

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIII-41

**Philip Zelikow.** *The Road Less Traveled: The Secret Battle to End the Great War, 1916-1917.* New York: Public Affairs, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-5417-5095-1 (hardcover, \$30.00).

13 June 2022 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT23-41>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editors: Robert Jervis and Diane Labrosse

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INTRODUCTION BY JOHN MILTON COOPER, JR., UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON,  
EMERITUS

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With this forum we welcome Philip Zelikow to the fraternity/sorority of historians of the First World War. In this club, we greet newcomers in ways that range from warm praise to hard-hitting criticism. Both those kinds of greetings are on display in this Roundtable.

Seven historians from around the world are represented here. All have worked in the period and on events covered in *The Road Less Traveled: The Secret Battle to End the Great War, 1916-1917*. The subtitle indicates the book's subject, but the title deserves some elucidation. Many will recognize it as the title of a poem by Robert Frost. Zelikow makes a nice contribution by noting that Frost sent a draft of the poem to his friend Edward Thomas, whom he had met while living in England from 1912 to 1915. In 1915, Thomas found himself torn between accepting Frost's invitation to come to America and joining the British army to fight on the Western Front. Thomas chose to answer the call to arms, and he was killed in action in France five days after the United States entered the war. Zelikow uses that story not just to supply a poignant title but also to put a human face on the stakes of a negotiated peace that might have stopped the fighting over a year and a half before the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

The historians reviewing this book bring different perspectives to their reviews, which appear in alphabetical order, and, coincidentally, express for the most part ascending degrees of criticism. Kathleen Burk finds the book a "totally convincing historical narrative" and apologizes for not raising criticisms. Roger Chickering likewise praises it for broadening understanding of these events, but, concentrating on his field of German history, he states at the outset that it did not change his mind about what transpired in that country. Chickering questions whether the principal German advocate of negotiations, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, wielded as much influence in the top tier of the Kaiser's government as Zelikow suggests. Chickering emphasizes the obstacles in Bethmann Hollweg's path, from the military high command and from the Reichstag and public opinion. He also sees the German ambassador in Washington, Johann von Bernstorff, in a much less kindly light than Zelikow does.

Gabriela Frei likes the sharp analyses of diplomatic dealings, but she thinks that Zelikow may be too hard on President Woodrow Wilson. T. G. Otte takes the opposite view. He agrees with Zelikow's characterization of Wilson as a diplomatic failure, and he contrasts this president's actions with those of his predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, in mediating the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Otte also praises Zelikow for drawing on his experiences in diplomacy and the higher levels of government to convey a sense of how things really work. Priscilla Roberts takes a somewhat more favorable view of Wilson, but she echoes Zelikow in slamming his advisor Colonel Edward M. House for poor negotiating. In the end, she, too, agrees with Zelikow that Wilson "fumbled" in his efforts and guaranteed continuation of the war.

Finally come the two most critical reviews. The first, by Hew Strachan, also emphasizes the barriers to a negotiated peace. Those barriers arose both from internal sources, which constrained how far leaders in the belligerent nations could move toward concessions, and from inter-allied pressures. For example, Britain's financial straits and desires for peace were not the only influences on Prime Minister Lloyd George. Also, Bethmann Hollweg, whom Strachan sees Zelikow making an "honorary liberal," had other policy considerations, as did the main British advocate of negotiations, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey. Moreover, Strachan makes the point that no matter how much any of these leaders might privately have doubted the chances of military victory, they could not say so publicly, which likewise limited their freedom to pursue negotiations. Then there is the matter of the book's focus, which centers almost exclusively on the Anglo-German conflict and the Western Front, with scant attention to the Eastern sector or the Balkans and Middle East, to say nothing of the more distant theaters of the war. At the end of his review, Strachan raises the most telling point about this book when he questions whether any settlement achieved in early 1917 would have been much better or more durable than the one hammered out in 1919. True, it could have spared lives and destruction, but Zelikow claims that the course of the twentieth century would have unfolded much better. Strachan finds this claim dubious.

The final review, by John A. Thompson, concentrates on the American side of the events. He stresses that Wilson had more things on his mind than possible negotiations in Europe. The biggest one was the 1916 presidential campaign, which precluded an intense focus on the war and a lightning response to the feelers and possibilities that Zelikow faults Wilson for not maintaining. Thompson particularly faults Zelikow for ignoring Wilson's constant concern about how much domestic support he could garner for any actions toward the belligerents. He comes away unpersuaded that Wilson could have exerted sufficient influence over the belligerents to bring about the peace he prized.

If I may, permit me to step out of the moderator's chair and add to some of the points that these reviewers have raised. I think Thompson hits the nail on the head when he emphasizes the variety of concerns and pressures that confronted Wilson. For example, as hard as it may be for historians of this war to grasp, it was not the main concern in American politics. It was not the major issue in the 1916 elections; it was not even the most salient foreign policy issue. Wilson's achievement in getting the German leaders to rein in their submarines in the spring of 1916 had lifted the immediate threat of intervention. That threat was, to use today's cancer-conscious usage, "in remission," but few only a people worried about it coming back. When Democrats trumpeted their campaign cry of "He Kept Us Out Of War," they meant Mexico, not Europe. As for the president exerting economic pressure on Britain, it might be well to remember that the Federal Reserve System and Board were in their infancy, with much of their powers yet to be determined.

Zelikow makes much of Wilson's failings as a diplomatist. He raises good points about the deficiencies of the people who should have been his chief lieutenants, notably his ambassadors in London and Berlin and his secretary of state. He is correct in emphasizing the shortcoming and deviousness of Colonel House. I think the Wilson's worst failings as a diplomatist were his tolerance of and indifference toward having such unreliable people around him. Perhaps he did rely too much on himself. But, to echo Strachan's observation about how much difference a 1917 peace would have made for the future, let me ask, could a different approach by a leader with a different temperament have brought off a negotiated settlement then?

The implicit and often explicit comparison is with Roosevelt in 1905. But the circumstances were starkly different. Without denigrating the importance of the Russo-Japanese War, it was a conflict over colonial expansion in an area far removed from the cockpit of great-power rivalry. Each of the belligerents was allied to one in a pair of nations that were coming together in an entente against Germany. Roosevelt hid his diplomatic maneuvering and let his mediation be sold to the public as a disinterested act of international benevolence. Wilson faced a far more dangerous and intractable set of conditions. Perhaps his blend of measured public overtures and laying out general principles in advance of specific terms might have had a better chance of success than the old-style great-power politics that Roosevelt had previously practiced and that Zelikow faults Wilson for not following. Germany's decision to unleash the submarines impelled him to practice his kind of diplomacy and seek a non-punitive settlement, in effect his "peace without victory," in a different way. He could no longer play his cherished role of mediator, but, instead and paradoxically, he had to seek such a peace as a war leader.

So here we have our club of historians of World War One greeting this new recruit to our ranks. Praise and appreciation are on display, but the criticisms and disagreements offer better measures of how seriously we take this work and how much we think it is worth reading and pondering.

#### **Participants:**

**Philip Zelikow** is the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He has worked at all levels of American government, including in each of the five administrations from Reagan through Obama.

**John Milton Cooper, Jr.** has written about Woodrow Wilson and World War I.

**Kathleen Burk** is Professor Emerita of Modern and Contemporary History at University College London. She is the author of a number of books, including *Britain, America and the Sineus of War 1914-1918* (George Allen & Unwin, 1985), *Old World, New World: Britain and America From the Beginning* (Little, Brown, 2005), and *The Lion and the Eagle: The*

*Interaction of the British and American Empires 1783-1972* (Bloomsbury, 2018). She is currently working on a global history of wine.

**Roger Chickering** has taught at Stanford, the University of Oregon, and Georgetown University, where he was Professor of History in the BMW Center for German and European Studies. His historical scholarship has emphasized questions of war, peace, and historiography. His publications include *Imperial Germany and a World Without War* (Princeton University Press, 1975); *We Men Who Feel Most German* (Allen and Unwin, 1984); *Karl Lamprecht* (Humanities Press, 1993; revised German edition, Steiner, 2021); *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, 3d ed., 2014; German edition, Beck, 2002); and *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2007, German edition, Schöningh, 2009). He is also co-editor of the *Cambridge History of War*, vol. 4: *War in the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**Gabriela A. Frei** is Lecturer in Contemporary History and History of International Relations at the University of the Bundeswehr, Munich, and an Associate Member of the Faculty of History at the University of Oxford. She is the author of the recent book *Great Britain, International Law, and the Evolution of Maritime Strategic Thought, 1856-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Her research focuses on the role of international law in international politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with a particular interest in the global governance of the oceans and the development of the law of the sea.

**T.G. Otte** is Professor of Diplomatic History at the University of East Anglia. His most recent book is *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* (Penguin-Allen Lane, 2020).

**Priscilla Roberts** is an associate professor of business and co-director of the Asia-Pacific Business Research Centre at City University of Macau. She specializes in twentieth-century international history, focusing particularly upon transitions of power. Her recent publications include the edited collections, *Hong Kong in the Cold War* (University of Hong Kong Press, 2016); (with Odd Arne Westad), *China, Hong Kong, and the Long 1970s: Global Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022). She is working on a study of Anglo-American think tanks and China policy from the 1940s to the 1990s.

**Hew Strachan** is Wardlaw Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews and an Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, where he was Chichele Professor of the History of War 2002-15. His books include *The First World War: Vol 1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and *The First World War: A New Illustrated history* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2003)

**John A. Thompson** is an Emeritus Reader in American History and an Emeritus Fellow of St Catharine's College at the University of Cambridge. His principal research interests have been American liberalism and US foreign policy. His publications include *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), *Woodrow Wilson* (Longman, 2002), *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Cornell University Press, 2015) and numerous articles and book chapters

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 REVIEW BY KATHLEEN BURK, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON, EMERITUS
 

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On 17 August 1916, Lord Bertie, the British Ambassador to France, received the unwelcome (to him) news that the French President, Raymond Poincaré, wished to make peace as soon as possible. On 18 August, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German Chancellor, sent word to the German Ambassador to the US, Johann von Bernstorff, that Germany was happy to accept mediation by President Woodrow Wilson to begin peace negotiations amongst the belligerents. On 30 August, Prime Minister H.H. Asquith requested papers on armistice and peace terms. On 28 of September, at the War Committee meeting, General William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, turned the discussion to the issue of how to make peace. On 13 November, Lord Lansdowne, a senior figure in the Conservative and Unionist Party and a member of the Military-Finance Committee, circulated a memo to the entire Cabinet attacking the ‘fight to the finish’ argument, implicitly calling for some consideration of possible armistice and peace terms. Finally, since the beginning of 1916, according to Philip Zelikow, David Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions and in July the Secretary of State for War, had been a principal architect of the American peace option. Yet not only was there no peace, but four months later, the US joined the war. What had happened, or, rather, what had not happened? Zelikow is able to give a fuller analysis than has hitherto been published because he has paid close and unwavering attention to what he considers the central question of the book: why did the secret German peace move fail? The result is a page-turning historical police-procedural. He has done a thorough job of research in the archives and printed documents of four countries, in memoirs and biographies, and in a range of secondary sources and then, in a manner of speaking, laid the documents out on the dining-room table and began to compare them. The result is an intellectual pleasure to read.

Zelikow describes (14) the fortuitous discovery that two other historians, Daniel Larsen, and Holger Afflerbach, had also decided that there were unanswered questions about war aims and the quests for peace that had never been addressed. Usefully for Zelikow, who cites it repeatedly, in *Plotting for Peace*,<sup>1</sup> Larsen concentrates on the British side with a revealing focus on the intelligence story. What Afflerbach provides in his book, *Auf Messers Schneide*,<sup>2</sup> is the German story: he had independently noticed that “a historic opportunity to bring the First World War to an end ... and spare Europe and the world the enormous costs of the last two years of war”<sup>3</sup> had been missed. Zelikow in his turn took the opportunity to intertwine all of these stories into a totally convincing analytical narrative.

One of the most important contributions of the book is his laying-out of the German attempts to convince Wilson actually to foster peace discussions. They tried. Unfortunately, the Germans had an opponent who was able to deflect these attempts, and this was Wilson’s close adviser Edward M. House. House’s great concern was what the Allies, and especially the British, wanted to happen. Indeed, he sometimes withheld important information from Wilson when he believed that doing so aided the British. What the British wanted was to achieve a breakthrough against Germany before peace negotiations began, and House did his best to stall any negotiations. In short, he sometimes ran his own foreign policy. This delay was unknowingly facilitated by Wilson himself, who appeared to assume that he had masses of time to think about the topic of peace and the post-war world and then to write speeches setting out his ideas and proposals. It is not surprising that he did not attempt to conduct any negotiations in the two months before the November presidential election, but there appears to have been little urgency in his actions thereafter. As a result of Zelikow’s detailed research into the fragile American-German relationship, a new hero has emerged, Bethmann Hollweg. He may have been relatively low-key, he may have appeared to vacillate, but he had a firmness of purpose. He held out for the peace option against the combined influence of the military high command, who, for a year and a half, called for total war. He also held out against huge pressure for unrestricted

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Holger Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide: Wie das Deutsche Reich den Ersten Weltkrieg verlor* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide*, 291.

submarine warfare. He essentially failed, as Zelikow makes clear, due to the inadequacy of President Wilson, who gave him nothing that he could use against the military and to convince the Kaiser.

One real problem was that Wilson had little idea about how to conduct diplomacy: “In 1916-1917, Wilson failed to make peace not because he was too encumbered by ideals. He failed simply because he did not know how to do it. He was the rookie who sits down at the poker game and, dealt a hand with three kings, throws back two of them in the hope of getting better cards” (272). He could draw up an inspiring set of ideals, he could proclaim them, but he never produced a plan as to how to accomplish the goals set out in the proclamation. It took him five months from September 1916 to the last week of January 1917 to begin to construct a plan to set up peace talks – and then he was stunned and outraged when the Germans announced unrestricted submarine warfare on 31 January. In his outrage, he instructed the State Department to hand his passport to Bernstorff, the German Ambassador, thereby leaving himself with no German diplomat with the authority to negotiate on anything at all.

In this historic episode of the Great War, Wilson fell short of what was required. He seemed not to realise that there were great swathes of recent European history that he did not know, truly for him an unknown unknown. His focus had always been on the domestic scene and sometimes Mexico, not on European affairs, and he was thus unfamiliar with both men and events. He took many of his ideas from editorials written by Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly in the Progressive magazine, the *New Republic*. To give him his due, he was not well-served by his government, which did not feed him the realistic ideas he could have used or give him constructive aid in this context. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, according to the author, knew how things worked, but he was neither liked nor trusted by Wilson. Furthermore, the State Department was not necessarily the first career choice of bright young men, who tended to go into business, although there were a few notable exceptions in foreign postings. It did not help in attracting high fliers that during much of the nineteenth century, diplomats were sometimes referred to with contempt as ‘cookie-pushers.’ Sadly, Wilson’s closest advisor, House, was hardly a first-class brain, nor was he wholly dependable. He was good with people, but he also seemed to lack focus on carrying out a plan once it was decided upon. Both he and Wilson were dilatory when it was vitally important to be urgent. In short, Zelikow’s verdict on Woodrow Wilson is that “In the failure to make peace at the most opportune moment, no one failed, and failed the world, more than Woodrow Wilson. His was the most consequential diplomatic failure in the history of the United States” (271). It is difficult to disagree.<sup>4</sup>

Zelikow’s arguments are carefully laid out, nuanced and lucid. Even those who are pretty familiar with the events of World War I will be struck time and again with the new information that can be slotted in to fill the spaces left by all of our unknown - or even known - unknowns. Of course, there are areas that I would have liked to read more about. France does not take up much space; perhaps this is because seemingly France’s position was so dependent on Great Britain that it did not require the analysis attracted by Germany and Britain. The Empire does not receive a mention, but it would be surprising if it played no part in these discussions; the Government of India was undoubtedly consulted, as it was too important not to have been.<sup>5</sup> There is some wonderful additional material in his footnotes, where it thickens the argument whilst not interfering with the flow of his argument and his prose. One example is on page 105 and its footnote 48: in the text, the author quotes a comment by István Burian, the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, made to the head of the Austro-Hungarian army on 5 November, regarding preparations for a peace conference; in the footnote there is a discussion of the belief the Germans had as to how they could counter British rhetoric calling for self-determination. Another example

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<sup>4</sup> An historian who would disagree strongly is Arthur S. Link, who edited the Wilson papers, and wrote 5 volumes of a biography of Wilson, a number of other books, and rather a lot of articles. See, e.g., Arthur Link, *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson, and Other Essays* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1974) and Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> “It is worth noting that the government of India made policy in its own right, and although linked to the Cabinet via the Secretary of State for India, was not bound to refer matters to London.” Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East 1914-1971* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981 rev. edn), 12 for the quotation. In 1914, the Indian Army constituted roughly 49% of the total British Army.

is on pages 217-19 and footnote 12: in the text Bernstorff and House discuss arrangements for a peace conference, which House then presented to Wilson for his approval; in the footnote Zelikow discusses why he thinks that Wilson did not understand what he was being asked to approve. There are other examples sprinkled throughout the text, all of which are stimulating to read. His command of the material is exemplary.

In short, this is one of the very few books that I have read of which I have so few criticisms. I am glad to have read it.

## REVIEW BY ROGER CHICKERING, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

As a scholar of European history, I am grateful to Philip Zelikow for this gripping account of efforts to bring about a compromise conclusion to the Great War in 1916-1917. It is a wonderful read. I have learned a great deal about the intricate negotiations that attended these efforts, as well as about the personal tensions, rivalries, and misunderstandings that complicated developments at every turn. In addition, I found my own understanding of these events so fundamentally challenged that I have had to revisit my conclusions in light of the author's arguments.<sup>6</sup> For this provocation I am also grateful, although I have not, on the strength of this exercise, been persuaded to change my mind.

The book's thesis is arresting. In 1916-1917, President Woodrow Wilson "had the will, the means, and the power," Zelikow declares, to "bring the war to an end. The United States could have made peace and did not do it" (275-276). Instead, Wilson's actions and inaction resulted in "the most consequential diplomatic failure in the history of the United States" (271). This conclusion rests on several central assumptions. In the fall of 1916, in the wake of failed offensives in both the western and eastern theaters, all the belligerents recognized that the strategic stalemate could not be broken on the battlefield. They also confronted growing material shortages, popular war-weariness, and opposition at home. Furthermore, the British war effort approached financial exhaustion, and was increasingly dependent on American credit. Germany's exhaustion led during the summer and fall of 1916 to increasing signals that the government would welcome America's good offices in mediating a negotiated peace. Wilson was both inclined and well-situated to exploit this situation. As leader of the most powerful non-belligerent power, he had already dispatched his advisor, Edward House, to Europe several times in order to sound out the feasibility of negotiations. Wilson regarded himself as an impartial actor, and he was the foremost champion of principles that were then known as 'pacifism'—the belief that a durable peace could be secured through democratic government, collective security, international organization, arbitration, international law, and arms limitation. In addition (and in a somewhat different spirit), the American president was now in a position to pressure the British into peace negotiations by throttling their access to American credit. So, the situation invited action. "By the autumn of 1916," writes Zelikow, "the prospects for a negotiated peace were ripe" (138).

His study traces the fortunes of this scenario for peace negotiations during the fall and early winter of 1916-1917. Like Wilson's attentions, the author's interests focus on three arenas—London, Berlin, and Washington, D.C. (with excursions to New York City, where House resided). Though by no means irrelevant, developments elsewhere—in France, Italy, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey—do not figure in the story. Because I myself lack the expertise to offer more than a couple of general observations on events in the British and American capitals, I defer to other participants in this roundtable. Instead, I shall reflect a little on the German chapter.

