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“History in the Half-Light”

Ostensibly, *American Midnight* is a historical account of the anti-radical, anti-immigrant, and anti-Black furor and violence that swept the United States during the years 1917-1921, spanning the United States’ involvement in World War I and the tumultuous readjustment to peacetime that occupied the remainder of President Woodrow Wilson’s second term. It is also, ostensibly, a prophylactic against the resurgence of such “toxic currents” in American life. “My hope,” writes Adam Hochschild, “is that by examining closely an overlooked period in which [such currents] engulfed the country, we can understand them more deeply and better defend against them in the future” (3).

Hochschild is an engaging writer who enlivens any topic he chooses, as he has demonstrated most magnificently in *King Leopold’s Ghost*.1 True to form, *American Midnight* affords great pleasures to prose connoisseurs, despite its almost unrelievedly grim subject matter. The book is worth reading for anyone interested in the subject, so long as they keep their critical apparatuses fully engaged. For, despite its ostensible aims, the book, in our opinion, presents a problematic narrative that obscures many of the period’s most valuable lessons for twenty-first century readers.

Hochschild subtitles his book *Democracy’s Forgotten Crisis*, describing that crisis in his introduction as “a story of how a war supposedly fought to make the world safe for democracy became the excuse for a war against democracy at home” (2). Given the last sixty-odd years of historical writing on US politics and society during World War I and its aftermath, it is surprising to read that this crisis is now “forgotten.”2 To be sure, one can find “high school” (2) textbooks and curricula that skim or entirely omit Hochschild’s story of repression, oppression, and organized violence, but one could say the same of almost any period in American history.

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American Midnight introduces some lesser-known incidents and characters in a readable, interesting way, but it does not break new ground.

This problem stems in part, at least, from a somewhat narrow research strategy. The only non-printed primary sources Hochschild consults all deal with cases of rank injustice and violence toward radicals and dissenters; genuine (or even disputable) acts of terror and treason are elided, along with the question of whether, when, and how the justice system ever worked to vindicate civil rights. Printed primary sources consist primarily of The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, edited by Arthur S. Link; published memoirs and diaries, especially that of Wilson’s adviser Edward M. (Colonel) House; and a set of congressional hearings into efforts to block deportation of some of the victims of repression. Of course, nobody can cover everything. Considering the roles in repression of civil liberties played by such men as Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson and Attorney General Thomas W. Gregory, however, their papers at the Library of Congress should have been consulted. Unfortunately, that arch-repressor (and Gregory’s successor as attorney general), A. Mitchell Palmer, left no papers, but his biographer Stanley Coben (whom Hochschild cites) was able to work around their absence by using other manuscript collections that could have repaid direct examination.

Further research into these men’s actions and mindsets might not have altered the thrust of Hochschild’s narrative, but in seeking the present relevance of even the starkest clashes of good and evil, it is important to probe and understand the intentions and motivations of the evil parties as well as the good.

The choice of secondary works shows similar gaps. The omission of Beverly Gage’s book on the Wall Street bombing of September 1920, for example, is only slightly less surprising than Hochschild’s omission of the event itself, which can fairly be called a coda to the anti-radical rampage of the time. Equally surprising is that the only writings of Arthur Link listed in the bibliography or cited in the text are two journal contributions about Wilson’s interview with the editor Frank Cobb in early 1917, shortly before intervention in the war—the conclusions of which Hochschild dismisses without engaging Link’s arguments or evidence (21-22; more on that interview later). The fifth volume in Link’s exhaustive (but never completed) life-and-times treatment of Wilson would have been particularly helpful in putting that interview (and much else) in context. To be sure, Link’s works are many decades old, and his findings have been incorporated into many other treatments, including our own. Both of our well-known books on Wilson’s “fight for democracy abroad” are ignored, as is Thomas Knock’s celebrated work on Wilson’s internationalism; this despite the fact that one of us (Throntveit), along with Knock, both devote explicit and sustained attention to the very contradictions of domestic and foreign policy that Hochschild discusses. Again, no book can cover everything. Still, such omissions are not mere historical nits to be picked by antiquarian (or envious) pedants.


Rather, they speak to the partisan nature of the book, which represents a disturbing trend in the literature on Wilson—and, we might argue, American historical literature generally.

