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**Galen Jackson. "The Offshore Balancing Thesis Reconsidered: Realism, the Balance of Power in Europe, and America's Decision for War in 1917."** *Security Studies* 21:3: 455-89. DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2012.706502.

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**G**alen Jackson's article on America's entry into World War I and the "off-shore balancing thesis" is an excellent work of scholarship. Jackson takes on an important topic for both international relations theorists and diplomatic historians and convincingly shows that U.S. leaders did not intervene in the war because they feared Germany was winning – a finding that he stresses is at odds with the predictions of John J. Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive realism."<sup>1</sup> Not all aspects of Jackson's argument are persuasive, however, and alternative interpretations of the president's approach to the war make Wilson's policies look less like an exception to Mearsheimer's model than Jackson believes.

According to Mearsheimer's theory of international relations, as effectively summed up by Jackson, "the anarchic structure of world politics engenders fierce security competition among states" (455). Driven by the imperative of survival in such an uncertain and dangerous environment, "great powers seek to gain as much power as possible" (456). More specifically, they try to become "regional hegemony" and to prevent other great powers from doing the same

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of International Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

thing (456). If a regional hegemon thinks another power is gaining dominance in a region overseas, Mearsheimer predicts, it will try to get other nations to balance against the threat and, if that fails, intervene against the threat itself. Consistent with the predictions of the theory, Mearsheimer claims, the United States, a regional hegemon, entered World War I because it feared that Germany was winning the war and that if it won, it would become a European hegemon powerful enough to threaten the United States.

Jackson is on his strongest ground in attacking Mearsheimer's assertion that Wilson intervened in World War I because he thought Germany was about to prevail over the Allies. Using extensive primary source research, he demonstrates that U.S. leaders in fact did not fear for the survival of the Allies during the months immediately preceding U.S. entry into the war. They did not express much concern about Russia's fighting ability even as the Czar was overthrown; to the limited degree that they discussed Russia at all, they expected the Russian Revolution to enhance Russia's determination to fight autocratic Germany. U.S. leaders were somewhat more concerned about the military strength of Britain and France, but they never indicated that they feared Germany might soon break through on the Western Front or that Germany's submarines were on the verge of shutting down Britain's supply lines. The war, instead, appeared to be a stalemate, with the Central Powers struggling much more than the Allies to hold their position.

At the end of his paper, Jackson briefly considers why the U.S. chose to enter the war in 1917 despite its perception that the Allies were in no danger of losing. The most important influence on Wilson, he argues, was Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Since this policy directly challenged Wilson's established position on the submarine issue, the president "felt he could not afford to back down without compromising his own dignity or the honor and international credibility of the United States" (487). Second, driven by his "moralism," Wilson had long seen the war as an opportunity to reform the existing international system of power politics (488). The president had hoped to achieve this objective by mediating an end to the war, but in early 1917, with the breakdown in U.S.-German relations, he saw he had "to wage war in order to make peace" (488). Since neither of these reasons for fighting Germany had much to do with the power calculations of one regional hegemon trying to prevent the rise of another, Jackson considers them further evidence of the limits of Mearsheimer's theory (488-89).

Jackson's analysis of America's entry into the war is convincing and, as he says, it undercuts Mearsheimer's claim that the U.S. acted as an "off-shore balancer" against Germany (457). But Jackson is less successful in knocking down Mearsheimer's other key assertion – that Wilson saw a victorious Germany as a potential danger to the United States. Between 1914 and 1917, Jackson concedes, Wilson and some of his advisors "disliked the idea of a German victory" in the war "and at times expressed concern about how such an outcome would affect American security in the future" (461). Nevertheless, Jackson argues, U.S. leaders were "not overly concerned" about the implications of a German win because they thought a victorious Germany would be too exhausted by the war to threaten America's safety (462). Jackson buttresses his case by noting Wilson's doubts that Germany could dominate all of Europe, his lack of enthusiasm for an Allied victory, and his hesitant endorsement of only a moderate program of military preparedness.