Its central character is Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German federal chancellor, the leader of the civilian government.<sup>7</sup> In seeking to portray him as a worthy partner to Wilson in the search for a negotiated peace, Zelikow must plunge into one of the most bitter historiographical disputes of all time, in which Bethmann's ambitions and policies have been a principal bone of contention. Although most of the controversy has focused on his role in the origins of the war, the evolution of Bethmann's aims during the conflict have themselves generated a large and contentious literature, particularly after Fritz Fischer made the case that the German chancellor was the precursor to Adolf Hitler, a consistent and ruthless

<sup>6</sup> Roger Chickering, "Strategy, Politics, and the Quest for a Negotiated Peace: The German Case, 1914-1918," Holger Afflerbach, ed., *The Purpose of the First World War: War Aims and Military Strategies* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 97-115. I am not alone in these conclusions. See David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Günter Wollstein, *Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg: Letzter Erbe Bismarcks, Erstes Opfer der Dolchstoßlegende* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1990).



advocate of aggression to secure both Germany's domination of the European continent and a far-reaching colonial empire.<sup>8</sup> Fischer's opponents in this dispute, foremost among them Gerhard Ritter, rejected this characterization, portraying Bethmann instead as a moderate, well-intentioned statesman, who resisted the expansionism of the country's military leaders and radical nationalists and who pursued aims that were both limited and legitimate in a defensive war.<sup>9</sup> Zelikow's views align with Ritter's, as well as with those of Holger Afflerbach, whose recent military history of the war, *Auf Messers Schneide* (On the Razor's Edge), has likewise emphasized the moderation of the chancellor's aims, the sincerity of his efforts to reach a compromise peace in the fall of 1916, and the hopes that he placed in Wilson.<sup>10</sup>

If one can speak nowadays of a consensus on Bethmann Hollweg, it lies somewhere between the two opposing positions. He was no Hitler. He was, at fifty-nine, a seasoned Prussian bureaucrat, cautious, reserved, prone to spells of fatalism and melancholy. In the interests of conciliation, however, he was given to telling his interlocutors what he thought they wanted to hear, a tactic that preserved his flexibility but invited the impression that he was weak and his views protean. Fischer's accusations rest primarily on a document from Bethmann's office that called in September 1914, amid the euphoria that accompanied the initial success of Germany's armies, for breathtaking annexations in eastern and western Europe. In November 1914, after the failure of the German offensive in the west, Bethmann resisted pressure from the army's chief of staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, to negotiate peace with Russia in order to free German forces to concentrate in the west. The chancellor's reasoning was that concessions to Russia would be politically damaging at home, where popular expectations were already riveted to a *Siegespreis*, extensive territorial annexations that would represent the 'prize' for Germany's victory and the reward for the country's sacrifices.

By 1916, Bethmann's expectations had sobered. Prospects for military victory seemed remote at best after the German failure at Verdun, the massive British offensive at the Somme, and then the entry of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente. By this time, shortages of manpower and material resources had also constricted war production; food was comprehensively rationed.<sup>11</sup> In these circumstances, political discord began to undermine the popular consensus in favor of the war. The central political issue became escalation of German submarine warfare against Entente traffic in the Atlantic, a subject that had already threatened on several occasions to bring the United States, the point of origin of much of this traffic, into the war against Germany. By the fall of 1916, as the removal of censorship on public discussion of Germany's war aims revealed, political opinion had polarized over whether to pursue outright military victory with the attendant territorial aggrandizement or to seek a negotiated peace and accept territorial compromise as the price. Support for the first option was anchored in the country's business, professional, landowning, military, and academic elites; sentiment in favor of the second was focused on the Social Democratic labor movement, where the material burdens of war weighed heaviest. The epicenter of the controversy was the lower house of the federal parliament, the Reichstag, where opinions were almost evenly divided between the two options.

The calculations that underlay the chancellor's decision in the autumn of 1916 to seek a compromise peace were thus complex. His anxieties about Germany's military prospects were genuine, particularly if the United States were to intervene

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<sup>8</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1918* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961). In English: *Germany's Aims in the First World War, 1914-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des "Militarismus" in Deutschland* (4 vols., Munich: Oldenbourg, 1954-1968). In English: *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany* (4 vols., Coral Gables: University of Florida Press, 1969-1975). See also Wolfgang Steglich, *Bündnissicherung oder Verständigungsfrieden: Untersuchungen zu dem Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte vom 12. Dezember 1916* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1958). Steglich was Ritter's student.

<sup>10</sup> Holger Afflerbach, *Auf Messers Schneide: Wie das Deutsche Reich den Ersten Weltkrieg verlor* (Munich: Beck, 2018), 276-319.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany, and the Great War, 1914-1918* (3d ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

militarily on the side of the Entente. He was also acutely sensitive to the political risks of seeking a negotiated settlement. He reckoned with relentless opposition from the right-wing parties, the Conservatives, National Liberals, and a large sector of the Catholic Center party, all of whom regarded the submarine as a *Wunderwaffe*, whose employment would win the war and pave way for German territorial annexations. He also worried that the domestic price of diplomatic compromise would include immediate democratic reform of the country's autocratic constitution—a course advocated by the Socialists and progressive liberals, who called particularly for ministerial responsibility in the Reichstag and the end of the plutocratic suffrage in Prussia, which had sustained the rule of the country's right-wing elites.

In the fall of 1916, however, sentiment in the Reichstag served principally as a gauge of polarized public opinion. In the German constitution, Bethmann Hollweg was responsible not to the parliament but to the Kaiser alone. The chancellor's exploration of a diplomatic compromise was known only to a small group of officials and advisors, including the foreign secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, the vice-chancellor and federal secretary of finance Karl Hellferich, the colonial secretary Wilhelm Solf, and Johann von Bernstorff, the German ambassador to the United States. These men shared Bethmann's fear of war with the United States, but, with the exception of Bernstorff, they disapproved of involving Wilson in any formal way in the peace negotiations themselves. In this respect, they reflected the broad German popular loathing of the American president, whose understanding of his country's neutrality had prescribed lavish material support for the Entente and condemnation of German efforts to interdict it.<sup>12</sup>

To write, as Philip Zelikow does, that Bethmann's quest for a compromise peace enjoyed the support of "the Kaiser, Germany's key allies, and a critical mass of civilian and opinion leaders" obscures the magnitude of the chancellor's challenges, the fact that German opposition to such a peace, whether Wilson was involved in it or not, was both widespread and strategically positioned (251). With the Kaiser's endorsement, Bethmann nonetheless began in public and private to vet 'moderate,' 'reasonable,' and 'fair' guarantees that Germany might expect from a compromise settlement. To heighten the appeal of any such compromise, he pushed in August 1916 for the replacement of Falkenhayn in the army's supreme command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) by Paul von Hindenburg, the hero of the eastern war, a soldier whose immense popularity the chancellor hoped to enlist in support of a 'lean' (*mager*) peace settlement.<sup>13</sup> Bethmann thus planned, with or without Wilson's aid, to present the Entente with a proposal for a peace conference, calculating that the German negotiators could achieve a 'respectable' (*anständig*) outcome, split the Entente, or at least strengthen the advocates of compromise within the Entente lands. Failing this result—or, as he thought likely, failing an agreement to negotiate from the Entente leaders—the chancellor reasoned that these leaders would be saddled with blame for the failure, whereupon the Germans could undertake unrestricted submarine warfare on the moral high ground, with less likelihood of American intervention.

The greatest challenge was to define a practical compromise, a basis for negotiation, a formula that could command agreement among the political camps in Germany, as well as among the country's allies, the Entente lands, and, should it get so far, from Wilson himself. The most delicate topic was Belgium, whose fate had become in Germany and elsewhere a principal avatar of success in the war. By October 1916, Bethmann had retreated from demands that Belgium become a German 'vassal state' or be shorn of its Flemish population. Now his position was that Belgian sovereignty would be restored, save only for German annexation of Liège and economic agreements to protect Germans from exclusion from the Belgian market after the war. Bethmann also proposed that parts of Alsace-Lorraine be returned to France in exchange for the coal-rich Briey basin in northeastern France. In the east, Germany was to retain conquered territory in the Baltic region

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<sup>12</sup> Torsten Oppelland, *Reichstag und Aussenpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: Die deutschen Parteien und die Politik der USA 1914-1918* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Jesko von Hoegen, *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007); Wolfram Pyta, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler* (Berlin: Siedler, 2007); Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

but guarantee the independence of Poland within the borders of the new kingdom. A block of German colonies in central Africa and economic indemnification for the country rounded off the list.

Professor Ritter has characterized this catalogue as “extremely moderate,” “very close to the reestablishment of the status quo in the west,” and “nearly a complete renunciation” of Germany’s earlier war aims.<sup>14</sup> In the event, the list was too modest for Germany’s Austrian, Bulgarian, and Turkish allies, who wished to include their own specific demands in the same document. Bethmann’s list was too modest for the German army command as well, which insisted not only on additional German territorial demands but also the inclusion of an imperious declaration of Germany’s military strength. After weeks of negotiations had revealed the hopeless disagreement among leading German agencies and the country’s allies, the German government was forced in the end to omit all mention of specific issues for negotiation in the note that it published (along with the army’s declaration) on 12 December as an announcement of the country’s willingness to talk.

The German peace note also made no mention of Wilson. Bethmann was aware that Wilson himself was planning an initiative in the wake of the American presidential election in early November. The timing of the German action was geared not only to the fall of the Romanian capital to German forces on 6 December. It also suggested the Germans’ impatience with Wilson’s delay, as well as their determination to keep him from meddling in any concrete negotiations that might result. Wilson’s own peace note, which followed a week after that of the Germans, addressed the conspicuous ambiguity of the German proposal, although it implied that the Central Powers would not differ significantly in the severity of their demands from those of the Entente. Wilson accordingly called on all the belligerents to specify their goals, to indicate, as he put it, “how near the haven of peace may be.”<sup>15</sup> Although both the German and American notes found a warm reception among the neutral countries, they only widened the gulf between the two warring alliances. Thanks in part to blustering remarks from the Kaiser about German military power, the ambiguity of the German note aroused the worst fears of the Entente. David Lloyd George, who was now British prime minister, gave vent to these fears on 19 December. Without “any knowledge of the proposals” from Germany, he told the House of Commons that to agree to negotiations “is to put our heads into a noose with the rope end in the hands of Germany.”<sup>16</sup> Insofar as it implied the moral equivalence of the aims of the two sides, Wilson’s note scandalized the British leadership, even as unfortunate comments from Robert Lansing, the American secretary of state, stoked German fears that Wilson was laying the moral basis for American entry into the war against Germany.

The Entente’s formal rejection of the German note came on 30 December. It repeated the charges of deception in the service of a ‘German peace’ and mentioned a number of general demands, such as the restoration of all violated rights and freedoms, which were themselves vague enough to leave the possibility of talks slightly ajar. The Entente’s reply to Wilson’s note on 10 January did not. This list included the restoration and indemnification of Belgium, Serbia, and Montenegro, the evacuation and reconstruction of Russia and Romania, the liberation of Italians, Slavs, Romanians, and Czechoslovaks “from foreign rule,” and the liberation of Europe from “the brutal greed of Prussian militarism of France.”<sup>17</sup>

The Germans could not respond to Wilson with specific goals of their own. There was still no agreement on the terms, let alone a consensus that would square with the Entente’s public position. Only with a promise that any German statement of goals would remain confidential and out of the hands of the American state department, where Lansing was known to be

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<sup>14</sup> Ritter, *Staatskunst*, 3: 335.

<sup>15</sup> Karl E. Birnbaum, *Peace Moves and U-Boat Warfare: A Study of Imperial Germany’s Policy towards the United States, April 16, 1916-January 9, 1917* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1958), 251.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 256.

<sup>17</sup> Ritter, *Staatskunst*, 3: 360.

partial to the Entente as well as indiscreet, did Bethmann agree to submit one, which Bernstorff delivered on 31 January. It specified the restoration of Belgium, albeit with guarantees of Germany's security, restitution of German-occupied territory in France, albeit with possible strategic and economic adjustments, a frontier corridor to protect Poland and Germany from Russia, and compensations to German businesses and property owners for damages suffered during the war. Bethmann's note was, as Zelikow remarks, "conciliatory and constructive" (256). It was, however, accompanied by an additional note. This one announced the German resumption of unrestricted submarine war the next day.

This note brought the practical end of the story, although the reason was less that Wilson immediately broke off diplomatic relations with Germany than what the German move signified about the political situation in Berlin. And the fatal diplomatic miscalculation was less Wilson's than Bethmann Hollweg's. It lay in the chancellor's calculation in August 1916 that a new, charismatic OHL would endorse and make a compromise peace palatable to the German populace.<sup>18</sup> Compromise, however, was arguably less foreign to anyone on earth than Erich Ludendorff, Hindenburg's deputy, who was the principal source of energy and determination in the military leadership. By the end of the year, he had also the country's effective leader.<sup>19</sup> His vision of Germany's security-requirements in Europe knew virtually no territorial limits. Still, the supreme command had initially approved of Bethmann's efforts to forestall unrestricted submarine warfare during the early fall, because German military forces were preoccupied with the Romanian campaign. Bethmann then weakened his own position further, when in October he told the Reichstag that the OHL would have the final decision about whether to unleash the submarines; and by December, indications were clear of the soldiers' intentions, particularly once the naval leadership began to fabricate fanciful numbers that forecast a splendid victory in an unrestricted war on British commerce.<sup>20</sup> The soldiers' demand that Bethmann's peace note contain an arrogant declaration of Germany's military superiority was followed by the firing of Jagow from the Foreign Office and his replacement, at the army's insistence, by Arthur Zimmermann, who in his aggressive imprudence was like a German Lansing. The Kaiser, who was temperamentally similar, had meanwhile migrated toward the OHL's position, recognizing that Hindenburg and Ludendorff were the most popular figures in the country and that their views enjoyed massive popular support. The Entente's hostile reception of Bethmann's peace note removed the final obstacles; and on 9 January 1917, the German leadership—including Bethmann Hollweg—approved unrestricted submarine action, to commence on 1 February. Hindenburg and Ludendorff could argue that the United States had long been in the war anyway, and that this country's formal intervention would not make much difference. This was a catastrophic mistake, and it ensured Germany's defeat.

Absent Wilson's willingness to rethink his own policy on the submarine offensive, American compromise with Germany was impossible. Whether the British government was any more prepared to compromise with Germany—even under financial pressure from Wilson—is best addressed by others in this roundtable. It strikes me as improbable. To dismiss Zelikow's argument as wrong in this light is, however, unfair. The virtue of his careful reconstruction of efforts to bring the warring parties together is to demonstrate the reasons for Wilson's optimism, even as the account lays bare the manifold obstacles to communication that made mediation impossible. These included basic technological difficulties—the fact that cable communication between Washington and Berlin took several days and was monitored in London. They also included the poor judgment, ignorance, incompetence, or bad faith of officials on all sides. This charge extended even to poor Bernstorff, America's best German friend, the most fervid German advocate of a negotiated peace. Ignorant of political

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<sup>18</sup> Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996), 437-456.

<sup>19</sup> Manfred Nebelin, *Ludendorff: Diktator im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Siedler, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Holger H. Herwig, "Total Rhetoric, Limited War: Germany's U-Boat Campaign, 1917-1918," Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 192-205.

developments in Berlin, and rarely in Wilson's presence, he passed misinformation in both directions.<sup>21</sup> He was helpless in the face of the deeper problem: consensus among the belligerents and the United States was impossible. The parties spoke different conceptual languages. Wilson in fact held territorial questions to be of secondary importance. German leaders in particular had never put stock in his vision of collective security and international organization, holding it quixotic and hypocritical at best and likely a blind for American power. Any rhetorical concessions that the German leaders made towards Wilson's vision in their dealings with him, such as the offer to join a Bryan treaty with the U.S., were instrumental gestures to evade specifying their demands.

Here lay the crux. Once the Germans' specific aims became known, the whole effort that Zelikow analyzes in such detail would have immediately collapsed. Compromise on territorial questions was unimaginable at this stage in the war. As Holger Afflerbach notes of the Germans' position, "it would have been impossible to have made demands that the political right would not have regarded as much too moderate, the left as too immoderate, and the country's enemies as completely unacceptable."<sup>22</sup> No specific reference to Belgium, or to Alsace-Lorraine, or—because Russian and Austrian allies were also to be parties to the proposed negotiations—to Poland or the Baltic lands could have found general acceptance in 1916-1917. The reasons lay in the war's moral dynamic. It was born during the summer of 1914 in a bargain between the belligerent states and their societies. To justify the enormous sacrifices that began immediately to accumulate, governments in Germany, Britain, and elsewhere defined the war in extravagant terms, as a crusade to repel aggression by a monstrous enemy. Propaganda images of Huns and a perfidious British *Hungerblockade* then ratified daily the terms of this bargain, offering the promise of a victorious peace, which would reward the sacrifices and make the foreign aggression impossible in the future. The paradox was thus that the longer the sacrifices mounted, the less likely a negotiated peace became. A compromise settlement could neither vindicate the sacrifice nor balance the moral account. It would have required breaking the initial bargain and accepting a vastly different representation of the war—as a mistake. No government could have survived this confession.

Bernstorff knew as much. Late in January 1917 he wrote to Berlin that "none of the belligerent governments can survive such a peace as must necessarily be made" (248). Zelikow, who has embraced Bernstorff's narrative of the failed peace offensive up to this point, shies from Bernstorff's conclusion as a guide to the collapse of Wilson's hopes. In doing so, Zelikow attributes greater power and influence to the president of the United States than he had.

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<sup>21</sup> Reinhard R. Doerries, *Imperial Challenge: Ambassador Count Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 191-231.

<sup>22</sup> Afflerbach, *Messers Schneide*, 289.

REVIEW BY GABRIELA A. FREI, UNIVERSITY OF THE BUNDESWEHR, MUNICH, AND THE  
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Philip Zelikow's book examines a brief window of opportunity during the First World War in which the time seemed ripe for peace talks to end the war. In the summer of 1916, the belligerent parties were at a crossroads. The battle of the Somme went badly for the Entente, and Imperial Germany faced a deadlock at sea after the Battle of Jutland cemented the maritime stalemate. On the Eastern Front, the belligerents of both sides showed signs of exhaustion. The timeframe from August 1916 to January 1917 provided a "unique opportunity" (9) to bring the war to an end. Knowing that the war continued for almost two years until November 1918, costing the lives of millions of soldiers, bringing states near to bankruptcy, causing hunger among civilians, and breaking up entire empires, it is worth pausing for a moment to review the events which led to the decision of the continuation of the war with all its horrible consequences.

The book is about the final months of the United States as a neutral power. It examines the secret peace talks between the United States and Germany, as well as between the United States and Britain. Neutrals in war had gained importance<sup>23</sup> and the violation of the Belgium's neutrality led Britain and the British Empire to enter the war.<sup>24</sup> Sir Erle Richards, Chichele Professor of International Law at the University of Oxford, said in December 1914 that neutrals and public opinion played a vital role in the conflict, and he was convinced the United States as the most powerful neutral would make "its judgment felt."<sup>25</sup> President Woodrow Wilson pressed the belligerents after the outbreak of war to accept the Declaration of London, which ensured neutral rights.<sup>26</sup> Yet, Wilson also felt the weight of ensuring the United States upheld the principles of neutrality. Even more, neutrals were seen as peace brokers and Wilson was keen to step into the big footsteps of former President Theodore Roosevelt, who had negotiated peace between Russia and Japan in 1905.

Zelikow examines Wilson's momentous task and his efforts to end the war. Wilson's foreign policy adviser and close friend to Wilson, Edward House, also known as Colonel House, played a central role. He, rather than Secretary of State Robert Lansing and the State Department, had the President's confidence to deal with such a delicate matter. House was never on the government payroll, but he had an extensive network in Europe. In December 1915, Wilson sent House on a secret mission to Europe to confer with Britain, France, and Germany about their willingness to enter negotiations about a "compromise peace" (40). When House returned, he wrote in his diary that "this war is not so much a breakdown of civilization as it is the failure of our statesmanship" (47).