Hochschild’s first chapter, for instance, describes the day—April 2, 1917—when Wilson went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Germany. Instead of conveying the popular shock and anger over the Zimmerman Telegram, for instance, or attempting to describe the charnel house that had once been Europe, Hochschild relates Wilson’s badly played round of golf that day, portraying him as simultaneously aloof, self-centered, and inept. In fact, Wilson had nerves to calm and time to kill while Congress organized for the special session he had called only after several sleepless weeks resisting his entire cabinet’s urgings to demand war. In any case, as Hochschild notes, Wilson was golfing on orders from his doctor, White House physician Cary T. Grayson.

Hochschild’s tone at times is not merely critical but disdainful of Wilson—and dismissive of those observers, contemporary or scholarly, who take him more seriously. One example is the book’s treatment of the days and hours before Wilson asked Congress to declare war against Germany. “Wilson,” writes Hochschild, “was agonized about the decision he faced, his admirers are fond of saying” (21, emphasis added). He then relates the aforementioned interview with Cobb, editor of the New York World, which Link placed in March 1917. “As [Wilson] finished writing his speech, the story goes, he sent for a trusted friend to whom he could bare his soul,” whereupon “Wilson brilliantly foresaw the years ahead”—a future including the brutal intolerance that Hochschild describes (21, emphasis added). As Link himself argued, Cobb was likely wrong about the timing of his interview, and Hochschild is correct to point out that Wilson had not yet written the exact speech he eventually delivered to Congress. Yet one need not be an “admirer” of Wilson, or even credit Cobb’s interview, to argue that Wilson was agonized by the decision he faced and afraid of the consequences of war. His agony, fear, and weeks-long effort to organize his thoughts on the subject are plainly printed in The Papers of Woodrow Wilson. On March 17, 1917, for instance, Wilson called on Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels and implored him to do everything possible to protect US shipping and thereby stifle calls for war, which he “still hoped to avoid.” Three days later, when Burleson insisted that the American people demanded war, Wilson responded: “I do not care for popular demand. I want to do right, whether popular or not,” and left the meeting “solemn, very sad.” Finally, discussing the possibility of war with House less than one week before addressing Congress, Wilson went so far as to state that he “did not believe he was fitted for the presidency under such conditions.”

Hochschild’s negative view of Wilson is problematic because it means that there is little effort in American Midnight to understand the past on its own terms, to probe the reasons why people did what they did in their own time, and to foster historical thinking that is nuanced and critical rather than analogical and moralistic. The injunction to make such efforts is not a call to embrace relativism or abdicate moral judgment. It is rather a call to render judgment on historical actors in the context of their recorded thoughts, immediate circumstances, and overarching social, cultural, and institutional environment. For this book, the central questions are: Why did the egregious violations of liberty and human decency Hochschild describes occur at this time, during World War I and under Wilson’s administration? Why did they take the particular forms they did? Why did they stop? And was there truly no light amid the darkness of Wilson’s administration—not one illuminating effort to learn from, or bright legacy to build on?

Hochschild does not address these questions, or pose them. “Aftermath,” the book’s last chapter, mainly explores what happened to the book’s major characters in later years. The only discussion of the question of causation is on the next-to-last two pages, when he talks about “the forces that had blighted America...: rage against immigrants and refugees, racism, Red-baiting, fear of subversive ideas in schools, and much..."
more. . . .” Such forces “have long been with us,” Hochschild notes, as have figures willing to exploit them—especially with “dog-whistle appeals on the issue of race” (356-357).

This analysis does little to explain the events of the years under study; after all, as Hochschild states, racism, nativism, and reactionism “have long been with us.” There is, of course, real value in applying such a perspective in writing on the United States during wartime. The popular image of the next war, World War II, as the nation’s “Good War” has cast a distorting shadow over other wars before and since. The image of all Americans nobly pulling together with virtual consensus on the political objects and moral clarity of the conflict has been taken to represent the norm in the way Americans fight wars, so that anything short of such presumably clear and common purpose is viewed as politically illegitimate, culturally “un-American,” or both. How accurately that presumption describes the years from 1941 to 1945 is open to debate, but in this context it is well to remember that the twentieth century’s worst violation of American civil liberties, the internment of Japanese Americans, occurred then—with official sanction from the highest levels. Indeed, any genuinely curious study of US wars reveals that internal debate, widespread dissent, and violation of civil liberties are much closer to the norm than consensus is.12

In that regard, the rampages of World War I were to be expected—and were expected, by the very man who took the nation into that war. “Once lead this people into war,” Wilson predicted, “and they’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance.”13 Granted, that prediction (or at least that specific formulation of it) came in Wilson’s contested interview with Cobb. Authentic or not, however (and we believe it is), the decision to include such a prominent account of Wilson’s awareness of war’s domestic dangers only raises more pointedly the questions that Wilson scholars should be asking. Was Wilson generally supportive of the civil liberties violations the book so exhaustively details? If not, what circumstances led him to permit them or prevented him from stopping them? In short, what was Wilson thinking, and what is the best way to find out?