The evidence on this issue is more complicated than Jackson indicates, however. Hedownplays Wilson's fear that if Germany won the war, "we shall be forced to take such measures of defence here as would be fatal to our form of Government and American ideals," but the president stated

this sentiment on at least three separate occasions in the first six weeks of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Wilson's concerns about Germany's ambitions and potential power did not go away. In 1915 and 1916, he worried about German subversion in the United States and the Reich's intrigue in Mexico. He also agreed with his close advisor, Colonel Edward M. House, that the Allies were in effect a shield for America against Germany and he consistently supported peace terms predicated on reversing all of the gains the Germans had made in the war. While the president thought that any victor in the war would be exhausted, he did not believe such a condition would last. Sooner or later, he wrote in late 1916, any victor – including Germany – would grow “cocky” and aggressive; indeed, he implied, it would pursue militaristic policies that were sure to lead to another war.<sup>3</sup> Finally, as Jackson notes in passing, Wilson tilted his neutrality policies in favor of the Allies, a stance completely in accord with his perception that a German win might force the United States into massively increasing its defense spending. In short, Jackson is right that Wilson doubted Germany's ability to defeat the Allies and certainly saw no prospect of an imminent German victory in 1917, but he understates the president's conviction that if Germany did manage somehow to prevail, it would pose a threat to U.S. national security.<sup>4</sup>

Jackson's interpretation of Wilson's desire for international reform, which he sees as an expression of the president's moralism and idealism, is also questionable. Lloyd E. Ambrosius, in his book *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective*, argues that Wilson thought of international reform specifically in terms of creating a global collective security organization dominated by the United States.<sup>5</sup> According to Ambrosius Wilson “expected the United States to exercise the controlling influence in this new structure of peace.”<sup>6</sup> By late 1918 and early 1919, Ambrosius argues that Wilson saw the league as a vehicle for “extensive American control over world affairs while avoiding entanglement in European politics.”<sup>7</sup> Far from being simply an expression of Wilson's moralism and idealism (though it was that too), Wilson's pursuit of international reform might have been an effort to extend American hegemony beyond the Western Hemisphere to the rest of the world.

My own research indicates that the president also saw international reform as a vital national security interest. Over the course of 1914 to 1917, Wilson repeatedly indicated, publicly and privately, that international anarchy and power politics had fundamentally caused the war; that arms races in particular characterized power politics and resulted not only in war, but also in

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Cecil Arthur Spring Rice to Sir Edward Grey, 3 September 1914, in Arthur S. Link, et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-94), 30:472. Hereafter *PWW*. See also Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “An Unpublished Prolegomenon to a Peace Note,” c. 25 November 1916, *PWW* 40:69.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the assertions in this paragraph, see Kennedy, *Will to Believe*, 27-30, 65-103.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition*, 53.

“militarism” engulfing a nation’s domestic freedoms; and that the United States was no less vulnerable to militarism than other nations. The near-constant friction between the United States and the belligerents over neutral rights, as well as the impact of the war upon America’s economy and politics, also convinced Wilson that whatever isolation America had enjoyed from power politics was over. As the President stated in October 1916, “this is the last war of the kind, or of any kind that involves the world, that the United States can keep out of.”<sup>8</sup> To Wilson, the existing international system of power politics itself was a threat to America’s future. If the system continued, America was sure to get increasingly caught up in it, resulting, Wilson feared, in the militarization of America’s domestic political economy even if it was never actually attacked by a foreign foe. From this angle, international reform was a means to assure the survival of America’s free way of life.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps, then, the case of the United States and World War I is less of a problem for Mearsheimer’s theory than Jackson suggests. To be sure, since Wilson did not think in early 1917 that Germany was close to winning the war, one cannot characterize U.S. entry into the conflict as an instance of balancing behavior by one great power against another. But Wilson’s concern about the threat Germany might pose to America if it did manage to do the unexpected and win the war and his accompanying pro-Allied neutrality policies from late 1914 to 1917 do appear to conform to Mearsheimer’s predictions. Specifically, Wilson seems to have adopted the outlook and strategy of a “buckpasser” during the neutrality period, as he saw Germany as a potential threat and tried to help the Allies to confront it while the U.S. stayed out of the war (457, 461). Secondly, Wilson’s effort to transform the international system was more than an idealistic mission. It was also a quest for expanding America’s world influence and for protecting it from the ravages of militarism. Mearsheimer might not consider the pursuit of international reform to be a rational strategy for power maximization and survival, but maybe he should, as it seems consistent with his description of what great powers care about in conducting their foreign policy. One wonders if the United States has solely adopted this strategy or if other nations have as well: is trying to end anarchy via collective security a predictable response to anarchy?

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson, “Luncheon Address to Women in Cincinnati,” 26 October 1916, *PWW* 38:531.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this argument, see Kennedy, *Will to Believe*, 1-103, passim.