The book reconstructs the events which followed Wilson's peace talks initiative of December 1915 and January 1916, with Zelikow identifying key moments in which opportunities opened to further explore the peace options. Zelikow carefully assesses the decision-making processes of the United States government as well as their role in brokering peace talks between the two main adversaries, Britain, and Germany. He often refers to a poker game and indeed this is how the book reads. While the players at the poker table changed over the months, the Wilson-House relationship was a constant. For readers less familiar with the course of events, the book offers an in-depth analysis of German and British military and political leadership, and examines how domestic politics shaped their decisions. The story is further enriched by the inclusion of a variety of personalities, such as Raymond Asquith, the son of the British prime minister, the Austro-Hungarian diplomat

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<sup>23</sup> Maartje Abbenhuis, *The Age of Neutrals, 1815-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Abbenhuis and Ismee Tames, *Global War, Global Catastrophe. Neutrals, Belligerents, and the Transformation of the First World War* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Erle Richards, *Does International Law Still Exist?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1914), 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen C. Neff, "Disrupting a Delicate Balance: The Allied Blockade Policy and the Law of Maritime Neutrality during the Great War," *European Journal of International Law* 29:2 (2018): 459-475.

Ottokar von Czernin, and the American jurist Frederic Coudert. Their comments and observations provide a rich panoramic view of the events, complementing the perspectives of the decision-makers.

The first round of poker was played in December 1915 and January 1916. Germany's submarine warfare posed a constant challenge to American neutrality and the sinking of *RMS Lusitania* in May 1915 added strain to the relationship between the two countries. When House opened the dialogue about possible peace talks, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor, signaled Germany's willingness to explore this option. Zelikow portrays Bethmann as a practical man (88) and corrects the picture that portrays him as simply "a hypocritical expansionist" (89). Crucial for the communication between the two countries was the German Ambassador to the United States, Johann von Bernstorff. From the beginning, Bernstorff had faith in Wilson's peace plan even though he did not think of Wilson as a practical diplomat but rather as a "theorist" (94).

In Britain, the situation looked different. From the outset, in December 1915, the Asquith coalition government was divided about Wilson's peace plans. Zelikow carefully reconstructs the various opinions and options the British had to evaluate. While the Prime Minister, Herbert H. Asquith, the Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna, were supportive, General William Robertson and others pressed for a summer offensive and wanted to reconsider the peace option only in September 1916. Wilson unsuccessfully tried to put pressure on the British as the blockade posed an increased menace to American shipping.

The second round of poker began in August/September 1916, which Zelikow describes as the "watershed moment" (95). Germany had refrained from further provoking the United States and restricted its submarine operations. In fact, Bethmann signaled that Germany was ready to enter peace talks without preconditions (95), accepting the idea of a compromise peace. In Britain, the peacemakers also gained ground, and Grey's speech in October 1916 outlined the ideas of post-war security and a league of nations, as well as the role of neutrals.

Yet, at this key moment, Wilson and House hesitated. Wilson would only initiate further steps for peace plans after his re-election in November 1916. To Zelikow, Wilson seems to have been unaware of the urgency, and House did not act either. Zelikow considers Wilson's scope of action and turns to the peace negotiations of the Russo-Japanese War, which he uses as a model after which Wilson could have planned his peace talks initiative. Zelikow identifies five instruments that Wilson could have used "for informal influence on the terms of a compromise peace" (142). First, Wilson could have opened the conference and led the negotiations. Second, Wilson could have offered his help for an armistice, paving the way to negotiations. Third, Wilson could have influenced the terms for peace negotiations. Fourth, he could have used his power to control the funds for the Allies, and initiate humanitarian relief. Finally, Wilson could have propelled himself to becoming the peace broker who shaped the post-war order. From the beginning Wilson planned two conferences, one where the belligerents settled the peace terms and territorial questions, the other where the international community agreed on a post-war order. The only condition for a peace conference would have been that the belligerents accepted the idea of a "war of self-defence" (142) as face-saving measure for all parties.

The third round of poker began after Wilson's re-election in November 1916. By then, voices in Germany and Britain were getting louder for a continuation of the war. In Britain, the Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd George had publicly pleaded for a continuation of the war despite the gloomy outlook for 1917, while another member of the Cabinet, the Marquess of Lansdowne demanded immediate peace talks. In Germany, the expansion of submarine warfare had been on the table for a long time, but it was unclear for how long Bethmann could keep the military leadership, Paul von Hindenburg, and Erich Ludendorff, in check.

Wilson was now committed to initiating the peace talks, yet House slowed him down. Zelikow regards the meeting on 14/15 November 1916 between the two as "the most consequential foreign policy discussions between two people to be found in the records of American history" (156). For Wilson, getting the British on board was crucial but House refused multiple times to go to Britain to get to the bottom of their hesitation. Zelikow describes House in this situation as a "discreet messenger and gifted manipulator" (160). Zelikow also raises the question as to why neither House nor the State

Department ever “prepared any analysis for Wilson” (161) to execute his peace plans. Instead, Wilson was alone at “a pivotal moment in the history of the world” (160).

Only slowly did Wilson realize that the Allies’ main concern was finance. The Federal Reserve Board and Morgan’s Bank were increasingly worried about the Allies’ loan system and warned Wilson about it. When the Fed published a warning note on 28 November 1916, it finally brought some movement into the messy situation. In Britain, Asquith, Grey, McKenna, and others pushed for agreeing to peace talks. Now, Wilson had to act, but instead, he did “nothing” (189). Wilson missed the opportunity to help the peacemakers in the British government. The British knew from intelligence that the Central Powers were waiting for Wilson to initiate peace talks. On 9 December 1916, Lloyd George replaced the moderate voices of Asquith and Grey. The Germans were also getting tired of waiting and finally publicly announced on 12 December 1916 their willingness to engage in peace talks, which the Allies instantly refused. British leaders were still up for a long war. With a large continental army, Zelikow argues that “Britain had abandoned its grand strategic tradition” (148).

When the final poker round began in December 1916/January 1917, Wilson tried to rescue his peace plans but his peace note on 18 December contained no mention of a peace conference or peace terms. House had altered Wilson’s draft, which changed “Wilson’s whole strategy for ending the war” (173). The Germans were disappointed that Wilson did not play a similar role to that of Roosevelt in the Russo-Japanese War. Clearly, the United States had moved a step closer to entering the war on the side of the Allies.

Since Wilson’s peace note left room for interpretation, the belligerents brought forward their peace plans and conditions, which reduced Wilson and House’s scope of action. For Germany the pre-negotiations had to be completely confidential and its leaders were willing to agree to the format of two conferences (218). Bernstorff was given full authority to lead the negotiations. The British were still hesitant. Lloyd George kept the option for peace talks open as the outlook for 1917 was bleak, with Britain running out of money, ships, and supplies. Worst of all, the Allied front crumbled.

To resolve the deadlock, Wilson looked for outside help and turned to the American journalists, Walter Lippmann, and Herbert Croly. Supportive of Wilson’s peace plans and rather critical of the British war aims and Lloyd George’s war mongering tone, Lippmann/Croly published their peace plan on 30 December 1916, in which they outlined that Germany should join the league and agree to a dispute settlement. Most importantly, Belgium should be restored and belligerents should agree on disarmament and no annexations.

In January 1917, the British signaled a willingness to accept peace talks but they were still anxious about territorial questions, which only played a subordinate role for the United States. In Germany, Bethmann knew “he had few cards left to play” (235). Bernstorff tried to delay the announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare because he had understood the significance of the Fed announcement in November 1916. Yet, the military leadership did not care. In a desperate move, Bernstorff and House discussed peace terms in which Bernstorff guaranteed the return of Belgium, the creation of a league of nations, disarmament, and arbitration. House wrote to Wilson that “this is the most important communication we have had since the war began” (238).

Yet, for Zelikow, Wilson seemed to have no “concept of a preliminary negotiation about conditions for a peace conference [...] [or] the possibility of an armistice” (242). Wilson’s peace without victory speech on 22 January 1917 was well received, given that it focused on the principles of post-war order. However, the British still stalled for time and asked for more guarantees from Germany, while announcing they would keep the blockade up until 1918. Time was up when Bernstorff delivered two messages to the United States government on 31 January 1917. One contained the announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare and the other sketched Germany’s peace terms. House and Wilson were shocked, kicked Bernstorff out of the country, and cut all lines of communications. Zelikow argues that Wilson’s “hasty actions wrecked the peace option” (259) although Bethmann had still left open a window. Now, the game was over.

Why did the efforts fail? Zelikow provides an insightful and convincing assessment of the opportunities, gambles, and miscalculations of the decision-makers. Zelikow describes Wilson as “realistic” (271) in foreseeing that a decisive victory



would not bring enduring peace. He always wanted a compromise peace with no major reorganization of Europe and no humiliation. Zelikow argues that Wilson failed because “he simply did not know how to do it” (272). House “effectively delayed and deflected” (273) Wilson at crucial times, and when Wilson finally used the powerful tool of the Fed to put pressure on the Allies, he did not follow up. Zelikow argues that Wilson wanted to do everything “out on his own” (274).

The Wilson-House relationship is a puzzle. House was Wilson’s closest foreign policy adviser and yet Zelikow asks whether he was “a fool or a villain” (226). In key moments, House gave misleading impressions about the situation in Germany and Britain. Of most concern, however, was the fact that Wilson and House did not seem understand the divisions of the British government (275). For Zelikow, the entry of the United States into the war was “unnecessary” (275) as Wilson had “the will, means, and the power” (275) to resist.

Zelikow also uncovers Lloyd George’s “brilliant gamble” (267), which aimed at delaying peace talks until Germany launched unrestricted submarine warfare. In the end, Lloyd George’s “colossal, secret bet paid off” (267). Yet was it worth to fight to the end? The Marquess of Lansdowne posed this very question in November 1916 and General Robertson anticipated that this would mean a continuation of the war until 1918. He was right. In Zelikow’s narrative, the Germans, Bethmann, and Bernstorff, are commended for their efforts in fighting for the peace talks option. Zelikow imagines a “bold” (271) move could have been made by Bethmann but is also aware of his limitations. When the United States entered the war, Wilson blamed “Prussian militarism” (260) for the decision. Yet, for Zelikow it was Wilson who “failed the world” (271) – “the most consequential failure in the history of the United States” (271).

However, one wonders whether the United States was in fact acting neutral. Britain’s blockade and Germany’s submarine warfare posed a serious threat to the United States as a neutral power and more importantly to its shipping.<sup>27</sup> In Zelikow’s opinion, Wilson was committed to neutrality because he knew that the alternative was the United States’ entry into the war. Yet House clearly favored the Allies and pushed Wilson in that direction. These conclusions complement the arguments of John W. Coogan, whose book provides an invaluable context to Zelikow, and Benjamin Allen Coates, whose recent examination shows the State Department’s understanding of neutrality in the First World War.<sup>28</sup>

As historians we tend to neglect the episodes in history that describe failure. This is a mistake, as Zelikow’s fascinating book impressively illustrates. The strength of the book is the author’s sharp analysis of practical diplomacy, of key actors and their assessments, of their miscalculations in political decision-making processes, and of their relationships with the military leaderships. In crucial moments, of which there were many, leaders took a gamble, made lonely decisions, were ill advised, or ignored advice. The book provides an invaluable case study for all students of diplomacy and provides a valuable lesson to readers that the tragic reality was that the door closed for peace talks on 31 January 1917, which led to the entry of the United States into the war, a war which Wilson despised so much. Wilson was caught in the middle, playing all his cards until none were left. Expectations were high for Wilson to initiate peace talks but the timing was never quite right. Bernstorff once exclaimed that “peace was on the floor waiting to be picked up” (165), but nobody did.

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<sup>27</sup> Johan den Hertog and Samuël Kruizinga, eds., *Caught in the Middle. Neutrals, Neutrality, and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Aksant/Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Allen Coates, *Legalist Empire. International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 136-151; John W. Coogan, *The End of Neutrality. The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899-1915* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

## REVIEW BY T.G. OTTE, UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

“Decisive, however, will be the ideas of 1917.”

Max Weber (1916).<sup>29</sup>

Studies of the origins of the First World War are legion. Those that deal with the abortive efforts to bring about a negotiated peace come in a single platoon.<sup>30</sup> The reasons for this disparity are manifold. Three, however, stand out, the first being the profound transformation of Europe, indeed the wider world, as a result of the war. Most of the vicissitudes of the short twentieth century, after all, were incubated by this conflict.

The second reason is usually unspoken, but it is no less significant. Stripping away all nuances, works on Europe’s descent into war fall into two broadly defined categories. There are those that argue that at the core of the events of 1914 was a conscious policy act by one power or another to opt for war; and there are those that subscribe to the view that politicians lost control and the nations of Europe, in the evocative phrase of Britain’s wartime leader, David Lloyd George, then ‘slithered over the brink into ... war.’ This dichotomy touches on something deeper than the origins of a particular conflict. It touches on the nature of man and the nature of politics in general. For if the former view is correct, then there is something rational and deliberate at the root of the decisions that led to war. If they were rational then, there is hope for the future; lessons can be learnt, and a recurrence of such a cataclysm be avoided. If, by contrast, the latter view holds sway, then politics are the realm of the more or less irrational or, at any rate, uncontrollable. Nothing can be learnt from the past; no lessons can be applied; and Dante’s inferno may be the only guide left: ‘*lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate.*’ There is no hope for the future.

Finally, and perhaps more mundanely, historians tend to explain why things happened rather than explore why they did not occur. It is their particular *déformation professionnelle*. In the 1930s Lewis Namier once mused that “[t]oo much history is written by don-bred dons with no knowledge or understanding of the practical problems of statecraft.”<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, *The Road Less Traveled* and its author, Philip Zelikow, are free from such blemishes. Zelikow, a professor of history at the University of Virginia and a former US diplomat, combines the skills of the seasoned historian in reconstructing past events with a shrewd sense of practicalities, borne out of his own professional experience. He brings both to bear upon what he calls ‘the lost peace,’ the period between August 1916 and January 1917. During these five to six months, he contends, a negotiated peace to end the war between the European great powers, most likely brought about by American mediation, was a tantalizing possibility. How and why that chance was allowed to slip through the fingers of political leaders and diplomats is the central question of Zelikow’s book.

<sup>29</sup> M. Weber, “An der Schwelle des dritten Kriegsjahres” [= Public lecture at Nuremberg, 1 Aug. 1916], W.J. Mommsen and G. Hübinger, eds., *Max Weber: Zur Politik im Weltkrieg. Schriften und Reden, 1914-1918* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988) (= *Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/15), 333.

<sup>30</sup> The classic studies of this *genre* are W.W. Gottlieb, *Studies in Secret Diplomacy During the First World War* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957); Z.A.B. Zeman, *The Gentlemen Negotiators: A Diplomatic History of the First World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); for a sound guide to the international politics of the war see D. Stevenson, *The First World War, and International Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). Perhaps understandably, the issue of peace talks has attracted greater attention amongst scholars from the vanquished nations, see *inter alios* W. Steglich, *Bündnissicherung oder Verständigungsfrieden: Untersuchungen zum Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte vom 12. Dezember 1916* (Göttingen: Musters Schmidt, 1958), and (more controversially) H. Fenske, *Der Anfang vom Ende des alten Europa: Die alliierte Verweigerung von Friedensgesprächen, 1914-1919* (Munich: Olzog, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Namier to Churchill, 14 Feb. 1934, Churchill MSS, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, CHAR 8/484A-B.

He believes that the war could have been terminated a good two years before it actually ended. At one stroke, it would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides of the conflict. The twentieth century might well have taken a different course. For one thing, a negotiated compromise peace might have proved more durable than the Paris peace settlement since all belligerents would have had a stake in its preservation. For another, Europe – and the world – might have been spared the twin horrors of Bolshevism and Nazism. Even so, this book is no counterfactual ‘free-for-all.’ On the contrary, it is a closely argued analysis of the practical problems and possibilities of statecraft. These remain Zelikow’s chief concern throughout.

Enticing prospects and missed opportunities lay close together, however, and Zelikow is not slow in apportioning blame, chiefly, but not exclusively, to the American president, Woodrow Wilson. There is an irony here, for Wilson sought the role of mediator to secure a so-called ‘peace without victory.’ Laudable though this ambition was, Wilson’s statecraft in pursuing it was lamentable. Instead of reflecting on President Theodore Roosevelt’s successful mediation at the end of the Russo-Japanese War, he discarded all lessons of recent diplomatic history and relied on his own imagination – and that of his trusted, loyal and yet vastly over-rated ‘right-hand man,’ Colonel Edward M. House – to devise the means and procedures to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table. Once they had taken their places there, he thought, they were committed to making the talks a success. They would not be able break off the negotiations.

It was a reasonable enough assumption. The problem, however, still remained how to coax them into entering meaningful talks. That required precisely framed mediation proposals and carefully sequenced diplomatic steps – and here Wilson failed. His notes were often “puzzling” (202), based on an insufficient grasp of the interests of the belligerent parties, and lacked any clear diplomatic route towards substantive talks (226 and 242). Wilson, in Zelikow’s reading, was ill-served by his confidant House and by his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, both of whom sent mixed signals to London and Paris at a time when America’s financial power could have exercised decisive influence on them.

*The Road Less Traveled* is firmly focused on the period between August 1916 and the beginning of the following year. By the summer of 1916, all the major belligerents were ready to negotiate peace. On the Western front they had settled into a stalemate that seemed never-ending. The British doggedly ploughed on with their offensive on the Somme at enormous cost to the enemy but even more so to themselves. French offensives in the West also failed, and at Verdun both sides bled each other white. In the East, the Dardanelles campaign had been a spectacular failure.

The military stalemate produced political divisions in the capitals of the warring powers. Military leaders invariably pushed for victory at all costs; diplomats probed for a route out of the carnage, as of course they were trained to do. Zelikow singles out for praise the efforts of the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and Germany’s ambassador at Washington, Count Johann von Bernstorff, for keeping the peace option alive in the face of strong opposition from their own generals. In 1914 they had hopes of “annexing Belgium and completely crushing England,” as one Austro-Hungarian ambassador noted with alarm.<sup>32</sup> But if that proved impossible, German leaders hoped to secure such a military position as to extract maximum advantage when peace was made.

That was now. Bethmann was ready to agree to significant concessions to ensure that talks took place. These included the evacuation of Belgium and the restoration of that country’s neutrality and integrity. He was even willing to cede a portion of Alsace to France in return for Germany retaining the Briey-Longwy basin with its rich mineral and ore reserves. The Germans had hopes to hold on to Russia’s Baltic provinces and some of Poland, so that a peace on this basis would not have restored the *status quo ante*. Further, Bethmann also publicly committed Germany to joining any post-war League of Nations-type international organisation that Wilson might propose. This was a workable basis; and the Germans could even point to the Peace of Hubertusburg of 1763, which ended the Seven Years’ War in 1763 on the basis of the pre-war *status quo*, to satisfy their national honour.

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<sup>32</sup> Palavicini to Forgách (private), 10 Dec. 1914, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, PA I/496, Liasse XLVII, 1c. Palavicini proposed a negotiated peace on the basis of the *status quo ante*.

By the autumn of 1916, circumstances looked propitious for a negotiated peace, precisely, Zelikow contends, because the prospects for decisive military victory looked bleak. French and British politicians and diplomats were also open to the idea of US mediation. France's army was on the brink of mutiny, and already in August 1916 President Raymond Poincaré had let the British know that Paris was ready to contemplate a compromise peace at the earliest opportunity. Britain's finances were exhausted, and it was this circumstance that gave Washington leverage over the *entente* powers. There was no denying that even Britain had become dependent on close commercial and financial ties with the United States, which made all discussions with Washington exceptionally delicate.