Frustratingly, Hochschild’s book never addresses these questions directly. Engagement with our own writings and those of others would have complicated the ever-proliferating pop-history portrayals of Wilson as history’s most racist, nativist, and hypocritical US president.14 Instead, Wilson is subjected here to sniping, innuendo, and misrepresentation. Looking back at the president’s pre-intervention efforts to mediate the war, for example, Hochschild sees him acting “as if the United States, and he himself, were morally superior to the squabbling countries of the Old World,” and “seeming to speak from a lofty perch above the great conflict in Europe” when he offered them a “peace without victory” (20). This judgement is belied by the sources. Wilson opened his Peace without Victory speech by crediting the peoples of Europe themselves for recognizing the need to replace balances of power with a universal “concert of power,” and stated more than once thereafter that he was not trying to dictate peace terms, but only to explain the sort of peace that the United States and other aspiring democracies could invest in sustaining. Later, in rallying Congress and the nation to war, Wilson made clear that the United States sought merely “the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion,” and would intervene “as but one of the champions of the rights of

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14 See Throntveit, Power without Victory, especially chapters 3 and 9. See also Cooper, Jr., Woodrow Wilson: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 2009); and Knock, To End All Wars.
mankind.” As for the fears the president aired to Cobb, Hochschild does not discuss Link’s reconstruction of the event and the longstanding character of those fears, and also claims that when the account of the interview was published, “neither Cobb nor Wilson was able to confirm it, because they were both dead” (22). In fact, Wilson was alive, and wrote a brief tribute to Cobb that was printed in the book containing the interview:  

The tone and pattern of the first and last chapters pervade the rest of the book. Throughout, there are repeated references to Wilson’s supposed aloofness as a politician, with the implication that he was seldom interested in the actual workings and problems of his administration or in any reality that challenged his theoretical constructs and solutions. To be sure, Wilson’s domestic record was—and always will be—marred by two moral and political failures, both of which could be viewed as sins of omission (in the strong sense of culpable negligence) rather than commission: his tolerance of segregation in the federal government, and his woefully inadequate response to the official and popular repression and violence that Hochschild chronicles. To attribute those failures simply to Wilson’s supposed aloofness, however, is to ignore the record and to foreclose cultural, structural, and contingent historical explanations of Wilson’s actions that, to our mind, are far more persuasive and edifying.

Wilson was indeed aloof from the experiences and suffering of African Americans, for instance, but he was not aloof from many of the policies that affected their lives. He believed (wrongly but sincerely) that his first-term legislative program would uplift all Americans—including Black Americans—and knew that his program depended on the votes of Southern Democrats. This knowledge, combined with his reflexively racist (and, among whites of all sections, supremely typical) prioritization of white people’s perspectives and voices, made him highly susceptible to arguments that both white and Black federal employees craved separation—arguments he should have rejected as incompatible with his own psychological, political, and social theories, but did not, because his racism perverted his thinking. At the same time, however, Wilson repeatedly drew the ire of ideological racists in Congress (and elsewhere) for blocking segregationist legislation for the District of Columbia, and for appointing African Americans to federal positions supervisory of whites.

Our point is not to defend Wilson’s record on race, or to pretend that we can perfectly describe his political phrenology. It is merely to argue that the book’s emphasis on Wilson’s aloofness flattens the latter’s character. Could the man who oversaw the biggest legislative program of progressive reform thus far in the nation’s history—including the first graduated income and inheritance taxes, credit and cash aid to farmers, an eight-hour law for railroad workers, a ban on child labor (later struck down by the Supreme Court), the nomination and hotly contested confirmation of the first Jewish American Supreme Court Justice (Louis D. Brandeis), and the creation of the Federal Reserve, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Federal Tariff Commission—really have been the distant, detached character Hochschild portrays? The documentary record, including Wilson’s public utterances, intimate correspondence, and private interactions with legislators, advisors, and constituents—all available in Link’s collection—explodes the notion.

Nor did Wilson grow more detached or conservative after the country entered the war. Take the issue of woman suffrage. Moved by the home-front and battlefield contributions of women and encouraged by his suffragist daughters, Wilson lobbied Congress tirelessly to get the Nineteenth Amendment passed in 1919.

