems as remote as ever. The fourth one, the principle of national self-determination has been the most resilient, successful, and resonant of all. But because of its perversion by successive generations of nationalist movements based on racial, ethnic, or religious identity, it has served much more as a cause of political instability, war, civil war, and human suffering than as source of the stability, peace, security, and human liberation, that America's twenty-eighth president so ardently sought.