As an inter-departmental Whitehall committee concluded in October 1916, "this country is at present, and must continue to be, dependent upon the United States for a large proportion of the supplies essential to the conduct of the war. So far as can be foreseen, we shall also henceforward be dependent upon being able to borrow in the United States." Any restrictions on commercial ties with Britain would also be "disastrous" for the Americans, but it was obvious "that in any negotiations with the United States our present position is extremely weak, and must continue to be so unless, and except in so far as, our dependence upon the United States for supplies can be reduced in every way compatible with the efficient conduct of the war."<sup>33</sup>

The German submarine campaign was beginning to have an effect as well. In September or October 1916, the Foreign Secretary thought, Berlin might have settled for "peace in terms of a draw," but not now.<sup>34</sup> By early September 1916, British-registered ocean-going tonnage had nearly halved in the course of a month. Shipyards could not plug the growing gap, and in late October senior naval officers warned that if losses continued at their present rate, by the middle of 1917 they would have "such a serious effect upon the import of food and other necessaries ... as to force us into accepting terms of peace which the military situation on the Continent would not justify and which would fall far short of our desires."<sup>35</sup>

An additional – and in many ways the crucial – complicating factor was that Britain also financed the war efforts of her allies. Russia received some £586 million, and the British gave £434 million and £412 million in loans to France and Italy, respectively. Altogether, including credits to smaller nations and the Dominions, British wartime loans amounted to £1,825 million. It exceeded the country's financial capacity. "*Hélas, les Anglais ne sont pas des magiciens*," a British minister explained to Russian representatives in early 1917.<sup>36</sup> The British were indeed no financial wizards. Some of the demand on Britain had to be financed through American loans, increasingly so after 1917.

As for a negotiated peace, the British insisted on the liberation of, and full reparations for, Belgium. Further, some form of guarantee was required against the recurrence of the events of the summer of 1914. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, was an early advocate of this. The core element of a durable post-war settlement was an

"agreement between the Great Powers at the end of this war with the object of mutual security and preservation of peace in future [which] might have stability if the United States would become a party to it and were prepared to join in repressing by force whoever broke the Treaty. We should

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<sup>33</sup>Memo. by the Interdepartmental Committee to consider Dependence of the British Empire on the United States (secret), n.d. [after 13 Oct. 1916], Bradbury MSS, The National Archives (Public Record Office), Kew, T 170/95.

<sup>34</sup>Grey to Balfour, n.d. [Nov. 1916], Balfour MSS, British Library, Add.MSS. 49731.

<sup>35</sup>Jellicoe to Balfour, 29 Oct. 1916, A. Temple Patterson, ed., *The Jellicoe Papers* (2 vols., London: Navy Records Society, 1968) ii, 89.

<sup>36</sup>*Procès-verbal* of the Allied financial conference at Petrograd, 7 Feb. 1917, CAB 28/2/IC 16(a).

be quite willing that Germany should have future security by any condition that would also give it to us.”<sup>37</sup>

In essence, this was a collective international security system, foreshadowing the League of Nations as an international organization to ensure peaceful relations between states and to make war all but impossible.

For financial, but also for political, reasons Wilson was best placed to act as an ‘honest broker’ between the belligerents. Traditional, usually royal, channels had been exhausted. Indeed, when they were tried, they just showed how irrelevant the monarchical rulers had become. This was true in the case of the famous “Sixtus affair” of early 1917, an Austrian approach to open discussions about a possible *status-quo-ante* settlement.<sup>38</sup> But it was also true of German attempts to entice Russia to leave her wartime alliance after the early setbacks in Poland.<sup>39</sup> An approach through the Prince of Hesse, the Tsarina’s brother, suggesting a secret meeting in neutral Sweden, similarly came to nothing.<sup>40</sup> Neither the Danish King’s New Year’s mediation offer in early January 1915,<sup>41</sup> nor an approach through a Russian court lady, interned in Vienna at the outbreak of the war, proved any more fruitful.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever financial leverage Washington had over the *entente* powers, political constraints and ambitions prevented Wilson from using the financial weapon to force the *entente* powers to agree to talks. The President, like Franklin Roosevelt a quarter of a century later, was loth to embark on a major foreign initiative in an election year. In London, meanwhile, Lloyd George, first as minister for munitions, then as secretary of state for war, and from early December 1916 as prime minister, frustrated peace diplomacy. In September 1916, in an interview with an American journalist, he publicly dismissed any suggestions of peace talks and committed himself to a fight to the finish. In private, however, he doubted whether military victory was still possible. He had, he later suggested to Grey, “commit[ted] a serviceable indiscretion: you could not.” Complacency mingled with condescension: “I know the American politician. He has no international conscience. He thinks of nothing but the ticket, and he has not given the least thought to the effect of action upon European affairs.”<sup>43</sup> Very likely the average US politician suffered from such shortcomings and, perhaps, it took someone like the mercurial

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<sup>37</sup>Grey to Spring Rice (private), 22 Dec. 1914, Grey MSS, TNA (PRO), FO 800/84. Spring Rice had earlier reported that Wilson “will be very glad to intervene if he could be convinced that the moment for intervention has arrived,” *vice versa* (private), 27 November 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> See R.A. Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre: Die geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1966).

<sup>39</sup> The scheme was pushed by Falkenhayn, the German chief of staff, who used a Berlin banker with extensive business contacts in Russia, Robert von Mendelssohn, and Yosef Melnik, private secretary to the former Russian finance minister Sergei Yulevich Witte, see Bethmann Hollweg to Zimmermann, 19 Nov. 1914, and Mendelssohn to Jagow, 16 Feb. 1915, A. Scherer and J. Grunwald (eds.), *L’Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la première guerre mondiale: Documents extraits des archives de l’Office allemand des Affaires Étrangères* (4 vols, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962) i, nos. 13 and 47.

<sup>40</sup> N. de Basily, *Memoirs: Diplomat of Imperial Russia, 1903-1917* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1973), 101-2.

<sup>41</sup> Ballin to Wilhelm II, 21 Nov. 1914, Bethmann Hollweg to Auswärtiges Amt (no. 122), 27 Nov. 1914, and draft response to Ballin, 30 Nov. 1914, *APP* i, nos. 14, 18, and 20.

<sup>42</sup> Foreign Ministry diary, 30 Dec. 1915, ‘Dnevnik Inostrannykh del’ 1915-1916 (I)’, *Krasnyi Arkhiv* 31 (1929), 49.

<sup>43</sup>Lloyd George to Grey, 2 Oct. 1916, Lloyd George MSS, Political Archive, House of Lords, London, E/2/13/6.

Welshman to recognize that fact. Nevertheless, his intervention frustrated the American's president's moves in the autumn of 1916. In many ways, Lloyd George is the other villain of Zelikow's piece.

On the other side, in Berlin, time was running out for Bethmann Hollweg who was struggling against the generals. They saw little need for concessions, let alone bringing the war to an end just then. By December 1916, German-led armies had taken possession of two thirds of Romania, and there was a growing sense in Berlin that an expanded U-boat campaign against allied shipping would now bring Britain and France to their knees as well. In the end, the German High Command prevailed over the chancellor, who, more Prussian bureaucrat than a political leader, was war-weary and no longer capable of standing up to the military leadership.

Zelikow's criticism of the German High Command is severe, but he reserves his most scathing judgment for Wilson. By the fall of 1916, Germany had proposed a workable peace option. Wilson had the financial and political clout to force Britain and France to negotiate. In his failure to strike at this opportune moment, President Wilson failed in his peace diplomacy and he failed the world: "He failed because he simply did not know how to do it" (272).

But the failings, at least to this reviewer's mind, were as much personal as they were structural. The lack of preparation and institutional support for foreign policy initiatives in Washington was striking. Indeed, anyone who has read the despatches of the British ambassador, Sir Cecil Spring Rice, will have formed an impression of the almost 'early modern' nature of the American system of governance, reminiscent of a Renaissance court, where much depended on the personal whims of the prince and his *consiglieri* and where access was all-important. It made matters worse for Wilson. Having correctly predicted, as Zelikow suggests, "that a peace accompanying bloody victories and humiliating defeats would probably not last, Wilson was condemned, like some figure in a Greek tragedy or myth, to suffer the prolonged and painful validation of his own dark prophecy" (272). Not ending the war at the turn of 1916/17 meant that the following year became a turning point in world history, ushering in the Bolshevik revolution and America's entry into the war – and the twentieth century.

The other tragic figure in this tale is that of the German chancellor. Bethmann Hollweg emerges from the pages of this book as a significant and substantive political leader. Intelligent and even far-sighted, he held his own against the generals and the annexationists on the lunatic fringe at Berlin. But one is left wondering whether Zelikow overestimates the punch the chancellor could pack in German decision-making. His influence was steadily decreasing, and in the end, he was one of many wheels in the imperial constitution. No-one can know for certain whether he would have been able to hold off the military leaders if matters had progressed to proper peace talks. For that he would have had to be with and around the Kaiser all the time, and as Zelikow shows in this book, Germany's political and military elite was usually dispersed during the war.

Indeed, in the absence of a coherent overarching structure, there was "disorder so imposing that it initially disguised a number of important truths."<sup>44</sup> Whatever the institutional failing in the United States, Germany was a pre-modern state trying to wage a near-total war. The levers of power remained in the hands of the old pre-war elites. Their position, however, was now more exposed since there were no precedents to guide them in the tasks that confronted them, and failure to secure a credible military or political outcome to the conflict had the potential to call into question the legitimacy of the imperial regime and the political and social arrangements that underpinned it. The Kaiser was pushed to the side-lines, and competing ministers and military officials created a situation that effectively left the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (Army High Command, OHL) the dominant force in politics. The principal source of its authority was the army, in particular the charismatic Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the 'Hero of Tannenberg', and his chief of staff, General Erich Ludendorff. The OHL's "silent dictatorship" contained a strong quasi-plebiscitary component. As long as this duumvirate succeeded in

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<sup>44</sup> R. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.

sustaining the belief that Germany was winning the war its political dominance was unquestioned.<sup>45</sup> Anything obviously short of victory would lead to significant domestic change.

One might quibble also about Zelikow's treatment of Britain's financial predicament. It is true that Britain's net external assets were drawn down to serve as collaterals for US loans. Even so, earnings from overseas investments remained stable between 1913 and 1920. Britain's immediate financial needs were pressing and posed awkward questions for the government – to pretend otherwise would be a case of “don-bred history” - but the country was not on the brink of bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup>

*The Road Less Traveled* is an excellent addition to the debate surrounding the international politics of the First World War. Tightly paced, meticulous in its attention to detail, and displaying a shrewd sense of the possible, it raises significant questions about the war. For that reason, we should be grateful to Philip Zelikow for having taken up the late Ernest May's challenge to look at the problem of the failed peace initiatives again. But the book also raises issues that go beyond the First World War. Not the least of these is the question of how belligerent powers can terminate a war by means short of outright victory. Diplomats, of course, are professionally primed to spot opportunities for negotiated settlements. Indeed, in early 1918, Sir William Tyrrell, an Assistant Under-secretary at the Foreign Office, “believe[d] that he could arrange an acceptable peace with [the German foreign minister, Richard von] Kühlmann today.”<sup>47</sup> Exploring the option of peace talks was one thing, but ultimately the positions on the battlefield, real or perceived, framed discussions of what was deemed politically possible. For as long as one side could see advantage in carrying on military operations, the dynamic could not be broken. Aligning military developments with the diplomatic dynamic and the interests of the belligerents was the challenge that proved impossible to meet. Sequencing the necessary diplomatic steps was key in 1916-1917, and Wilson's peace initiatives fell at that hurdle. Whether there were better opportunities to bring the two sides to the negotiating table earlier or later, for instance in late 1917, must be a matter of speculation.

Of course, if Wilson's statecraft had been better, his initiative might have been successful; if Lloyd George had kept his personal ambitions in check, Britain might have accepted US mediation; and if Bethmann had been more resilient still, he might have faced down the hawks at the German high command. But these ‘ifs’ pale when compared with the ‘if’ that was not considered in the summer of 1914: if only Europe's leaders, especially in Vienna and Berlin, had been less complacent and reckless. Once the war had started, leaders found themselves facing unpalatable choices; and as Namier observed on a different occasion, there often are situations ‘wherein it is well-nigh impossible for statesmen or diplomats to be justified by results.’<sup>48</sup> It was Europe's tragedy that its leaders faced such an impossible situation in 1916-1917.

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<sup>45</sup> M. Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff* (London: Croom Helm, 1976) remains the most authoritative account of this.

<sup>46</sup> Overseas investment earnings amounted to £199.6 m in 1913, and £200 m in 1920, see B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, eds., *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 334-5. For a similar point, but using different figures see Niall Ferguson, “The Peace-Making Initiative that Failed, at Vast Cost,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 Apr. 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-road-less-traveled-philip-zelikow-review-niall-ferguson-first-world-war/>.

<sup>47</sup> Oppenheimer diary, 8 Jan. 1918, Oppenheimer MSS, Bodleian Library, Oxford, box 5.

<sup>48</sup> Namier to Headlam-Morley (private), 5 Mar. 1919, Headlam-Morley MSS, CCAC, HDLM Acc. 688/2.

REVIEW BY PRISCILLA ROBERTS, CITY UNIVERSITY OF MACAU

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For close to a decade, spurred by its centenary, new studies of World War I and the fragile peace settlement that followed it have proliferated, to the point where one might wonder whether any genuinely novel revelations into this bloody and catastrophic conflict can still be expected. Philip Zelikow's new study, based on extensive research in US, British, German, and French archives, suggests that surprises may still lie in wait, and that even supposedly familiar episodes involving the highest levels of diplomatic negotiations and policymaking may benefit from careful re-examination and reassessment.

In 1996, in an exercise in counterfactual history, the often-controversial historian Niall Ferguson suggested that the British decision to go to war in 1914 was mistaken. He went so far as to argue that, had Britain not intervened in August 1914 but remained neutral, German war aims would have been far more moderate, and would have included guarantees to maintain the territorial integrity of Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. Ultimately, Ferguson argued, even those states that came out of the war as "victors . . . paid a price far in excess of the value of all their gains; a price so high, indeed, that they would very shortly find themselves quite unable to hold on to most of them." More than 9 million soldiers died in battle, with millions more left permanently disabled. "Quite apart from the killing, maiming and mourning, the war literally and metaphorically blew up the achievements of a century of economic advance" and "undid the first, golden age of economic 'globalization'." Meanwhile, the territorial changes resulting from the war destabilized the existing international system.<sup>49</sup>

Ferguson boldly speculated that, had Britain either not declared war at all, or even waited to do so until just a few weeks later, after the defeat of France, and had then restricted itself to waging maritime and economic war against Germany, the conflict might eventually have resulted in "a diplomatic compromise . . . whereby Britain ended hostilities in return for German guarantees of Belgian integrity and neutrality." Germany would have dominated Central Europe, but Adolf Hitler would never have come to power. And while Tsar Nicholas II of Russia would probably still have lost his throne (though perhaps not his life) following wartime reverses, the government that emerged to replace his regime was more likely to have been some form of constitutional monarchy or parliamentary democracy than a radical Communist despotism. By choosing in 1914 "to turn the continental war into a world war," and thereby thwarting a rapid German victory, the British government committed "nothing less than the greatest *error* of modern history."<sup>50</sup> According to Ferguson, Britain's decision to declare war on Germany in August 1914 and dispatch an expeditionary force to Belgium was therefore perhaps *the* key factor in ensuring that the conflict would not end quickly, but instead last long enough to wreak permanent havoc on a global scale.

1914 may not, however, have been the final opportunity to avoid these consequences. Zelikow, in similar fashion, identifies a second crucial turning point: the period in late 1916 and early 1917 when, following thirty months of neutrality, the United States finally joined the coalition of Entente Powers at war against Germany, a development that ensured that, thanks to the vast economic and demographic reserves the new belligerent power could mobilize, hostilities would continue indefinitely, as opposed to winding down within the next few months, to end in a compromise peace. Zelikow reconsiders one of the most tantalizing historical counterfactual scenarios of the twentieth century: the possibility that in the second half of 1916 and the first weeks of 1917, US President Woodrow Wilson not only wished to bring Germany, Great Britain, and France to the conference table, to embark on serious talks to negotiate a peace settlement that would have ended what was steadily becoming an all-consuming conflict, but that with each of the major belligerents there was a serious window of opportunity in which these presidential mediation efforts might have been successful.

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<sup>49</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 168-173, 433-441, 458-462, quotations from 436, 438; see also Maev Kennedy, "Britain Entering First World War Was 'Biggest Error in Modern History,'" *The Guardian*, 30 January 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/30/britain-first-world-war-biggest-error-niall-ferguson>, accessed 20 December 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 458-462, quotations from 459, 461, 462.



This situation arose in part, Zelikow argues, from the recognition by some German officials, notably the chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and Count Johann von Bernstorff, the German Ambassador to the United States, that the human, financial, and social costs of waging war to the finish in the hope of ultimately delivering a knock-out blow were mounting to the point where they risked bringing down the German Empire. Adding urgency to their efforts, the two men were also aware that from 1 February 1917, Germany's top military leaders, General Paul von Hindenburg, and his chief of staff Erich von Ludendorff, intended to launch unrestricted submarine warfare against all Allied and neutral shipping, including passenger vessels on which American civilians might well be travelling. The generals believed that by doing so they could cut the vital maritime lifeline carrying massive quantities of munitions, food, and other war supplies across the Atlantic to the Entente Powers, Great Britain and France, goods that sustained the ability of Germany's enemies to continue fuelling their military campaigns with the resources needed to maintain their war effort at existing levels. While aware that, given previous German pledges to the United States to limit submarine warfare, the United States might well join the Allies in their war with Germany, the German high command gambled that, once unleashed, their submarines would succeed in choking off this transatlantic trade and thereby limiting the Allies' warmaking capabilities. They hoped this would in turn enable them to defeat Britain, France, and Russia conclusively on the battlefield, before the United States could mobilize itself for war.

While fear of adding the United States to the roster of German enemies gave extra impetus to the efforts of leading German diplomats to reach an understanding with Wilson that would facilitate peace negotiations, apprehensions over the consequences for their own country, in terms of continually soaring death tolls, mountainous budgetary expenditures with no respite in sight, and ever greater social disruption of every kind, as external embargos and internal controls hit home, were the fundamental drivers of their search for a conference that would at least bring hostilities to an end. Similar considerations weighed heavily with officials in Austria-Hungary, who were already casting around for potential routes to peace. In France, likewise, political, and military leaders were being forced to recognize that reserves of manpower and resources were increasingly stretched to the limit, with no apparent end to the continuing sacrifices of blood and treasure in what appeared a stalemated war of attrition. (In Russia, by contrast, Tsar Nicholas II had repeatedly rejected German offers to negotiate a separate peace that would have removed his country from the Allied coalition.)