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then worked on governors and state legislatures to secure ratification. Was it fair that women needed to earn full citizenship, and their president’s support for it, through wartime service? No. Did it matter that Wilson paid mind to women’s claims and actions, that his mind was changeable, and that he used the power of his office to change the minds of others? Yes.

Regarding Wilson’s supposed aloofness to wartime violations of civil rights such as free speech and free assembly, Hochschild’s argument is on firmer, but still uncertain ground. Wilson occasionally questioned Burleson’s choices to suspend the mailing privileges of left-wing and other suspect periodicals but, as Hochschild points out, he rarely followed through on those inquiries. On the other hand, aggressive prosecutions of radical organizations, particularly the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), did bother Wilson, and in October 1918 he finally ordered Gregory to curtail them. What explains this irregular pattern? Several sources could have helped Hochschild answer. Wilson’s writings and papers—dating from his Princeton presidency, New Jersey Governorship, and US presidency—reveal a penchant for deferring to lieutenants in their areas of responsibility and expertise, so long as overall, collectively vetted objectives were (in his view) being served. Meanwhile, the papers of Wilson, Burleson, and several members of Congress whose collections are also preserved at the Library of Congress reveal Wilson’s respect for Burleson as a political operative who had been instrumental in passing pro-labor, pro-consumer, and franchise-expanding legislation. Finally, Wilson was under very real pressure to keep the industries that were arming, transporting, clothing, and feeding millions of US soldiers running smoothly, while also living up to his pledge to ensure that workers shared in the government’s wartime largesse. All these factors, at least potentially, make Wilson’s greater sympathy for discontented workers than for critical editors or office seekers (as well his discomfort with and frequent flight from situations in which those roles were blurred) easier to understand. Regardless of whether such factors exculpate Wilson or excuse his actions, they might have aided Hochschild’s analysis.

Wilson’s record on race during wartime receives similarly incomplete treatment in American Midnight. Hochschild rightly condemns Wilson for not speaking or acting forcefully against the racist violence sparked by white fear of armed and uniformed African Americans and the demands of Black communities across the country for a democracy worthy of the name. At the same time, readers learn nothing of Wilson’s private campaign to discourage movie houses from screening D. W. Griffith’s blatantly white-supremacist Birth of a Nation, or even of his public (and widely publicized) rebuke of communities across the United States for organizing and tolerating lynchings. Were these the acts of a heroic racial democrat? No; they were wholly inadequate to the crises facing African Americans. Given the even lower bar Wilson set for himself before intervention, however, it is hard (for us) to read Wilson’s record on race as evidence that the war simply drained all the progressive juices out of him, much less that he saw it as an opportunity to inflame nativism, succor reactionary capitalism, and further entrench white supremacy. To be sure, Hochschild does not explicitly endorse the latter argument. But Hochschild does frame his narrative with the claim, at the end of the “Prologue,” that Wilson “presided over the greatest assault on American civil liberties in the last century and a half,” that “he showed few regrets,” and that it is imperative to “start” the coming story “with him, on the day this dark era began” (12). In short, Wilson is to blame for what followed.

18 Wilson to Gregory, 7 October 1918, PWW 51:257.
19 While it is true that Birth of a Nation was screened at the White House, the documentary record makes clear that Wilson was unaware of the film’s content and message beforehand; indeed, Thomas W. Dixon—whose 1905 novel The Clansman inspired the film, and who worked with Wilson’s secretary to arrange the screening—insisted that Wilson be kept in the dark, and told only that he was to be introduced to a revolutionary new mode of mass communication. It was not until 1937 that Wilson was reported (without attribution) to have told Dixon: “It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true” (See Milton MacKay, “The Birth of a Nation,” Scribner’s Magazine, November 1937, 69). Dixon himself did not record the quotation in his memoirs. In an interview of 23 June 1977, Marjorie Brown King, the only surviving person to have attended the East Room showing, told the editor of the Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Arthur S. Link, that “Wilson seemed lost in thought during the showing, and that he walked out of the room without saying a word when the movie was over.” Throntweit, Power without Victory, 98; Milton MacKay, “The Birth of a Nation,” Scribner’s Magazine, November 1937, 69; Link et al., Papers of Woodrow Wilson 32:267 n1.
It bears repeating that we do not seek to rehabilitate Woodrow Wilson’s record on race or civil liberties. We do, however, think it necessary to point out that these subjects could have been addressed without encouraging the current trend toward blaming Wilson for everything that enlightened Americans of today find wrong and repugnant in his era. Wilson deserves criticism for many of his actions and blame for much of what happened during his presidency. Still, it is imperative to understand the past on its own terms.

