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**Daniel Larsen. "Abandoning Democracy: Woodrow Wilson and Promoting German Democracy, 1918-1919."** *Diplomatic History* 37:3 (June 2013): 476-508. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht016.  
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This is an interesting paper on an important topic. It is also well written and the author demonstrates a solid command of both primary and secondary sources. Daniel Larsen argues that in late 1918, after the signing of the armistice ending the fighting with Germany, President Wilson "did not pursue in any meaningful way a policy to promote democracy in Germany" (477). Historians have either wrongly portrayed the president as an enthusiast for promoting democracy around the globe, including in defeated Germany, or they have largely ignored this aspect of Wilson's German policy. Larsen concedes that Wilson did clearly want the Germans to alter their autocratic form of government in the pre-armistice notes he exchanged with them. But, he argues, the President justified this action on the narrow ground of removing a demonstrated international security threat and he was vague about how exactly the Germans should reform their institutions. Once the Kaiser was gone and the armistice signed, Wilson essentially "left German democrats to fend for themselves" (477). Indeed, details Larsen, Wilson ignored officials such as Ellis Loring Dresel, a staff member of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace sent to investigate conditions in Germany in early 1919, who urged him to encourage Germany's efforts at democracy.

Larsen attributes Wilson's "policy of nonengagement with the newly republican Germany" to two main factors (477). First, by his second term in office, Wilson "developed a significant ideological commitment to noninterference in the internal political affairs of other nations" (480). Larsen sees evidence for this commitment in Wilson's policy toward Bolshevik Russia, arguing that most recent scholars interpret Wilson's intervention in revolutionary Russia as a reluctant endeavor pursued for reasons that had little to do with promoting democracy. In addition, Wilson distrusted the "democratic bona fides" not only of Germany's provisional government, but also of all of the German people (480). He was alarmed in particular by the German Reichstag's ratification of the March 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which appeared to reveal that Germany's people hungered for conquest as much as their autocratic leaders.

Reports of German duplicity during the armistice negotiations did nothing to reassure Wilson of the character of the German people or their new political representatives. By December 1918 he had decided that Germany had to “pass through a probationary period. . . . because it must still be proved that the German people have a responsible, decent government” (498).

As Larsen notes in his conclusion, his findings about Wilson’s failure to promote democracy in Germany in 1918-1919 raise questions about the President’s policy toward “democratic interventionism” throughout his presidency (507). Most historians view Wilson’s Latin American interventions in his first term as examples of Wilson trying to promote democracy, but Larsen wonders if this interpretation might need to be re-examined. In any case, Larsen asserts that historians should stop conceptualizing “Wilsonianism” as including a link between self-determination and democracy promotion. For Wilson, the two ideas were not “complementary – or even necessarily compatible” (508). He acted to destroy threatening autocracies, but he believed that “self-determination meant finding democracy on one’s own” (508).

Hopefully, Larsen’s article will stimulate scholars to re-examine not only Wilson’s attitudes toward promoting democracy abroad but also the broader issue of how American leaders have viewed the relationship between democracy and peace. Certainly during World War I their understanding of this issue was complicated and contradictory. Wilson himself frequently suggested that he thought democracies were more peaceful than autocracies, but, on the other hand, prior to 1917 he was willing to allow autocratic Germany into a peace league. Similarly, conservatives such as Elihu Root deplored what they saw as the over-excitability, belligerent nature of ordinary people, but simultaneously identified autocratic rulers as the likeliest threats to law and order in the world. Even peace progressives on the left, who were usually the most vehement in asserting a link between democracy and peace, implied that the masses could easily be whipped up by ‘war scares’ and appeals to patriotism into supporting aggressive imperialism abroad.<sup>1</sup> How – or if – these paradoxical views were worked out during the war and after remains to be seen, as does their relationship with the policy of democracy promotion in twentieth-century American foreign policy.

**Ross A. Kennedy** is the author of *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America’s Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009) and the editor of *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> For some discussion of these views see 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), 7–24.