Most crucial to any peace negotiations, however, was Great Britain, the paymaster of its fellow allies. Here, ever growing British financial dependence upon the United States gave the president enormous potential leverage in terms of forcing the Entente Powers to the peace table. Since the beginning of the war, British naval power and control of the seas had permitted the Allies to purchase war supplies of all kinds from the United States, orders orchestrated and increasingly financed by the pre-eminent New York investment bank, J. P. Morgan, and Company. By 1916, around 40 percent of all British government spending on the war was directed to the United States. As British reserves of foreign exchange and dollar-denominated securities to pay for these dwindled, the Allies instead sought to purchase on credit, floating an unsecured \$500 million loan in October 1915, followed by further secured loans carrying a higher interest rate in the first half of 1916. Pro-Allied bankers on the newly created Federal Reserve Board also made deft use of technical loopholes to allow American banks representing Allied buyers to convert short-term commercial bills of exchange secured by goods into what became effectively longer-term unsecured credits, bills that regional Federal Reserve Banks then purchased from the issuing banks, effectively assuming any risk involved.<sup>51</sup>

Even though the Morgan firm, which acted as the US wartime purchasing agent and financial representative of Britain and France, displayed considerable creativity in exploring all possible means of providing funds for its clients, by autumn 1916 the well was beginning to run dry, a situation for which Prime Minister Raymond Asquith, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, Chancellor Sir Reginald McKenna, and assorted British Treasury officials had been steeling themselves since the spring. In an episode that Zelikow describes in detail (170-173), at this point Henry Davison, the Morgan partner who took the lead in Allied financing, proposed offering massive quantities of short-term British Treasury bills on the US market, envisaging issuing US\$10 million per week and an aggregate total of half a billion or even a billion dollars of these revolving

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<sup>51</sup> Priscilla Roberts, "Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?' The Federal Reserve System's Founding Fathers and Allied Finance in the First World War," *Business History Review* 72:4 (Winter 1998), 585-606.

credits. When Davison refused to scale back his plans, alarmed Federal Reserve Board members not only prepared to make a public statement expressing reservations over these securities, but also consulted the newly re-elected president, sending him their draft announcement for comment. Wilson, contemplating a peace initiative in the immediate future, strengthened the statement, warning not just Federal Reserve System member banks but also private investors against these securities. When published on 28 November 1916, the announcement effectively destroyed the prospects for issuing the Treasury bills, while the prices for all Allied bonds on the New York market slumped dramatically. In the most serious financial crisis it had faced since the war began, the British government was forced to support the sterling exchange rate with heavy purchases for its own account, perilously depleting the Treasury's remaining gold reserves. With funding lacking, in the months following the Board's statement American exports to the Allies declined abruptly.<sup>52</sup>

Wilson's intervention was tangible evidence of his readiness to use the crucial role of not just supplies but also loans and credits from the United States in enabling the Allies to wage war to pressure them to sit down at the peace table. Writing as long ago as 1976, John Milton Cooper, Jr. argued that, had the Germans not declared unlimited submarine warfare on 1 February 1917, thereby prompting the United States to declare war just over two months later, lack of funds would have led to the collapse of the Allied war effort some time in mid-1917.<sup>53</sup> Adam Tooze takes a similar approach, highlighting Wilson's firm conviction that the United States represented values fundamentally superior to those of not just the Central but also the Entente Powers.<sup>54</sup> Other historians have been more skeptical. Ferguson has accused the economist John Maynard Keynes, then working in the British Treasury, of consistently exaggerating the extent of British financial dependence on the United States, arguing that Keynes's own pacifist sympathies predisposed him to favor Wilson's efforts to negotiate an end to hostilities.<sup>55</sup> Hew Strachan has argued that, even if the German declaration of unlimited submarine warfare had not propelled the United States into the war, Wilson could not have followed through on his intention to cut off American loans to the Allies, because given the reliance of American industry on Allied orders, this would have triggered an economic crisis in the United States.<sup>56</sup> Zelikow, in response (318 n. 8), suggests that by this point the US economy was less dependent than it had been on Allied war orders, which were competing with and perhaps even holding back domestic demand.

Although it sometimes differs on the interpretation of specific details or episodes, a recent study of top-level British policymaking by Daniel Larsen lends additional force to Zelikow's analysis.<sup>57</sup> Larsen depicts the British political elite as divided. On one side were those such as Asquith, Grey, McKenna, and former Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, who appreciated that the Allies' dependence on US goods and their dwindling ability to raise the dollar loans and credits needed to pay for these meant that at some point in 1917, they would reach the end of their available financial resources. Dwindling supplies from across the Atlantic would in turn constrain the Allied capability to mount intensive military campaigns and force them instead onto the defensive. This belief generally inclined them to be fundamentally receptive to suggestions of a mediated peace. Those in the other camp, including Minister for Munitions and future Prime Minister David Lloyd George,

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<sup>52</sup> Roberts, "Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?" 607-617; John Milton Cooper, Jr., "The Command of Gold Reversed: American Loans to Britain, 1915-1917," *Pacific Historical Review* 45:2 (May 1976), 221-226.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, "The Command of Gold Reversed," 227-230.

<sup>54</sup> Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America, and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 51-58.

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, 326-329.

<sup>56</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 991-992.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: America Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

the Conservative politician Bonar Law, and Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, declined to accept the existence of limitations upon Allied access to US funds or the fact that their financial dependence upon the United States made them vulnerable to American pressure, and favored waging war at full throttle until a knockout blow was delivered. One interesting twist in Larsen's account is the significance he gives to the role of British signals intelligence. Sir Reginald Hall, Director of Naval Intelligence, and a strong opponent of any mediated peace, apparently distributed selected deciphered intercepts of US and German cables to particular individuals within the government, with the objective of convincing or boosting those who supported his own approach. These divisions among the British elite mirrored those within German officialdom, where in late 1916 Bethmann Hollweg and Bernstorff sought desperately to restrain Ludendorff and Hindenburg from launching unlimited submarine warfare and bringing the United States into the war against the Central Powers. In Larsen's elegant formulation: "One set of hardliners was certain to lead their alliance to calamity; the other to be rescued by the other's folly."<sup>58</sup>

As events determined, the German military men beat the Allies to it. Though not, perhaps, by much. Without strong backing from the US government, the rickety financial expedients to which the British were resorting in late 1916 and early 1917 were almost certainly unsustainable in the long haul. When war began in August 1914, Britain's rapid transition from international creditor to debtor status and its ever-greater financial dependence on the United States had not been anticipated. Adam Tooze rightly cautions that "to imagine this gigantic mobilization as the effortless redirection of an existing network underplays the historic significance of the shift and the extreme precariousness of the financial architecture that emerged."<sup>59</sup> The British Treasury and its friends in J. P. Morgan and Company were effectively improvising as they went along.

What, then, went wrong, notwithstanding President Woodrow Wilson's undoubted intent to act as a mediator and set the stage for a negotiated peace settlement that would not only bring open combat and continuing destruction to an end but also eliminate the ever more likely prospect that a crisis with one or another belligerent power might draw his own country into the war? In particular given that Bethmann Hollweg was willing to make concessions on at least one symbolically crucial issue, German withdrawal from occupied Belgium, the proximate cause of Britain's decision to declare war in August 1914. According to Zelikow, a mixture of bad timing, unfavorable political developments in Britain, Germany, and the United States, poor communications, in terms not just of crossed wires and misunderstandings but also physical delays in the delivery of vital messages, and Wilson's own inexperience, lack of preparation, and inept diplomacy, all played their part. One may even discern some resemblance to the cascading errors at crucial junctures in the final act of *Romeo and Juliet*. But this was real life, not the theater.

The central proponent of Zelikow's volume is, of course, Woodrow Wilson. One of the key figures in the intellectual history of US foreign policy, the 28th President of the United States has generated an immense historiography, running the gamut from near canonization to something approaching demonization. During his lifetime and afterwards, Wilson was a controversial figure who provoked both extreme adulation and admiration, total hostility and contempt, and almost everything in between.<sup>60</sup> In 2020, Wilson's purported embrace of "racist thinking and policies," including segregation, led Princeton University to remove his name from the School of Public and International Affairs, founded in 1930 and

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<sup>58</sup> Larsen, *Plotting for Peace*, 288,

<sup>59</sup> Tooze, *The Deluge*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> To explore the range of literature on all aspects of Wilson in greater detail, see the volume of incisive essays, Ross Kennedy, ed., *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

renamed in his honor in 1948, as a tribute not just to Wilson's accomplishments in the political and diplomatic sphere but also to his service from 1902 to 1910 as a dynamic president of Princeton University.<sup>61</sup>

Zelikow's volume provides additional evidence on how the president—in common with many other contemporaries—perceived the world through racialized lenses. Wilson has sometimes been presented as an advocate of anti-imperialism, whose wartime backing for self-determination and the rights of small nations inspired anti-colonial independence movements across the world, weakening the Western empires.<sup>62</sup> Yet one reason for his reluctance to allow the United States to enter the war was his fear of irreparably weakening the “White nations,” among which he ranked his own, telling his close adviser and confidant Colonel Edward M. House on 4 January 1917: “We are the only one of the great White nations that is free from war today, and it would be a crime against civilization for us to go in.”<sup>63</sup> Just four weeks later, according to David H. Houston, Wilson's Secretary of Agriculture, at the cabinet meeting of 2 February 1917, one day after Germany had begun unlimited submarine warfare, the president stated that “if he felt that, in order to keep the white race or part of it strong to meet the yellow race—Japan, for instance, in alliance with Russia, dominating China—it was wise to do nothing, he would do nothing, and would submit to anything and any imputation of cowardice.”<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, the president's decisions and actions in 1916 and the early months of 1917 constitute the heart of this narrative. Convincingly, Zelikow portrays the often-charismatic Wilson not as the high-minded idealist and visionary of much historical legend, but as a pragmatic leader who was at his most effective when focusing upon the immediate practicalities of exactly how an objective might be reached. While by no means unprincipled, Wilson was a rather shrewd and skilled political strategist, who was willing to adapt his policies in response to changing circumstances. These qualities were in evidence in his efforts in early 1916 to persuade the two warring coalitions to begin peace negotiations. They were also demonstrated in his public endorsement in a speech in May 2016 of the creation of a postwar organization to prevent future wars, an idea that did not originate with the president, who had appropriated it from British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey and to some degree from the US-based League to Enforce Peace, a private organization established in early 1915 with backing from prominent Republican politicians. In late November 1916, following his re-election, the president's abilities were likewise displayed to advantage in his determined exercise of financial pressure in an effort to force the Allies to the negotiating table.

Yet, despite Wilson being dead set upon facilitating a negotiated peace and willing to use whatever leverage the United States possessed over either side to attain this end, the Allied and Central Powers never reached even the stage of at least having talks about talks. One factor was the interlocking impact of internal US and British domestic political considerations. Wilson, a Democratic president who had won power in 1912 largely because the divided Republicans put up two competing contenders, faced a tough re-election challenge in 1916. Although running on his successful record of keeping the United States out of war while maintaining American rights, during the campaign Wilson was not prepared to spring an October surprise and announce that he would call a peace conference. He thought the issue too significant to make it a political football. More pragmatically, until the returns came in on 8 November 1916, it was far from clear who would win what was ultimately an extremely close election. Until they could be sure just who they would be dealing with for

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<sup>61</sup> Lori Aratani, “Princeton Says it Will Remove Woodrow Wilson's Name from its Public Policy School,” *Washington Post*, 28 June 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/princeton-says-it-will-remove-woodrow-wilsons-name-from-campus-buildings/2020/06/27/26075bee-b898-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/princeton-says-it-will-remove-woodrow-wilsons-name-from-campus-buildings/2020/06/27/26075bee-b898-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html), accessed 20 December 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Edward M. House, diary, 4 January 1917, quoted in Zelikow, *The Road Less Traveled*, 241.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Zelikow, *The Road Less Traveled*, 317 n. 40.

the next four years, the governments of the warring powers had little incentive to respond to American overtures with anything more than polite but cautious prevarication.

Once Wilson was assured that he would be in office until 1921, he turned his hand immediately to the task of expediting the opening of serious peace negotiations. In Britain, leading figures in the existing cabinet, including Prime Minister Asquith, Foreign Secretary Grey, and Chancellor of the Exchequer McKenna, as well as former Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, had already shown themselves to be receptive to the prospect of ending the war before Britain scraped the bottom of the barrel of its steadily dwindling resources. Facing potential crises in manpower and shipping in 1917, and with continued access to further US funding and therefore supplies problematic, they were pessimistic over the prospects that Britain and its Allies could continue fighting at the same levels as in the past. After exceptionally murky internal maneuverings within the wartime coalition government Asquith had headed since May 1915, in early December 1916 his colleague David Lloyd George replaced him, and Grey and McKenna likewise left office. Overall, Lloyd George and his new cabinet were far less inclined than their predecessors to be conciliatory to the United States.

The major exception was probably Arthur James Balfour, the new Foreign Secretary, who from December 1916 apparently maintained a communications backchannel to House, Wilson's closest adviser, through the youthful Sir William Wiseman, a British intelligence operative based in New York. Wiseman was aware that Bernstorff, the German ambassador, was likewise working near frantically to encourage the opening of serious peace negotiations. Almost certainly, however, neither Wiseman nor House recognized that Bernstorff's urgency was spurred by his working with an ominous deadline, since the German military had won authorization from Kaiser Wilhelm II to resume unlimited submarine warfare from 1 February 1917, a move that was liable to provoke outright war between Germany and the United States.

As Zelikow highlights, Wilson's personal reliance upon House also brought its own problems. Blessed with great self-confidence in his own judgment and opinions, the president was a masterly rhetorician, writing as well as delivering his own speeches and other key documents of his presidency. Among these were inspirational formulations of US diplomatic principles, the reverberations of which still inform the present-day international policies of his country. Speaking before crowds, he appeared expansive and at ease. On a professional level, as president of Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and president of the United States, Wilson obviously had to deal with many people. Yet despite his public oratorical skills and the respect, admiration, even veneration many who knew him felt for Wilson, personally he was an extremely private and even shy man with remarkably few intimate friends. Meeting small groups of strangers, he tended to appear awkward. He felt most relaxed with his family or the small circle of his extended household, and was emotionally deeply reliant upon his first and second wives. While most politicians tend to be gregarious, Wilson was just the opposite. He had little time or inclination for socializing, and displayed little skill in reaching out to political opponents or even indeed allies, a weakness that would be particularly significant during his second term in office.

For most of his presidency, Wilson's closest friend and confidant was the unobtrusive Colonel Edward M. House, a wealthy Texan with ambitions to play a behind-the-scenes role in political affairs. Rather than undertaking sensitive war-related diplomatic negotiations himself, from 1914 to early 1917 Wilson delegated to House much of the responsibility for these. Assessments of House's abilities and his contributions to Wilsonian diplomacy vary, with Zelikow particularly harsh in his criticism: "One of the few benefits of American entry into the world war is that House's role became relatively less important" (275). Most are in agreement, however, that House was significantly more pro-Allied in outlook than his patron the president.<sup>65</sup> In late 1916 and early 1917, House was decidedly more reluctant than Wilson to put pressure on the Allied powers. According to Zelikow, who relies heavily on House's unpublished diary, which is often at odds with the version that

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<sup>65</sup> See Larsen, *Plotting for Peace*; also Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Inga Floto, *Colonel House at Paris: A Study of American Policy at the Paris Peace Conference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Godfrey Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson's Right Hand: The Life of Colonel Edward M. House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Joyce Grigsby Williams, *Colonel House and Sir Edward Grey: A Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984).

appeared in print in the 1920s, on several occasions he was remarkably dilatory in following up on presidential initiatives or ensuring that vital messages were dispatched, deflecting, and delaying in order to win the British more breathing space. At times, indeed, House deliberately misrepresented the president's position and his own to Ambassador Bernstorff, reversing their respective views; he likewise erroneously reported to Wilson that a pacifist British member of parliament who had spoken in support of mediation before the end of 1916 had in fact said the opposite.

The evidence Zelikow cites suggests that for at least several weeks at this crucial juncture in 1916-1917, the dilatory House deliberately attempted to scupper the president's moves to set the stage for a peace conference, trusting that sufficient procrastination and even misrepresentation might result in a situation where the United States was ultimately drawn into war with Germany. He thereby undercut the desperate efforts not just of Wilson himself but also of Foreign Secretary Balfour and his New York operative William Wiseman on the British side, and Bethmann Hollweg and Ambassador Bernstorff on behalf of Germany. Admittedly, the documentary record, however painstakingly reconstructed, is still far from complete, especially where intercepted intelligence messages are concerned. Yet the material that has survived is highly suggestive. In conversations with the president and other administration officials, including Secretary of State Robert Lansing, who shared his pro-British leanings, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, and Assistant Secretary of State Frank Polk, House also fantasized repeatedly about the rather surreal danger that, if Wilson should alienate the British by pressing ahead with and gaining German acquiescence in his peace initiative, Japan and Britain would secretly move their forces to Canada and launch an invasion of the United States (159-160, 177).

Ultimately, though, the responsibility for the failure of Wilson's efforts of late 1916 and early 1917 to lay the ground for a negotiated peace settlement has to be laid upon the shoulders of the president himself. Wilson was the one who had originally chosen to rely upon House as his diplomatic conduit to the belligerents. In November 1916, after House had, as Zelikow recounts, spent lengthy hours of argument trying to dissuade Wilson "against making a peace move at present," (158) the president finally ordered his subordinate to meet with Ambassador Bernstorff as soon as possible. Zelikow comments on Wilson's failure to consider "whether House was still a reliable messenger, but he had no other option, unless he handled this with Bernstorff himself. His predecessors would have done that, but that was not Wilson's way." (159) One can only ask: Why not?

In the final analysis, the obligation of selecting reliable and trustworthy advisers fell firmly within the president's bailiwick. With the future of peace negotiations at stake, and House a somewhat questionable intermediary, it should not have been too difficult for Wilson to summon the German ambassador to the White House. In response to any summons from House, Bernstorff was invariably willing to travel several hours from Washington to meet the colonel at his New York apartment. The White House was far closer to the German embassy, and by no means off bounds to visitors. In late November Wilson did, after all, find time for lengthy conversations with House. On 25 November, the president also met with William P.G. Harding, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, to discuss the impending announcement on British Treasury bills. In early December, Wilson conferred with assorted labor leaders, and later that month, his cabinet had dinner at the White House. Beyond his own inhibitions, no genuine barriers existed to prevent Woodrow Wilson from ceasing to negotiate at arm's-length and by proxy, and taking control of top-level diplomacy into his own hands.

Zelikow argues that ultimately, Wilson's peace initiative "failed simply because he did not know how to do it." (273) Yet he also notes that an exceedingly relevant precedent did exist: that of President Theodore Roosevelt's successful brokering of the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth, negotiated in New Hampshire, that brought an end to the infinitely less destructive Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Wilson, the State Department, and House seem to have made no effort to study in detail just how Roosevelt handled that challenge. This omission is even more surprising given that, at Wilson's request, in late 1917 House was heavily involved in setting up the Inquiry, a brain trust of more than a dozen US experts on international affairs, who worked on detailed plans for the peace settlement that was expected to follow the war and eventually attended the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.<sup>66</sup> In 1916, the US foreign policy apparatus lacked the Policy Planning Staff and National

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<sup>66</sup> Lawrence E. Gelfand, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917-1919* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

Security Council that would emerge in the aftermath of World War II. As Zelikow recounts, however, Wilson was nonetheless scrutinizing closely suggestions put forward in opinion pieces by “Cosmos” (President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University) in the *New York Times* in late November 1916, urging that the time to make peace had come. By January 1917, he was also much influenced by a series of articles by the progressive editors of the liberal journal *The New Republic*, Walter Lippmann, and Herbert Croly, urging a compromise peace settlement. These ideas fed into his “Peace Without Victory” address to the US Congress on 22 January 1917.

In October 1916, Wilson told the journalist Ida Tarbell that he was not interested in simply discussing or laying out “general terms” for a peace settlement. “What I want to know is how it is to be done. I am never interested until that point is reached. . . . I am not interested until a practical method is proposed—that is, I suppose that in government I am a pragmatist: my first thought is, will it work?” (25, 165). From late November 1916 to the end of January 1917, he subjected the British to excruciating financial pressure; he called on all belligerents to state their terms for peace; and he addressed the US Congress and by extension the international community on the overriding need for a “peace without victory,” stating that the United States would join a future organization designed to arbitrate international conflicts and so prevent the outbreak of any further wars. Even so, tangible specifics were missing; Wilson confined himself to exhortations. Never did the president issue a concrete and definite summons to a peace conference, or even to a meeting to talk about talks, an invitation that would have placed all belligerents on the spot and strengthened the hand of advocates of a negotiated settlement in every warring country. Notwithstanding his passionate commitment to ending the war before the United States was sucked into the conflict, Wilson possessed no clear strategy or road map as to how this objective might be attained. Here, the president’s reliance on and confidence in his own instincts and judgment did him a great disservice.