In emphasizing Wilson’s simultaneous aloofness from and responsibility for the violations detailed in the book, Hochschild’s narrative muddies critically important questions of causation. Why did these things happen? Why at this time? Why did they end? The answer here—that a cauldron of prejudice and reaction seethed just below the surface of society, waiting for someone like Wilson to turn up the heat and blow off the top—goes only partway toward answering the first two questions. Certainly, a lot of what is now called “polarization” abounded, and the sweeping success of Wilson’s progressive reform agenda had sparked conservative backlash and partisan realignment. Meanwhile, the preceding half-century of massive immigration, combined with the Great Migration of Blacks out of the South to Northern cities, had roiled sentiments of resentment, intolerance, and fear. Those sentiments needed only a small battery of well-placed demagogues to exploit them and set off an explosion—and as Hochschild chronicles, such people eagerly stepped forward, supported by an alarming number of conservative, business, and nativist groups who knowingly fomented the rampages of the war years and after.

Yet some of the most zealous persecutors of the left were themselves considered of the left in their day, at least before 1917. This included many of the state and local politicians and prosecutors who clambered aboard the anti-radical bandwagon, as well as fiery patrioteers in Congress like US Senator Miles Poindexter of Washington (the only sitting senator to have joined Theodore Roosevelt’s 1912 Progressive Party). Then there was Palmer, whom Hochschild calls (with some exaggeration), “the most progressive member of Wilson’s cabinet” (232). A Pennsylvania Quaker, Palmer had declined appointment as secretary of war. In Congress he was classed among the advanced progressives of his party, known for maintaining strong ties with organized labor in his home state. Previous to joining Wilson’s cabinet, Palmer expressed doubts about the government’s wartime attacks on radicals and unions, and at the end of the conflict he endorsed amnesty for several political prisoners. Why he mounted the postwar anti-radical crusade that made him one of history’s most notorious Red Hunters has long puzzled historians. A bomb set by an anarchist on his doorstep in June 1919, while he was at home with his wife and daughter, likely had something to do with it. Bolshevik-led uprisings in Bavaria and Hungary, raising the specter of world-wide revolution along the brutal lines witnessed in Russia, likely factored as well. Finally, Palmer hatched presidential ambitions and plunged into the race for the 1920 Democratic nomination. Still, Palmer’s distinct transformation from pacifistic progressive to “Fighting Quaker” and self-styled scourge of left-wing traitors deserves more attention than it receives in the book.20

The importance of such attention becomes apparent when the seeming inevitability of the era’s widespread hysteria and repression is subjected to scrutiny. Hochschild’s focus on the bad actors and bad deeds of the day creates the misleading impression that the majority of Americans were itching for a fight against any sort of foreigner and simply went mad with bloodlust when the opportunity came. It overlooks the complicated state of public opinion in the spring of 1917, when every available indicator registered, in aggregate, the same sort of confusion and uncertainty that Wilson was feeling about war. It also ignores the question of why all this hysteria neither ended with the 1918 Armistice nor tapered off over several months or years, but instead ceased rather abruptly in 1920, in the wake of the infamous “Palmer Raids.” By late spring of 1920, newspaper editors and community gatherings across the country were not only condemning the raids but also mocking Palmer’s failed predictions of a coordinated series of Bolshevik-led bombings and uprisings, earning

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20 See Coben, Palmer, esp. viii and 265-67, on Palmer’s paradoxically liberal and demagogic leanings and the importance (in Coben’s estimation) of public and congressional pressure in pushing him toward Red-baiting.

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him a new sobriquet: the “Fighting Faker.”21 None of this is to deny that ‘toxic currents’ flowed through American society during the progressive era, or that the strains of war exacerbated their poisonous effects. It is merely to point out that abstract concepts such as Systemic Toxicity and Rapid-Onset War Fever serve as poor explanations (and only highly imperfect classifications) for historical events.

This brings us to the second consequence of the book’s portrayal of Wilson and the presentism it feeds. For in conjuring an image of a nation both entirely corrupted by war and sweeping its president up in the madness, Hochschild ignores the one thing that all available indicators suggest most Americans, along with Wilson himself, agreed on: the idea that the United States was—or at least should be—fighting a war against war. This, to our mind, is the greatest shortcoming of American Midnight: its shallow treatment of Wilson’s internationalist thinking and policies and its cursory review of the peace conference and League Fight (which, by the way, captivated far more Americans between the summer of 1919 and the spring of 1920 than the Red Scare did). Together, these two narrative choices reinforce the widely accepted but rarely substantiated argument that Wilson’s internationalist policy—the crux of which was US membership in a powerful League of Nations with direct influence over members’ foreign policies—was either ridiculous or nefarious, and that the American people would never have stood for it in any case.