One further irony is that, although British and German diplomats took the lead in negotiations with the Wilson administration that were aimed at laying the foundations for serious peace talks, other warring nations were reaching the right psychological moment to respond to an invitation. By late 1916, military defeats and shortages of food, fuel, and other basics were prompting massive protests and mutinies within Russia, as the Duma warned Tsar Nicholas II that, unless he established a constitutional government, his regime would fall. When Nicholas ignored this appeal and used violence against the protesters, chaos ensued; he was forced to abdicate in March 1917, as a liberal provisional government took office. The young Emperor Karl I, who succeeded to the Austro-Hungarian throne on 30 November 1916, was a staunch advocate of peace negotiations, viewing these as the only realistic route for the survival of at least the core of the Hapsburg Empire and by extension his own monarchy. With the French increasingly weary of an inconclusive war, a potential peace settlement based on something close to the *status quo ante*, with German forces withdrawing from occupied Belgium and France, an arrangement that Bethmann Hollweg and Ambassador Bernstorff suggested to House and Wilson, would have had much to recommend it. While each belligerent nation had its quota of hardline warriors who wished almost for the sake of it to continue fighting to the bitter end, in every country elites and the general population alike might for the most part have found it impossible to resist the prospect of a compromise peace settlement that would end further fighting and the resulting suffering and privations.

At the end of August 1916, Wilson told the American Neutral Conference Committee: “If they once stop fighting and begin to parley, they will never begin fighting again. The minute that happens, the war is over. They will never go back to it. They will never revive the forces that will sustain them in it” (152). His prediction was probably accurate. It is tantalizing to contemplate how close the world came to discovering whether or not he was correct. Despite his inexperience in international affairs when he first became president, Wilson brought an impressive level of imagination, creativity, and ingenuity to the conduct of diplomacy. By no means, all his ideas originated with him, but he was skilled at appropriating and adapting concepts first advanced by others. Even after 1 February 1917, when the German navy launched unlimited submarine warfare, or the release of the highly provocative Zimmermann Telegram at the end of that month, he could still conceivably have moved to call a peace conference of all the belligerent states based upon the principles that he had laid out in his address of 22 January 1917. If even one combatant nation—perhaps Austria-Hungary or Russia—had broken ranks and accepted his invitation, others would—however grudgingly—almost inevitably have followed.

Writing in 2001, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara claimed that “the ghost of Woodrow Wilson . . . has haunted world leaders from his day to ours.” According to McNamara, who was himself pursued by memories of his own share in the responsibility for the Vietnam War and the many ensuing needless deaths in that conflict: “The message of Wilson’s ghost is: Beware the blindness and folly that led Europe’s leaders into the First World War, a disaster theretofore without compare in world history.” He proceeded to argue that “Wilson, almost alone in his own day, focused on the all-consuming character of the First World War, on the enormous loss of life it caused, and on the consequent necessity for a comprehensive and radical program to prevent another such catastrophe.”<sup>67</sup>

McNamara exempted Wilson from responsibility for the war itself. Perhaps, though, his portrayal of Wilson was too generous. As discussed earlier, Ferguson placed the prime responsibility for the devastation of every kind that World War I let loose upon the world upon the decision that Asquith, Grey, and other British Liberal leaders made in August 1914, to declare war in defense of Belgium and France and dispatch a British Expeditionary Force to Belgium, thereby preventing a speedy German victory over France. One may debate whether or not Ferguson’s analysis is correct. But in all fairness, lacking clairvoyant powers, in 1914 top British politicians could hardly have been expected to foresee all the fearsome long-term ramifications that Ferguson argues resulted from their decision to send British troops to Belgium.

By late 1916, by contrast, the ravages and devastation of every kind the conflict had brought in its train were only too apparent. The president himself undoubtedly recognized them, impelling him to seek to insulate his own country from the conflict, ideally by brokering a negotiated settlement. Quite possibly, after two years of hostilities, Wilson not only fumbled an opportunity to facilitate peace but, by bringing the United States into the war, ensured its continuance for almost two more years, with all the ensuing consequences in terms of deaths, devastation, violent regime changes, the emergence of a Communist state in Russia, and the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. If, by deciding on war in early 1917, Woodrow Wilson did indeed become the master impresario behind these events, ever since then, at the global level and below, his specter has indeed cast a long shadow over the world.

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<sup>67</sup> Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, *Wilson’s Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 3, 9.



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 REVIEW BY HEW STRACHAN, UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS
 

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Four decades ago, when I was embarking on a study of the First World War, the chaplain of my Cambridge college – a lawyer rather than a historian by training – expressed the hope that I would answer what for him was the big question of the war. Why at the end of 1916 hadn't the belligerents accepted the opportunity for peace offered them by the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson? In July 1914 they had taken up arms, comparatively innocent (for all that the innocence is regularly over-stated) of the likely consequences of their actions. As the third Christmas of the conflict approached, they had no such excuse. The battles of Verdun and the Somme had resulted in roughly 1.7 million dead on the western front alone. That November the Conservative politician, the Marquess of Lansdowne, warned his colleagues on Britain's War Committee that they were destroying the very civilisation they were seeking to defend. Lansdowne was no pacifist: he had served as Secretary of War during the South African War and he had been responsible as Foreign Secretary for the Anglo-French Entente in 1904 in whose name Britain was in part fighting. A year later, in November 1917, freed from the responsibility of office, he would write to the newspapers to make his views public. He was denounced for his pains, even if privately many agreed with him.

In *The Road Less Travelled*, Philip Zelikow sets out to answer the chaplain's question. In Zelikow's view the chance for peace was real and yet the topic has been neglected. There is both truth and hyperbole in those assertions. Zelikow makes clear just how complex Wilson's task was but he still suggests that the choice confronting the statesmen of the belligerent powers was a binary one between war and peace. In practice it no longer seemed like that to most of them. Nor is Zelikow the first to have addressed their problems, even if his focus is more precise and several of his judgements are fresh. The pursuit of peace in the first half of the war has bulked large in a clutch of recent biographies – of Wilson by Scott Berg, of Wilson's principal adviser on these issues, Colonel Edward House, by Charles Neu, and of House's principal British interlocutor, Sir Edward Grey, by T.G. Otte.<sup>68</sup> Back in 1958 Karl Birnbaum looked at Germany's simultaneous pursuit of peace and submarine warfare and in 2021 itself Daniel Larsen trod much of the same ground as Zelikow with a book called *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers and Britain at War, 1914-1917*.<sup>69</sup>

Zelikow is generous in his acknowledgement of Larsen's work, although he will have had to finalise his book before the latter's was out. Both embody what is new or comparatively new in our understanding of the Anglo-American diplomatic dialogue in 1916. First, they stress how many members of the British cabinet were ready to countenance peace. Lansdowne was not alone, even if his memorandum of November 1916 was never granted the full debate it was promised because of the fall of the Asquith government at the beginning of December 1916. Secondly, the role of British signals and human intelligence in London's manipulation of the United States and in its conduct of foreign policy was far more pervasive than the concentration on Britain's use of the Zimmermann telegram to orchestrate America's entry to the war has sometimes suggested. Thirdly, Zelikow and Larsen put the financial crisis precipitated by British (and hence Entente) borrowing on Wall Street into the story of Anglo-American international relations.

On 28 November 1916, the Federal Reserve Board warned Americans that they were over-investing in British Treasury bills and so betting on an Entente victory, a move which not only sent British stocks plunging but also threatened sterling's convertibility against the dollar. Between then and American entry to the war, Britain knew that at any moment the United

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<sup>68</sup> A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: a biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); T.G. Otte, *Statesman of Europe: A Life of Sir Edward Grey* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> Karl E. Birnbaum, *Peace Moves and U-boat Warfare: A Study of Imperial Germany's Policy Towards the United States April 18, 1916-January 9, 1917* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958); Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

States could effectively foreclose on the allies' finances. When Kathleen Burk discussed this in 1985,<sup>70</sup> she pointed to Woodrow Wilson's personal role in strengthening the board's advice to American banks on unsecured loans to foreign powers. Zelikow goes further, showing how in December Wilson began to appreciate the political leverage over Britain he now possessed and how conscious of its latency those charged with British finances were. In the event the possible connection between war finance and war termination was never 'weaponised', not least because Germany pre-empted the opportunity it presented by adopting unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917.

While Britain made the link between economic power and military effectiveness central to its strategy, Germany did not. Two figures who bulk large in Zelikow's pages as advocates of a negotiated peace and who enjoyed comparable responsibilities for state finance – Reginald McKenna, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer until December 1916, and Karl Helfferich, Germany's finance secretary until May 1916 and vice-chancellor thereafter - took diametrically opposed views. McKenna saw finance as the enabler of Britain's war effort, believing that its role in equipping not only Britain but also its allies made the preservation of the balance of trade, the maintenance of the gold standard, and the capacity to secure foreign loans priorities in sustaining the war effort. McKenna wanted to limit the size of the army to maintain labour not just for domestic production but also to ensure Britain's balance of payments. Helfferich did not. He effectively accepted the German catchphrase that 'money plays no role,' boasting that he had granted the army all it wanted and that domestic borrowing through monetary inflation made Germany strong.

David Lloyd George, McKenna's predecessor as Chancellor of the Exchequer and the British Prime Minister with whom Wilson and House had to deal from 3 December 1916, thought more like Helfferich than he did McKenna (who lost his post when Lloyd George formed his government). In this sense Wilson's financial leverage proved only as strong as the perceptions surrounding it. That was why Germany did not recognise its opportunity in December but instead – as many Americans and Britons appreciated at the time - came to the Entente's rescue on 1 February with its declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare. Britain's financial crisis would be resolved by America's entry to the war in April 1917, but Lloyd George's distance from the views of McKenna and of his principal Treasury adviser, John Maynard Keynes, made him less susceptible to Wilson's pressure. He believed that Britain could afford to mobilise both industry and a mass army in order to deliver victory and so was ready to jettison the Liberal orthodoxies on which he had been raised.

He also had little room for political manoeuvre. Privately, Lloyd George may have recognised the case for a negotiated peace of the sort that Wilson and House were proposing but publicly he could not afford to be its advocate. His hold on office in December 1916 was contingent on the support of Conservatives, not Liberals, and they in turn were in thrall to the Northcliffe press, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, and its support of the army and the war on the western front. Some were tariff reformers, ready to abandon free trade for protectionism after the war and agreeing with like-minded French ministers that a peace settlement should hold back Germany's economic recovery so that their two countries could establish a post-war competitive edge. The pressures from Washington and the desire for peace were not the only forces shaping decisions in London.

Zelikow barely acknowledges how powerful these could be. Sir Edward Grey, as Zelikow says, wanted to end the war but that was not the only factor he had to keep in play when he talked to House. As Britain's Foreign Secretary he had to manage Anglo-American relations in ways that underpinned Britain's war effort as much as remove the need for it in the first place. The war had brought the United States out of recession and many Americans (including House) sympathised with the Entente cause. However, Grey's critics argued that Britain was not waging economic warfare with sufficient ferocity because it deferred too readily to American sensibilities over neutrals' trading rights. At the same time, and even more importantly, Grey had to balance what he said to House about peace with Britain's obligations to its allies to wage war.

On 5 September 1914, Britain, France, and Russia had signed the London agreement committing each of them not to make a separate peace. Britain could not go it alone, whatever the inclinations of some in its cabinet, without a gross act of

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<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America, and the Sineews of war, 1914-1918* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 84-5.

betrayal, one that would rekindle the rivalries of the nineteenth century and so fracture the security arrangements which allowed Britain simultaneously to protect its empire and to keep the balance in Europe. The debate about how to end the First World War therefore began not in 1916, as Zelikow suggests, but from its outset. Woodrow Wilson offered the services of the United States in seeking peace while he was mourning the death of his first wife on 6 August 1914. By the end of the year, he had instructed House to depart on his first mission to Europe. By then too Germany was putting out tentative peace feelers via Denmark to Russia. For Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the Prussian general staff, Russia – an autocracy and Britain’s long-term rival in Asia – was on the wrong side. Despite its military setbacks in 1915, Russia resisted German blandishments. Its loyalty to the Entente was further cemented by the Straits agreement, which in March 1915 promised Russia control of Istanbul and the warm-water trading route from the Black Sea into the eastern Mediterranean in the event of the Ottomans’ defeat.

These early moves vitiated what followed. A separate peace was not a step to a general peace of the sort pursued by Wilson, but a means of more effectively waging war. If Germany could secure peace with Russia, it would use it, not as a path to further negotiations, but to concentrate its forces in the west. The purpose of the 1914 London agreement was to forestall such an eventuality. If Britain and France forewent their commitments to Russia, they would further endanger themselves. Coalition cohesion demanded that the allies marched towards peace together or not at all. Wilson and House, with their disregard of Russia and their focus on Britain and Germany, seem never to have grasped that point – and nor does Zelikow. He concentrates almost entirely on the Anglo-German antagonism, on the western front and on the war in the Atlantic, as though other powers and other theatres of war were immaterial.

That they were not can be demonstrated in two ways. First, the war that had broken out in the Balkans in July 1914 had already widened before 1916 as each alliance secured further partners – Japan and Italy in the case of the Entente and the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria in the case of the Central Powers. Both the Italians and the Turks were pursuing regional objectives, in Italy’s case the completion of its unification at Austria-Hungary’s expense and in Turkey’s the recovery of its recent losses in territory and status in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and North Africa. Neither Wilson nor House recognised the potency of these conflicts in their pursuit of peace. They had begun before what Zelikow perceives as the widening of the war in 1917, and they would outlive what we conventionally think as its formal end in 1918.

Secondly, when Germany signed the armistice with Britain, France, and the United States on 11 November 1918, it did so unilaterally, not as part of a general negotiation or of a collective surrender of its allies. The war was ended by a series of separate armistice and peace negotiations. During 1918 the alliances unravelled and – ironically – the Entente was the first to fall. In March Russia signed a separate peace with the Central Powers, and did so on terms which were dictated more than they were negotiated. But they did not lead to a ‘German peace,’ not least because by then the United States was in the war. Instead, Germany’s allies, ostensibly satiated by the fruits of the victory over Russia but in reality, exhausted by the war, felt no need to fight in a war in western Europe in which they had no interest, not least because it was the one on which America was focused. The war ended as each of Germany’s allies sought a separate armistice and as their enemies used those armistice negotiations cumulatively to secure a collective victory. Grey could not have foreseen all of this in 1916 but he was more aware of the conflict’s wider dimensions, not least because of his extensive experience in foreign affairs and his commitment to the European balance of power, than were Wilson and House. As Zelikow makes abundantly clear, both were amateurs in the business of diplomacy.

In Germany, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg had an even more difficult hand to play. Zelikow, as Grey did, treats the chancellor as an honorary liberal, the figure in Berlin ready to compromise, not as the fellow-traveller of Prussian militarism portrayed by Fritz Fischer in his studies of German war aims.<sup>71</sup> Zelikow is surely right, and his interpretation makes the ‘might-have-beens’ of December 1916 even more poignant. But, as it does with Grey, his narrative also leaves too much out of account. After all, on 9 September 1914 Bethmann Hollweg drew up the first official war aims programme. His bid to secure economic domination of Belgium, northern France and much of central and eastern Europe may have been a means

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<sup>71</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967).

to win what he now realised was a ‘world war’, not the basis for a post-war settlement, and by 1916 it may have become a list of gains to be negotiated away at a peace conference. Nonetheless, it put the notion of a German-dominated *Mitteleuropa* into the public debate and gave the Reich’s pressure groups a stick with which to beat him.

A German-dominated federation which ran from the English Channel to Poland and from the Baltic to the Balkans would present a persistent threat to France and Russia, and by the same token would upset any British hopes for re-establishing the European balance of power. The debate on war aims in Germany, which was much more public than in the Entente and much more deeply rooted by 1916, cut across the chancellor’s moves for peace in late 1916. Nobody, inside Germany as much as outside, could be quite sure what Germany wanted without a clear statement of its war aims. The fact that Germany was in *de facto* control of so much of the territory that was under debate put it in a very different position from Britain, France, and Russia, each of which – if they accepted peace talks – would have to re-establish the frontiers of 1914 by negotiation, not by military force. Unsurprisingly, therefore, those in the Entente who argued that the balance on the battlefield would eventually swing their way seemed to have the better argument. Privately, as Zelikow stresses, Bethmann may have been ready to forego France and Belgium and to establish a nominally independent Poland, but he was powerless to say so publicly – and that was what mattered.

Bethmann Hollweg had brought this on himself. Although he agreed with Falkenhayn on the need for peace with Russia, he opposed a direct offer and believed it needed to be made on the basis of a victory. In 1916 he manoeuvred Falkenhayn out of office in favour of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. Domestic politics may have left Bethmann with little choice, but the change boxed him in yet further. If Hindenburg and Ludendorff had accepted a negotiated settlement, their popularity might have enabled the chancellor to sell it to the German people and to the Reichstag, but the new incumbents had consistently rejected Falkenhayn’s pursuit of a separate peace with Russia. Stunned by the scale and technological sophistication of the Somme offensive, they joined the navy in endorsing unrestricted U-boat war in the west. Bethmann could not be open with the Americans in December 1916, not just because he could not afford to reveal his hand before any peace negotiations but also because he was too weak politically at home to do so. In the Kaiser’s eyes his job was to manage the Reichstag and by end of 1916 a majority supported submarine warfare. It is easy to see why Birnbaum saw the German peace offer of 12 December 1916 as a ploy to clear the path to that option without necessarily pulling the United States into the war.

It might even have worked. Wilson’s critics see the Democrats’ claim in November 1916 that he had kept the United States out of the war as a front to ensure that he was re-elected. They interpret Wilson’s own peace offer of 18 December 1916 as part of the same plot, a show of neutrality destined to fail diplomatically but designed to ensure domestic unity when the decision for war came.<sup>72</sup> Zelikow’s revisionism is directed at them – and his book plays to best effect with an American readership. His Wilson is not a cynical politician pulling the strings of popular opinion but a principled leader who came to believe that it was America’s manifest destiny to use its democracy to create a better world. His problem was not insincerity but incompetence. He had no idea how to put this vision into effect. He could not move from the idea of peace to peace negotiations and, without any indication of what the practicalities might be, he could not give the belligerents’ leaders whose support he needed the baits with which to convince their colleagues – or increasingly themselves – that the United States was in earnest.

Wilson did not help himself. The sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 led both Walter Hines Page, America’s ambassador in London, and House, who, having made an earlier crossing in the same vessel, was himself in London at the time, to assume that the United States would declare war on Germany. Wilson rebuffed the pressure to do so but he left Page in post, despite his Anglophilia, just as he left James Gerard, whom he judged to be a fool, in Berlin. Without diplomats he could trust in the capitals of Britain and Germany, he could never overcome the distance from Washington – and the consequent lags in communication – which confounded his foreign policy in Europe. House’s two missions were no substitutes,

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<sup>72</sup> A recent survey of American anti-war opinion which conveys the flavour of these views is Michael Kazin, *War against War: The American Fight for Peace 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

especially when he rejected the president's request that he undertake a third at the end of 1916. By then, in the judgement of Charles Neu, House had lost much of his influence to Wilson's second wife, Edith Galt.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, House had more often seen his efforts as clearing the path to America's entry to the war than as the pursuit of peace. That observation was even more true of Robert Lansing, the Secretary of State, but he too was not dismissed. Instead, but unhelpfully, he was excluded from Wilson's inner circle.

Zelikow argues – rightly – that the original belligerents (he is presumably disregarding the later entrants) had defined the conflict in which they were engaged as a war of self-defence but he then also says that by 1916 it was not an 'existential' war for any of them. What could be more existential than self-defence? His answer is the Second World War, because Nazi Germany presented a greater threat than Imperial Germany. However, that was not a yardstick of which the peoples of the First World War could be aware. The wisdom of hindsight makes the war's continuation more tragic but it does not facilitate empathy.

Nor do hypotheses that rest on counter-factual arguments. Zelikow tells us that the failure to end the war in 1916-1917 'changed the whole course of world history' (9). But what happened was also a failure to change. Statesmen proved unwilling or unable to follow 'the road less travelled,' including ultimately Wilson himself. We don't know what would have changed if a general peace had been negotiated in 1917. The war was not the only cause of economic and social pressure in Europe. The appalling winter of 1916-1917 and the poor harvest in 1917 precipitated poverty and hunger independently of the blockade. The peace might possibly have been partial, not general, and it would almost certainly have been contested, particularly given the persistence after 1918 of the regional wars that predated 1916. Wilson believed that neutrals, including the United States, should take part in the creation of the post-war order but in that case America's involvement could have prompted its rejection in Congress, just as it did in 1919. Russia might not necessarily have escaped the revolution which so many observers thought imminent. And would Russia's neighbours have been unaffected by revolution? Before 1914 Bethmann Hollweg had put off the constitutional reform of the Reich; after the end of the war he would have had to implement it. Even in 1916 some Germans anticipated that there would have to be a second war and hoped they could have a true leader the next time round.

The historian's job is to explain contingency and to examine the relationship between cause and effect. Zelikow has done much of that well but when he resorts to unprovable speculation he is in danger of undermining his own argument. Conceptually the division between war and peace may be binary, but the two are also interdependent. By 1916 the dead were sunk costs whose memory for some could be sanctified only by victory, not by a fractured peace. By then too the war had already changed too much for the world to return to its pre-1914 channels. The transition to peace would bring its own conflicts and they too would be shaped by contingency.

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<sup>73</sup> Neu, *Colonel House*, 285-7.

REVIEW BY JOHN A. THOMPSON, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, EMERITUS

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Few historical judgments are as widely accepted as that World War I was catastrophic for Europe, both as an immediate experience and in its longer-term consequences. But, as Philip Zelikow points out in this challenging contribution to the historiography, much of the human suffering and the most momentous consequences would have been avoided if the war had ended before the United States entered the conflict and Russia succumbed to defeat and the Bolshevik revolution. These events followed the failure of the attempts to bring about a negotiated peace made in 1916-17 by the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and the American president, Woodrow Wilson. In this highly readable and forcefully argued study, Zelikow, a former diplomat and policymaker, tells the story of these attempts and analyzes why they were unsuccessful.

While being a contribution to scholarship, this book is also clearly designed to appeal to non-specialist readers. Written in a lively, man-of-the world style, it assumes no prior knowledge, and places everything in its geographical and chronological context. There are insightful pen portraits (supplemented by photographs) of all the principal actors. Nor are we ever allowed to forget the human significance of what was at stake in the high politics that is the book's principal focus. The diplomatic story is framed by an account of the experience of Edward Thomas, the thirty-seven-year-old English poet and friend of Robert Frost, who was killed in the trenches shortly after the United States entered the war; the book's title alludes to the poem Frost sent Thomas as the latter was agonizing over whether to volunteer or to accept Frost's invitation to join him in America. In the body of the book, the narration of political and diplomatic developments is interspersed with reminders of the horrors occurring on the western front at the time, with particular attention paid to the personal losses being suffered by leading policymakers – notably the death of Raymond Asquith, the widely admired son of the British Prime Minister. But Zelikow seeks to engage his readers' minds as well as their emotions. The extensive footnotes demonstrate that he has not only read but also critically appraised a wide range of both primary and secondary sources. This a serious and thoughtful work of history

The basic issue of whether there could have been a negotiated peace in 1916-17 clearly requires consideration of the factors shaping policy in (at a minimum) Britain and Germany as well as in the United States, and Zelikow's account moves to and fro between these different arenas. I will leave it to reviewers who know much more than I do about the situations in Britain and Germany to assess Zelikow's treatment of those, and will concentrate on the American angle, which is perhaps the central focus of his analysis, as it certainly is of his argument. For Zelikow claims that "in the failure to make peace at the most opportune moment, no one failed, and failed the world, more than President Wilson" and that "his was the most consequential diplomatic failure in the history of the United States" (271).

Zelikow is certainly right that Wilson very much wanted to bring the European war to an end as soon as possible. This was the over-riding objective of his foreign policy from the summer of 1915 to the spring of 1917. It had become so after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 had led Wilson to demand, in a series of notes that implicitly carried the threat of war, that Germany abandon submarine attacks on merchant ships, particularly those carrying passengers. Over the next twenty months, Germany yielded to this demand, but only reluctantly, partially, and conditionally. During this time, and especially in the election campaign of 1916, Wilson became increasingly conscious of how deeply most Americans wanted to stay out of the European bloodbath. He recognised that it was only the continued willingness of the German government to limit the activities of its U-boats that saved him from having to make a painful choice between a humiliating climb-down from the diplomatic demands he had made and leading a reluctant country into a major war. The German government was well aware of Wilson's position, above all through its astute ambassador in Washington, Count Johann von Bernstorff, and in urging the president in 1916-17 to promote a peace conference, it stressed the pressures building in Germany for an unrestricted U-boat campaign. Wilson told all concerned that he did not think it right to embark on such a major foreign policy step during a presidential election, but after he won a narrow victory in early November 1916 following a campaign stressing his success in maintaining "peace with honor," he made it clear to his advisers both that bringing the war to an end was his top priority and why this was so. To Walter Lippmann, at that time a youthful editor on the *New Republic*, the president said simply "we've got to stop it before we're pulled in" (212).

So why did Wilson fail to achieve this objective, and how far was the failure due to deficiencies in his own diplomacy? From August 1916, Bethmann, with the open support of the Kaiser, was appealing to Wilson to call for a peace conference. It was the Allies who opposed a negotiated settlement at this time, for reasons that are obvious from the map Zelikow helpfully includes of where the battle lines stood in the autumn of 1916. By the end of the year, the Central Powers had won control of Belgium, a segment of north-eastern France, and a large amount of western Russia, while in the Balkans they had conquered Serbia, Montenegro, most of Albania and two-thirds of Romania. Peace negotiations at this time seemed bound to eventuate in a settlement that would be generally seen as a victory for the Prussian militarists whom allied opinion held responsible for launching this terrible war. In these circumstances, it would take some powerful inducement or coercive pressure to secure allied agreement to participate in a peace conference.

Zelikow stresses that Wilson could bring pressure to bear upon the allies through restricting their access to American production. In October 1916, the UK Treasury calculated that almost 40 per cent of British war expenditure was on imports from North America of munitions, food, and other things upon which the allied war effort depended. The huge trade deficit this had created was being financed through the sale or mortgaging of securities held by British investors, supplemented by the shipment of gold reserves. But these resources were running down so rapidly that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna warned the cabinet that “by next June or earlier, the President of the American Republic will be in a position, if he wishes, to dictate his own terms to us” (128). That Wilson realised the Allies’ vulnerability in this respect was demonstrated in late November when he urged the Federal Reserve Board to strengthen a warning to US banks against investing in the short-term British and French Treasury Bills that J.P. Morgan and Co were hoping would provide the Allies with the dollars needed to sustain their purchases. The historian Niall Ferguson has argued that Zelikow makes a mistake in taking “at face value” the dire picture of Britain’s financial plight painted by the UK Treasury, arguing that this overlooks the substantial size of the country’s remaining net external assets.<sup>74</sup> But, as Daniel Larsen has pointed out in his thorough examination of this issue in his recent study, *Plotting for Peace*, by no means all of these assets were convertible into the dollars Britain needed. Only those in the United States itself could readily be sold, or used as security for loans, on Wall Street; other investments, especially those outside North America, had at most some limited use as collateral for loans in certain circumstances. The pessimistic Treasury assessments would seem to be further confirmed by the fact that in July 1917 Britain did indeed run out of dollars, leading the then Chancellor of the Exchequer to cable Washington that “unless the United States Government can meet in full our expenses in America, the whole financial fabric of the alliance will collapse.”<sup>75</sup> By that time, the United States was a co-belligerent, and met the need by advancing the enormous sums that became the “war debts” which so bedevilled Anglo-American relations in the 1920s and 1930s.

Zelikow is correct, too, that the means Wilson had for implementing his policy were both limited and deficient. With his experience of policymaking in modern Washington, Zelikow is clearly shocked by how rudimentary the process was at this time. The small State Department handled day-to-day business but Wilson had little confidence in the judgement and capacity of his Secretary of State Robert Lansing, and even less in the US ambassadors in London and Berlin. The president himself composed on his portable typewriter important diplomatic notes as well as his speeches. In designing and executing policy toward the European war, Wilson’s sole significant aide was ‘Colonel’ Edward House, who held no official position and lived in New York, making only occasional and brief visits to the White House. As well as being Wilson’s only influential advisor, House was also the intermediary through whom the president conducted confidential exchanges with foreign leaders and diplomats.

Zelikow holds Wilson responsible for the failure to make peace in 1916-1917 on the grounds that he went about the enterprise too slowly and in entirely the wrong way. Instead of urgently seeking to set up a peace conference through confidential discussions with the two sides, Wilson sent an open diplomatic note to all the belligerents in mid-December

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<sup>74</sup> Niall Ferguson, “All the difference”, *TLS*, April 9, 2021, 23-25.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 43-44, 285, also 54-58, 141, 166.

asking that they specify the terms on which they would be prepared to make peace, and followed this up on January 22nd with a widely publicized address calling for an early “peace without victory.” But it was not only because of his own lack of diplomatic experience and House’s manifest limitations that the president acted in this way. Probing the deeper reasons shows that it was hardly true that, as Bernstorff told House in a phrase that Zelikow highlights and apparently endorses, peace was “on the floor waiting to be picked up” (15, 153, 165).

It is clear that House was instrumental in leading Wilson to delay sending his peace note and to omit from the original draft a call for a conference of the belligerents and leading neutral powers. In recent decades, leading Wilson scholars have been critical of House, seeing him as duplicitous and possessed of a megalomaniac conception of his own role that led him to be disloyal to Wilson at times.<sup>76</sup> Zelikow himself provides examples of House’s misrepresenting to the President what he had been told by British interlocutors, and to Bernstorff Wilson’s own attitude, stressing the harm this misreporting caused (164-165, 175-176, 179, 194-195). Yet, as Zelikow observes, the openness of House’s opposition to Wilson’s desire to send a peace note in early December was unprecedented in their relationship. Zelikow persuasively links it to the importance House attached to his friendship with English Liberals, particularly Foreign Secretary Edward Grey (154-163). But in fearing that Wilson was about to align the United States with the wrong side in the European conflict, House was by no means alone; Lansing and his deputy felt this even more strongly.<sup>77</sup> This clear division reflected a difference that had developed between the President and his advisers over the stake that the United States had in the outcome of the European conflict, and even before it came to a head in late 1916 this difference helped generate ambiguity about the form that possible American mediation would take.

After the *Lusitania* crisis had added urgency to Wilson’s desire to bring the European war to an end, he initially sought to achieve this objective through the relationship that House had established with Grey. It was in response to Grey’s repeated plea that the Allies would be more prepared to accept a compromise peace if the United States guaranteed the settlement that Wilson made a commitment to participate in a post-war league of nations – an epochal break with the hallowed tradition of non-involvement. But when House went to Europe in early 1916, he found that this was insufficient to secure Allied agreement to Wilson’s calling for an early peace conference. House, less averse than Wilson to war with Germany and thinking it a likely outcome of the submarine dispute in any case, offered further inducement in the form of a promise that the United States would not only intervene to press Germany to attend such a conference but also support allied demands for “the restoration of Belgium, the transfer of Alsace and Lorraine to France, and the acquisition by Russia of an outlet to the sea” (49-50, 59-62). Wilson approved the memorandum embodying these promises, adding only a “probably” to the statement that the United States would enter the war “if Germany was unreasonable.” But when in May the President made public his commitment to a post-war league of nations, he also stated that “we are in no sense or degree parties to the present quarrel” and that there should be “such a settlement with regard to their own immediate interests as the belligerents may agree upon.” Along with this affirmation of Americans’ continued detachment from European politics, Wilson expressed their belief “that every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live” and that small states should enjoy the same respect and security as large and powerful ones.<sup>78</sup>

From this array of different, somewhat inconsistent, proposals and principles, those in Britain and Germany who were attracted to the idea of American mediation selected the ones that they found most appealing and attempted to secure Wilson’s firmer commitment to these. To the Allies, it was naturally the prospect, held out by House, that the United

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<sup>76</sup> Notably, John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 207, 267, 316-319, 365-367.

<sup>77</sup> Even the bizarre idea that an alienated Britain might, in combination with Japan, invade the United States, which Zelikow shows House invoking more than once at this time, was akin to the specters of invasion pedaled earlier by pro-Allied campaigners for preparedness. On these, see John A. Thompson, “The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition”, *Diplomatic History* 16:1 (Winter 1992): 23-43, especially 25-28.

<sup>78</sup> Address to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916. *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* [henceforth *PWW*], vol. 37, 115-116.



States might come into the war on their side that was the biggest carrot, but there was always great skepticism about this, which only increased as the reluctance of the American people to enter the war became ever clearer. But there remained the possibility that at a peace conference the United States might openly back the terms outlined in the House-Grey Memorandum, and so, as Zelikow (like Larsen) shows, those in London who wanted to keep the option of American mediation on the table were disappointed and discouraged by the detachment Wilson expressed in his May speech (75-9). When the President repeated in his December peace note that he was “not at liberty to suggest” the terms on which the war should be concluded, an irritated Arthur Balfour (by that time Foreign Secretary) pointed out that the respect for small states Wilson had called for implied the restoration of Belgium, Serbia, and Montenegro (205, 309). Privately, House, continued to assure Grey that “peace on the basis of the map as it stands today” would be unacceptable to the United States, which would throw its weight “into the scales on the right side” (77, 167). On the other hand, Bethmann seized on Wilson’s statements that it was up to the belligerents to determine between themselves the terms on which the war was ended, and that the United States was interested only “in peace and its future guarantees”.<sup>79</sup> From his first approach to the President in August 1916, the chancellor made it clear that he was asking Wilson only “to start peace negotiations among the belligerents”, and following conversations with House later in the year Bernstorff reassured Berlin that Wilson had no ambition to dictate the terms of the negotiations and attached “relatively little importance to the territorial side of peace conditions.” From this, the Germans became firmly committed to the idea that there should be two conferences, one limited to the belligerents to end the fighting, and another including the United States and other neutrals to establish a post-war order with provisions for arbitration, disarmament, and a league of nations (97, 217-218).

The difference between the active, involved kind of mediation privately promised to the Allies by House and the detached form urged by Wilson in his public statements owed something to the President’s increasing irritation with the Allies in the summer of 1916. But the more fundamental reason was the President’s dominant concern that his actions should have domestic political support – an aspect of the situation that Zelikow almost completely ignores. The features of American opinion of which Wilson was most conscious as he shaped policy towards the war were the conflicting sympathies of different elements of the population and the general desire that America’s own life be disturbed as little as possible. These dictated adherence to neutrality and acting always on the basis of the nation’s own interests rather than those of any other countries. The extent to which a conflict of this scale inevitably impinged on the United States was his basic justification for committing the country to a league of nations that would prevent such wars in the future. But, as Wilson emphasized in his 1916 campaign speeches, breaking with the tradition of non-involvement did not imply abandoning neutrality. The response in the Senate to his January 1917 address, which was condemned by Republicans as different as the pro-Allied partisan Henry Cabot Lodge and the champion of traditional non-involvement William Borah, confirmed the difficulty of mustering a domestic consensus for any more ambitious intervention in European politics.

Zelikow suggests that Wilson could have bridged the gap between the simple call for a conference between the belligerents that Bethmann was asking him to make and the sort of American mediation that had some appeal in London by establishing through confidential diplomacy preconditions for negotiations that were acceptable to both sides. The difficulty of doing this was starkly revealed by the gulf between the terms in the Allies’ public response to Wilson’s peace note on 10 January and those in the note Bernstorff presented on the 31st. Zelikow maintains that “Wilson had plenty of tools in his box for informal influence on the terms of a compromise peace – if he chose to use them” (142) but this is very questionable. Since the president’s push for peace was driven by a desire to avoid American involvement in the conflict, it would have been self-contradictory for him to threaten Germany with war, as House had suggested early in 1916 that he might do. Nor would it have been quite as easy as Zelikow suggests for Wilson to put further financial pressure on the Allies. In the case of the warning against purchasing Allied Treasury Bills, the initiative had come from the Federal Reserve Board; for Wilson to have spontaneously obstructed the Allies’ ability to raise loans on the market for overtly diplomatic reasons would have been fiercely criticized by the many articulate pro-Ally sympathizers in Congress and the press as a clear departure from neutrality – in the wrong direction. Zelikow also more than once suggests that Wilson might have gained leverage by offering financial help towards the rehabilitation of Belgium, and possibly also of Poland and Serbia – making reference to the large sums raised for Belgian relief by Herbert Hoover (141-142, 221-222). But the money for Belgian relief was raised from the

<sup>79</sup> Address to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916, *PWW*, 37, 116.

American public and such resources could not be conjured up for diplomatic purposes; given the reluctance of Congress to contribute American taxpayers' dollars to post-war reconstruction even after the United States had fought a major war in Europe, it is difficult to imagine that in 1916-17 it would have provided significant funds to achieve the administration's policy goals. (It is not clear that Zelikow fully appreciates how differently the relationship of the United States to world politics was conceived then from the way it has been in recent decades.) So it is understandable that the "tools" which Wilson sought to make use of in his January address were the underwriting of European security implied in his commitment to a post-war league of nations and the war-weariness of ordinary people in all the belligerent countries. It was hardly his fault that these proved to be inadequate.

Zelikow is undoubtedly right that Europe and the world would have avoided a great deal of suffering if World War I had been brought to an end in 1916-17. But he does not persuade that at any point Wilson could have exerted sufficient influence on the belligerents to achieve the peace which he so earnestly desired.

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RESPONSE BY PHILIP ZELIKOW, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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*The Turning Point of the First World War*

The turning point of the First World War did not occur on the battlefield. It took place during the winter of 1916-1917, just over two years after the fighting had started. That winter the war should have ended, but instead it widened and deepened. The United States joined the war and sustained it, offsetting the terrible reverses the Allies suffered all through 1917, including the implosion of the Russian empire.

The standard story of this turning point, taught and retaught for generations, is that the war widened because Germany expanded its U-Boat war, defying American warnings not to do so. America joined the war. A country that, in 146 years, had never sent a single soldier or sailor to fight in Europe, would soon send two million of them to France. Neither America nor Europe would ever be the same. But the standard story leaves out the most important parts, which also affected everyone else in the war. They have been left out because, at the time and for generations afterward, these stories were secret.

When I first started work on this project nearly fifteen years ago, Ernest May (who passed away in 2009) and I were just trying to explore a puzzle. I did not foresee what a fresh look at the evidence, much of which had only been made adequately available in the last generation, would show. It disturbed some well-entrenched preconceptions. The research forced me, with some difficulty, to comprehensively reconceive this turning point of the war. The scope of that argument and the challenge it poses to many preconceptions has elicited this extraordinary roundtable which features such fine reviews from an exceptional group of scholars.