Take Chapter 9, “The Water Cure,” where Hochschild skims the Fourteen Points address of January 8, 1918. Wilson’s most important public statement of US aims for the war and the peace to follow receives a total of twenty-one words of direct quotation. In the remaining page-and-a-half of text, Hochschild argues that Wilson, in calling for “free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims,” never imagined such a principle to apply to nonwhite peoples, and even cites US possession of the Philippines as an example (136). In fact, Wilson began pushing for Philippine independence long before intervening in World War I, and continued to do so until the end of his presidency. Furthermore, it was the British, French, Italian, and South African delegations to the Peace Conference who insisted on a postwar settlement preserving their African, Asian, and Oceanian colonies, and it was Wilson who insisted (successfully) that such colonies be treated under international law as mandates of the League of Nations, to which native populations could appeal for redress in cases of injustice and to which fell the task of determining the schedule of the territory’s full independence. Hochschild also states that Wilson “ignored the fact that socialists and peace activists had long voiced many of [the] same aims” he endorsed in his speech (137). To the contrary, Wilson’s awareness of and engagement with socialists and peace activists, and his intentional effort to incorporate their ideas and speak to their concerns in his address, have been exhaustively documented and discussed by other scholars.22 Indeed, in the speech itself Wilson successively credited the Bolshevik negotiators at Brest-Litovsk, “the Russian people,” “every public man,” and “all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists” with inspiring his program.23

The book’s accounts of Wilson’s vision for a League of Nations, his efforts to realize it, and the resulting international and domestic response are equally questionable. Contrary to Hochschild’s claim (136), Wilson was not a late convert to the League idea, but had first endorsed it publicly on May 27, 1916—making him the first world leader we know of to do so.24 Nor did Wilson think his commitment to the League idea made him, as Hochschild puts it, the conduit of a “superior moral force” that “would help Europe put an end forever to its centuries of bloodshed” (205-206), much less “Another Savior Come to Earth” (Hochschild’s title for Chapter 14). Wilson’s public and private papers reveal his full awareness that no peace settlement could guarantee an end to war; he simply believed that minimizing war’s occurrence, duration, and impact was an end worth pursuing, and that an international forum for building understanding, arbitrating disputes, and determining collective responses to aggression was a means worth trying. That belief, with its global

22 The most important work in this vein is Knoeck, To End All Wars.
23 Woodrow Wilson, address to a joint session of Congress, 8 January 1918, PFW 45:534, 535, 536, 538.
24 Wilson, address in Washington to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916, PFW 37:113-117.
resonance, remains unexplored. While nodding to Wilson’s popularity among Europe’s masses (204), Hochschild invokes the opinions of French Premier Georges Clemenceau (who feared Wilson as a friend of the German people and dismantler of France’s empire) and British economist John Maynard Keynes (who thought the world’s problems could be solved in a Cambridge economics seminar) to frame his discussion of Wilson’s vision and ideas for a postwar order. The contempt of these two highly biased witnesses tinges the analysis of Wilson’s preparation for and performance at the Paris Peace Conference, leaving readers with a caricature of Wilson as both the vain and ignorant catspaw of Europe’s old hands and somehow responsible for all the disappointments of the settlement.

Despite its flaws, American Midnight tells many important stories in an engaging and frequently beautiful style. Unfortunately, in its failure to take Wilson seriously, it reinforces a decades-long trend in academic and popular literature that has gravely impoverished Americans’ moral and political imaginations when it comes to their nation’s global role and responsibilities. It is true that Wilson was racist. It is true that Wilson presided over egregious violations of civil liberties. And it is true that Wilson’s vision for a less violent and more democratic world was not fully realized after World War I, or at any time since. But consideration of other truths would have challenged his readers and injected a potent mixture of humility, boldness, realism, and hope into the United States’ public discourse on international affairs.

Wilson, for instance, never sought or promised a world rearranged into ethnically “self-determined,” territorially independent polities. Instead, Wilson envisioned a world of self-governing polities, free yet united through a League run on the principles of “common counsel” undergirding constitutional federations like the United States. In the cases of certain frequently persecuted peoples whose lands had long been imperial battlegrounds, notably the Poles, he considered an immediate guarantee of statehood crucial for world peace. In other cases—especially but not exclusively in the global South—Allied resistance and Wilson’s own prejudices made full self-government a distant goal. Yet in Wilson’s mind, all arrangements were subject to revision by the League, whose (majority non-European) membership could correct the injustices sure to plague any settlement of so complex a conflict.25

We cannot here explain all the ways the League’s structure reflected this vision, and thereby exceeded its successor, the United Nations, in terms of both democracy and efficiency. But take voting as an example.26 Wilson consistently pushed for majority decision-making in both the executive Council and full Assembly, against British and French insistence on unanimity—that is, against unilateral national vetoes over internationally negotiated initiatives. Again, after Senate nationalists forced him to push for a clause explicitly identifying unanimity as the general rule, Wilson helped secure means to circumvent it in specific but crucial cases. These permitted any member to request League-sponsored investigation of situations “dangerous to the peace of the world,” and excluded interested parties—even permanent Council members like the United States—from voting on final recommendations.27

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26 The following paragraph is based on Cromwell A. Riches, The Unanimity Rule and the League of Nations (Baltimore, 1933), chapter 1; and David Hunter Miller, The Drafting of the Covenant, 2 vols. (New York, 1928).
27 The Covenant's final Article 5, for instance, provided that all procedural matters, including appointment of committees to investigate problems, be decided by majority vote in both the Executive Council and the Assembly. Article 11 provided that any League member could, at any time, request a vote for such an investigation. Article 15 provided that interested parties be excluded from voting on Council reports; that the Council’s failure to reach unanimity in resolving a dispute left member states in control over their individual responses; that parties to a dispute could request its referral by the Council to the Assembly; and that Assembly reports in such cases would be binding if approved by a majority of that body and by the full Council, exclusive of interested parties. The full text of the Covenant can be viewed and downloaded at https://www.ungeneva.org/en/about/league-of-nations/covenant.
This was no perfect democracy. Still, it was Wilson’s failure to correct those who conflated it with far less
deliberative arrangements that caused the widespread disappointment that most historians emphasize.28
Hammering out the details in Paris, Wilson neglected the American public and press. When he returned,
critics portrayed the League’s Article 10—which pledged to maintain the territorial integrity of members
against aggression—as binding American forces to quash any revolt against oppressive rule anywhere in
the world. To control the damage, he embarked on a grueling speaking tour, explaining that the Covenant did not
make Americans the foot soldiers of European empires, but did demand a commitment to resist unilateral force
as a tool of political change. Meanwhile, Senate nationalism, led by Henry Cabot Lodge, demanded multiple
reservations explicitly limiting American obligations to participate in such resistance. These were coldly
calculated to reduce Wilson’s options to two: accept what he deemed dishonorable terms of membership; or
refuse them, and exchange the stately role of compromiser for the tawdry role of defiant partisan.

At this crucial moment, Wilson suffered a massive, paralytic stroke. A healthy Wilson might eventually have
accepted even highly qualified League membership, hoping that the relationship would evolve with the
League itself. But after his stroke, Wilson proved incapable of such strategic thought. Before the final Senate
vote in March 1920, he ignored the inclinations of most Senate Democrats and ordered them to reject
membership on the nationalists’ terms. Many defied him; a handful more would have secured America’s place
in the League.

Now, the fact that nearly two thirds of Senators supported some form of League membership tells us nothing
about the American people. And in a democracy, even a highly imperfect one like the United States, what the
people think does ultimately matter. So how do we tell if League membership would have mattered? Was it
important enough, to enough Americans, to allow for meaningful international cooperation? Was it important
even to include in a book purporting to illuminate the present through a searching look at the past? We
think it was.

Between the spring of 1919 and the spring of 1920, an astounding number and range of citizens expressed
support for League membership. It was endorsed by the Federal Council of Churches, representing 150,000
Protestant congregations and perhaps 30 million people. They were joined by the Union of American Hebrew
Congregations and the National Catholic War Council, an umbrella group representing both the Catholic
hierarchy and laity. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs, National Council of Women, Woman’s
Christian Temperance Union, and the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association all resolved,
repeatedly, in favor of membership.29 The leaders of the Red Cross and YMCA also supported League

28 This “clay-footed idol” school of writing on Wilson boasts several illustrious alums. See, inter alia, John
Maynard Keynes, The Economic Consequences of the Peace (London: Macmillan, 1919); Charles Beard, The Idea of National
Interest (New York: Macmillan, 1934); E. H. Carr, The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of
International Relations (London: Macmillan, 1940); Thomas A. Bailey, Wilson and the Peacemakers (New York: Macmillan,
1947); George F. Kennan, American Diplomacy, 1900–1950 (Chicag: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Hans J.
Morgenthau, In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy (New York: Knopf, 1951);
Robert E. Osgood, Ideas and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Roland N. Stromberg, Collective Security and American Foreign Policy: From the
League of Nations to NATO (New York: Praeger, 1963); Lloyd E. Ambrosius, Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy
in American Foreign Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and 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).
29 General Federation Magazine 18 (December 1919), 1; New York Tribune, 14 January 1920, 1-2; Handbook of the
National American Woman Suffrage Association and Proceedings of the Jubilee Convention (New York, 1919), 249; Proceedings of the
Fourth Annual Convention of the National League of Women Voters, Des Moines, Iowa, April 9th to 14th, 1923 (Washington, DC:
National League of Women Voters, 1923), 56-58, 74, 83.
Constitution

states legions, see the New York Commerce for t

States by the middle of 1921.

June 1919, 13. Approx. 1,300 chambers of commerce were affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce of the United

ibid

Chiefs Repudiate All Labor Radicals,”

1919 issues of the

Chicago Daily Tribune

is

Finally, w

impossible to prevent the worst from arising.

Meanwhile, w

the Versailles Treaty. In short, US membership would have facilitated more coordinated responses to conflicts in

1920s, better preparing the international community to tackle the apocalyptic crises of the 1930s, and

perhaps preventing the worst from arising. Meanwhile, whether or not a second world war would have come,

record of constructive cooperation between America and Europe would still have made a difference—by

providing plausible normative and institutional alternatives to the domineering model of global leadership

America adopted after 1945.

Finally, the United States’ century-old, stillborn experiment in internationalist politics suggests a lesson that

everyone in our politically polarized and civicly discouraged nation must take to heart: namely, that the past

is most relevant to the present when taken on its own terms. Woodrow Wilson was a man prone to racist

30 “Service Badges and Certificates are Conferred,” The Red Cross Bulletin 3 (13 January 1919), 5; “World Congress to Coordinate Red Cross Work,” ibid. (3 March 1919), 8; “Mr. Davison Discusses Red Cross League,” ibid. (2 June 1919), 1-2. ARC membership numbers are taken from the official reports printed in the 3 March and 20 October 1919 issues of the Bulletin.


33 On the Chamber’s promotional efforts, see Chicago Daily Tribune, 5 February 1919, 2; and New York Times, 30 June 1919, 13. Approx. 1,300 chambers of commerce were affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce of the United States by the middle of 1921. Annual Report of the Director of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce to the Secretary of Commerce for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1921 (Washington: G.P.O., 1921), 50.


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thinking, guilty of imperialist incursions, and facing a world in which nearly every rival power had exhausted itself. Yet that same man persuaded himself to eschew global dominance and instead base the nation’s entire foreign policy on the idea that no person or group of people is an island, and any freedoms enjoyed by one depend, ultimately, on the forbearance of others. Meanwhile, the American people were morally ravaged by the same cultural toxins as Wilson, not to mention highly suspicious of the Old World and fiercely proud of their political independence. Yet that same people came, in the majority, to approve their nation’s membership in the “community of power” that Wilson envisioned: one that depended, like their national community, on tolerant, constructive deliberation, on submission of parochial perspectives and interests to collective scrutiny and authority, and on consistent application of legal, economic, and if necessary forceful means to preserve the system’s integrity. Today, we inhabit a world that decades of jealously guarding the United States’ freedom of action has failed to make safe, either for democracy or against imperialist aggression, nuclear proliferation, global pandemics, or climate change. It seems that, despite their benighted state, millions of Americans in Wilson’s day saw something many of us are missing.

This is not to say that those people, including Wilson, were “the good guys” of the period. They were simply thinking people, capable of reflecting on their past experience and present situation, and changing their minds. Today, when it is tempting for scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike to yield to the inertia of domestic and international affairs or howl in the face of them, we should remind ourselves of the alternative traditions, practices, and ideals that history reveals. And whatever we think of them, we should ask ourselves where they came from, where they went, and what we can learn from them. That is why we two curmudgeonly historians choose to harp on certain fundamental rules of the discipline as we understand it, when it would be easier simply to praise one of its most popular practitioners. Historical writing is always informed by present concerns. Current crises of racial, ethnic, and gender injustice, economic inequality, and deteriorating democratic norms and institutions can—we might even argue must—influence the questions we ask of our past. But historians should not allow their views of such present crises to constrict too narrowly what they look for, attend to, learn from, and conclude about the past. For history—at least as we see it—is most valuable when it challenges rather than confirms what we wish, or others want us, to think.


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