Germany expanded its U-Boat war because its secret peace efforts, which had been underway for five months, seemed to have failed. Even on the very same day, January 31, 1917, that the German government gave Wilson the message expanding the U-Boat war it gave him another message too. This one, directly from the Chancellor to Wilson, secretly confided Germany's compromise peace terms and promised to stop the German U-Boat war as soon as a peace conference began.

Even if the peace talks had failed, the war would have wound down anyway, absent American intervention. Britain was about to run out of the dollars that financed the Allied war effort. Even to this day, as is indicated in a couple of the reviews, some scholars have not quite internalized this point, though at the time it was alarmingly grasped by key officials and bankers on both sides of the Atlantic. Out of dollars and absent American intervention, the war would have wound down, except that in this case the Allies would have faced much worse terms than they could have gained through the peace talks.

Instead of ending or winding down, the war widened and deepened. America joined it, and, secretly learning of Britain's dollar bankruptcy, its government supplied the needed funds. Events proceeded to their cataclysmic results, including the particular ways the continuation of the war drove the eventual fates of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman domains and peoples, and the course of world history.<sup>80</sup>

Yet this was not the result that President Woodrow Wilson had desired. The story would be easy if it were merely a matter of irreconcilable goals. But, in fact, the German chancellor and the American president had a common vision for peace, what Wilson famously called a "peace without victory" (borrowing a phrase he had just picked up from a lead essay in *The New Republic* criticizing the British).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> In the book, for instance, I call out the importance of the argument in Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016).

<sup>81</sup> "Peace Without Victory," *The New Republic*, vol. 9 no. 112 (December 23, 1916).

That is not all. This same vision, of each country having successfully defended itself, held sway in much, if not most, of the British cabinet, at times including both of the relevant prime ministers, as well as the president of France.

In fact, the warring sides were so close to complete exhaustion; the civic courage of some key figures was so great; that it took an astonishing combination of circumstances, incompetence, and manipulation to keep the war going. Hence, over the years, a puzzle exploration became a long paper, which became a book.

The puzzle extends to the historiography. There were large gaps and distortions in the available evidence when the earlier accounts became settled during the 1950s and 1960s. The fundamental problem is that so much of the core story had long been so carefully hidden from public view, sometimes quite deliberately, that generations of scholarship understandably placed it at the margins. From some of their suggestive footnotes, I believe the editors of this part of the Papers of Woodrow Wilson began sensing that a much larger story was there, as did Arthur Link in his last work.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout almost all of human history, medical advances came only from studying gross anatomy, examining what anyone could see. No one knew of ‘microscopes.’ No one bothered about the significance of things later called ‘germs,’ or ‘genes,’ or ‘viruses.’ Hardly anyone could see such things; they were hard to understand.

So too, in the examination of great human actions. It is tempting to draw inferences from that which everyone can see. The Germans brought the United States into the war by extending their submarine blockade. Everyone could see that.

Yet, seen through a historian’s microscope, choices like the turning point of the First World War become far stranger and more fascinating than anything that could be seen by the unaided public eye. A seemingly familiar story becomes profoundly strange and gripping.

No one, in fact, was more stunned than Wilson himself when his peace work, which he thought was coming close to ending the war, went so wrong. Seeing only some of what had been swirling around him, he could not, and never did, quite understand what had happened. On the day he decided to break relations with Germany he confessed to his closest adviser that he “felt as if the world had suddenly reversed itself; that after going from east to west, it had begun to go from west to east and that he could not get his balance” (259).

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One preliminary note, about Wilson: All the reviewers correctly call out my critique of Wilson’s statecraft. Yet as some of them also observe, my overall portrait of Wilson is sometimes positive, even admiring.

Wilson’s fundamental strategic insights were profound and realistic. He very much regarded himself as a pragmatist. That was his own term to describe his approach to the peace process. He displayed great operational skill at points, for instance in

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<sup>82</sup> In his last major work on the subject, Link -- whose growing bewilderment about what happened seemed to mirror that of Wilson himself -- focused, for instance, on Wilson’s failed peace move in December 1916 and blamed his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, for “one of the most egregious acts of treachery in American history,” deliberately “maneuvering to force the Germans into war with the United States.” Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1979), 57-58. I share Link’s assessment of Lansing’s purposes, but do not share his evaluation of this episode’s impact, except that it did importantly affect Kaiser Wilhelm II’s personal view of Wilson, coming on top of the false statements about Wilson that had come to Berlin from Wilson’s adviser, Edward House, which Link does not discuss. I infer the growing suspicions of Link and the other editors of the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* in notes, for example, about House’s distortion of British views and the long note detailing the dissembling of both Lansing and House in the December peace note episode. Arthur Link, David Hirst, John Little, Frederick Aandahl, et al, eds., *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 40 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 110-11 n. 1, 307-11. A whole essay could be written on the historiographical issues in studying the peace and financial issues of 1916-17 in the American, British, and French sources. In short, the war’s victors did not want to recount these stories.

secretly working with the Federal Reserve Board in the last week of November 1916 to choreograph and direct the momentous cutoff of unsecured financial credits to the Allies.

In his Introduction, John Milton Cooper, Jr. points out that the peace issues were not dominant for Wilson during much of 1916. He is right. But, as the book certainly shows, they were quite dominant for Wilson during the three months between his reelection and his decision to break relations with Germany.

It is Wilson's urgent attention to the challenge and his qualities that make the story so tragic. And he was not the only gifted statesman in this story. The most complex political narrative in the book is not about Washington. It is about what was happening in London.<sup>83</sup>

Given the diverse perspectives of such a remarkable set of reviewers, I am grateful for their generous appraisals. Kathleen Burk, Gabriela Frei, and Priscilla Roberts have called out many key features of the book. The other four scholars -- Roger Chickering, T.G. Otte, Hew Strachan, and John Thompson -- do this too. But they also call out some important points of disagreement. I'll just focus on the questions.

Those reviewers who are not quite convinced by all of my interpretations raise four questions about: the state of British finance (Otte); the American politics of neutrality (Thompson); the diplomacy of a "separate peace" (Strachan); and the domestic political balance in Germany (Chickering and -- a bit -- Otte). Each one is a very important historical issue, but none is more important and less well understood than the financial one.

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*British finance.* It is impossible to overstate the significance of the Allied financial problems by the end of 1916, though at the time they were well hidden. They were the well-predicted result of a British strategy to field a giant continental army, stripping manpower out of agriculture and industry to do it. In the winter of 1915-1916 Britain's leaders understood, and some of them commented privately on this to each other, that this choice was a desperate gamble. They had to try to win the war in 1916, because then they would run out of the means to continue it. This anxiety was an essential context for the very secret peace debates during 1916 among Britain's leaders.

At one level, it is unassailably easy to prove the dire financial condition of Britain and the Allies in early 1917, because the dollar bankruptcy happened.

In the late spring of 1917, Prime Minister Lloyd George secretly, frantically wrote to Wilson about the imminent "financial disaster." Shortly afterward, the very pro-war Treasury secretary in his government (Bonar Law) secretly admitted that, "Our resources available for payments in America are exhausted. Unless the United States government can meet in full our

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<sup>83</sup> Much key British material did not become available until the 1970s and 1980s and some later than that. To give just one example among many: Hardly any scholars are even aware that there was a full Cabinet meeting held on November 22, 1916, to discuss Lord Lansdowne's riveting memo circulated a week earlier that had urged a negotiated peace. There was no official record of this meeting, as no official minutes were made of full Cabinet meetings (unlike the minutes usually kept of meetings of the Cabinet's War Committee). Daniel Larsen and I have both, however, examined notes of this meeting privately made by two Cabinet members -- Lord Crawford and Lord Harcourt. Crawford's papers became available only in the 1980s, Harcourt's more recently. This meeting thus provides meaning for documents circulated the following week which scholars had seen without this vital context.

expenses in America, including exchange, the whole financial fabric of the alliance will collapse. This conclusion will be a matter not of months but of days.”<sup>84</sup>

Long predicted, the dollar bankruptcy had become just a matter of time after Wilson, in November 1916, orchestrated a warning that cut off any hopes to seek unsecured Allied credits. Wilson did that in order to aid his peace moves. He did this very secretly, but both Wilson’s role and Wilson’s motive were guessed, rightly, by Britain’s diplomats and Britain’s bankers.

It is a sign of how dire the British finances were that the dollar bankruptcy occurred even though the Federal Reserve Board had switched that ‘red light’ of November 1916 over to ‘green,’ after the US broke diplomatic relations with Germany in February 1917. That switch, which enabled some desperate infusions of funds in the spring, was still not good enough. Without that switch, prompted by the break with Germany, the dollar bankruptcy would have happened even sooner. It would probably have come as early as March 1917, the same month that Tsarist rule collapsed in Russia. Allied finances were only saved by the US being in the war and opening massive spigots of direct, unsecured public loans to its Allies.

Since the dollar bankruptcy happened, the interesting question then is why historians now think it did not happen, or would not have happened. How do they think the Allies could have continued their level of effort in the war if the US had not started paying all the bills? Otte, for instance, quotes Niall Ferguson on this point, in his *TLS* review of my book.<sup>85</sup> Ferguson stressed the scale of Britain’s sterling assets. Otte adds that Britain maintained consistent returns on its overseas sterling investments.

Since Ferguson’s review calls my book a “masterpiece,” it is hard for me to find any fault with his discernment and judgment on any subject. But on this vital point, let me add a bit to what Roberts, who knows this topic well, points out in her review.

Britain needed dollars, not sterling. If it used enormous sums of sterling to buy dollars on the foreign exchange market, that would just have depreciated sterling, made the import problem worse, while depleting Britain’s (and France’s and Russia’s) dwindling gold reserves even more quickly.<sup>86</sup>

To borrow dollars in that period, the British government, and its banker (J.P. Morgan & Co.) had to physically deposit collateral to secure the loans. That meant carrying into New York banks cases either of gold bullion or securities that were readily saleable with a known dollar market value (like the securities of the world’s larger railroads) and thus could serve as dollar collateral. Nominal British sterling assets around the Empire may have remained large, but almost all were unusable or not sufficiently liquid for this purpose.

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<sup>84</sup> Lloyd George’s quote is from the message he sent to Wilson via Eric Drummond through the secret Wiseman-House channel on 25 June 1917, William Wiseman Papers, Yale University, Box 1; Law’s conclusion is in a memo the US embassy relayed home on 20 July 1917, London 6780, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1917, World War*, Supplement 2, vol. 1, Doc. 457.

<sup>85</sup> Niall Ferguson, “The Peace-Making Initiative that Failed, at Vast Cost,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 Apr. 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-road-less-traveled-philip-zelikow-review-niall-ferguson-first-world-war/>.

<sup>86</sup> A similar problem arose during the Second World War. Britain needed dollars. In that war, though not relying nearly as much on dollar imports as it had during the First World War, Britain ran out of dollars in about a year, by the end of 1940. In the First World War, starting off in a far stronger financial position, Britain was able to finance a vast amount of dollar imports for more than two years.

In the Second World War, the U.S. government had become openly unneutral (in Franklin Roosevelt’s Charlottesville address of June 1940, if not earlier), and FDR came up with the Lend-Lease plan to solve the dollar problem. In the First World War, Wilson really did believe in a neutral stance. Until that changed, no analogous rescue plan for Allied finance was even contemplated.

By the spring of 1916, British leaders were trying every possible expedient they could think of to stave off the inevitable dollar bankruptcy. These measures, for instance, coerced all private British holders of usable negotiable securities to loan them to the British government (giving them sterling IOU's), so the Treasury could then ship those stocks and bonds off to be used in New York. Treasury officials and the Morgan bankers carefully calculated just how much longer they could stretch, with every possible scheme, the available gold or negotiable securities.

Repeatedly the British searched for substitutes for American imports; repeatedly they failed. Some British politicians claimed that greedy American business would somehow solve the problem, or that the American economy relied so much on these purchases that somehow the Americans would finance them. These claims were repeatedly rebutted by more knowledgeable British officials, and such illusions were dispelled with particular brusqueness during the so-called "rifles crisis" in the autumn of 1916.

One could argue that the British Treasury officials (like John Maynard Keynes) were just incompetent, or that the J.P. Morgan bankers were incompetent too, but that will not wash. The historians who have dug into the relevant archives, and not just relied on general macro data, have understood the truth of the British financial crisis for some time. Take just the participants in this roundtable: Cooper called out the scale of this crisis in 1976; Burk called it out in 1985; and Roberts called it out in 1998.<sup>87</sup> What remained was to flesh this story out and fit it together with all the other pieces of the puzzle.

At one point in his recent book, Daniel Larsen recounts an example of David Lloyd George airily dismissing the financial concerns. Larsen could not contain his exasperation:

If I have succeeded in explaining Britain's financial situation with even a modicum of the clarity to which I have aspired, the absurdity of this last statement [by Lloyd George] should need no elaboration. For those of my readers with no previous study of economics, one realization should prove striking: armed with no economic training beyond a few hours in the company of my prose, you have achieved a superior understanding of Britain's financial situation in 1916 than a man with eight years' experience as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Indeed, Lloyd George's experience seems only to have added a sweeping arrogance to his ignorance.<sup>88</sup>

Incidentally, a few of the cleverer Germans over in the enemy capital, Berlin, understood something of Britain's situation. Karl Helfferich, the vice-chancellor and an ally of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, warned the Reichstag on September 30, 1916, that, "We need to bear in mind: once we play the card of unrestricted U-boat warfare and [a favorable outcome] is not victory, then we are lost. In the event, America, too, would side with England. For instance, once in the war, America would no longer require collateral from its allies for loans."<sup>89</sup> Helfferich was so, so right.

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<sup>87</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., "The Command of Gold Reversed: American Loans to Britain, 1915-1917," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 45 no. 2 (1976): 209-30; Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America, and the Sinews of War, 1914-1918* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 77-95; Priscilla Roberts, "'Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes? The Federal Reserve System's Founding Fathers and Allied Finances in the First World War,'" *Business History Review*, vol. 72 no. 4 (1998): 585, 611-16.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Larsen, *Plotting for Peace: American Peacemakers, British Codebreakers, and Britain at War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 140. Martin Farr is another among the recent historians who have handled this issue in detail. *Reginald McKenna: Financier Among Statesmen, 1863-1916* (London: Routledge, 2008). In my book I call out my particular debt to two historians who delved deeply into Morgan's archives. One was the unlisted author of an unpublished internal history for the firm right after the war, F. Carrington Weems. The other, more recently, is the late Vincent Carosso, whose monumental work on this period is also unpublished.

<sup>89</sup> *Der Hauptausschuss des Deutschen Reichtags 1915-1918*, vol. 2, 30 September 1916, quoted in Hans Joachim Körver, *The Kaiser's U-Boat Assault on America* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2020), 176.

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*Politics of neutrality.* Understanding Britain's financial crisis helps with the issue Thompson raises about the domestic politics of American neutrality. In his thoughtful review, Thompson is sympathetic to the narrative, but he thinks that Wilson, who was limited by the domestic political support for neutrality, could not have brought much pressure on either side in a mediation process. Cooper sympathizes with Thompson's point.

Thompson's premise is sound. Yet Wilson's peacemaking efforts had wide public support. My point is that Wilson would not have needed to threaten war against Germany. The Germans were the ones seeking his intervention to call a peace conference.

Thompson then argues, also correctly, that Wilson could not have put more financial pressure on the Allies. Yet he did not have to.

The argument actually runs the other way. Neutrality kept them from bailing out the British. One reason Wilson and the Federal Reserve Board issued their November 1916 warning against Morgan's proposal to make unsecured loans to the Allies is that they -- Wilson and the Board -- felt it would be unneutral to offer such loans. So, unless America broke relations with Germany, the Allies would soon run out of dollars. The November 1916 warning had turned over the last hourglass. So, as Keynes later wrote, he and his Treasury colleagues watched as Britain "dragged along with a week or two's cash in hand," stoically preparing to pay out their gold reserves "to the last bean" (209).

Thompson further argues that Wilson could not have offered financial assistance with the reconstruction of Belgium, as a way of neutralizing that issue and helping to make peace. He believes I do not fully address the constraints on US offers of such public foreign aid in that era. But this is not my hindsight idea. At different times, both Wilson and his private adviser, Edward House, had discussed this. Thus, on January 2, 1917, House knew he was on firm ground when he told the British ambassador (Cecil Spring-Rice) and the head of British intelligence in the US (William Wiseman) that he "was in favor of the United States rehabilitating Belgium, Poland and Serbia, if by doing so we could facilitate the making of peace."<sup>90</sup> House did know something of America's domestic politics, and obviously thought this was doable.

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*Diplomacy of a "separate peace."* In his fine review (I am glad to have answered his chaplain's question!), Strachan questions how the diplomacy could have worked. On the British and the German sides, Strachan argues that the pro-war factions were quite powerful. Also, especially on the Allied side, he does not see how the British government could possibly have bypassed its allies to seek a separate peace. Strachan is right about all that. In the Treaty of London (1915), the Allies had secretly promised "not to conclude a separate peace during the course of the present war."

That is why the whole plan turned on Wilson. When, early in 1916, the British leaders began actively considering how to negotiate a compromise peace, the whole plan required the initiative to come from Wilson.

In May 1916, Balfour actually drafted the cable to Wilson to execute this plan, in which the British would have given Wilson the green light to proceed. The plan failed at that time because Wilson inadvertently undermined it (76-77). Had the plan succeeded, Wilson then would have invited all the countries to attend a peace conference, probably at The Hague.

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<sup>90</sup> Edward House diary, 2 January 1917, House Papers, Yale University. As best I can tell, Spring-Rice did not report this aspect of the conversation back to London. But Wiseman, with his own channel back home, also had a reasonably good understanding of the state of play, including what the Germans were prepared to offer in the peacemaking, very much including the German offer on Belgium.



This outsider-called peace conference was a scenario outside of the Treaty of London language. Britain could, and would, have said, “Yes” to that invitation without having agreed to “conclude a separate peace.”

Britain was not alone. The French president, Raymond Poincaré, discussed the same idea in a very private conversation with King George V in August 1916. Poincaré hoped that Wilson would make the move since he assumed that no government would say no. Certainly, Italy and Russia were not given much place in these deliberations, though the assumption was that Russia too was eager to find a way out of the war. Again, there was no Treaty of London issue in this scenario for Poincaré.

To Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, the argument ran the other way: it was his concern about Britain’s Allies, mingled with the financial crisis, that was another reason to welcome Wilson’s intervention. “What I fear most,” Grey wrote in one of his final memoranda to his colleagues near the end of 1916, “is that one of the Great Allies, when told, as they ought to be told now, that our support in shipping and finance, one or both, has to be curtailed in a few months, will abandon hope of ultimate victory, and demand that the war be wound up on the best terms available” (191).

The same point applies to the German side. Strachan points out that, given his domestic political environment, Bethmann Hollweg could not publicly announce his preferred peace terms and boldly move for peace. This is why Bethmann Hollweg secretly pleaded with Wilson, in every possible channel, to make the move. Germany would pretend that Wilson had initiated it. Bethmann Hollweg offered practically every assurance Wilson sought, and some Wilson did not seek, to show Germany’s readiness for a compromise peace and encourage Wilson to act.

The Austro-Hungarian side was suspicious of Wilson generally. But it was uneasy about a Wilson peace move, and its leaders preferred to coordinate their own public move with Germany, precisely in order to have leverage in getting agreement on a common approach. Understanding all this, Bethmann Hollweg wanted the Wilson path. If Wilson called the conference, Vienna’s leverage would disappear. Bethmann Hollweg, with the Kaiser’s full approval, would have just said, ‘Yes.’ Then, as he explained to others, Bethmann Hollweg would have had freedom to maneuver.

In other words, Strachan is right about the domestic political challenges. That is why Wilson offered the way out, not only procedurally, but also because he could allow the peace factions in each country to claim victory.

When I write that each side could have ended the war with a story of self-defense, this does not mean those countries were fighting for existence. On both sides, the populations mainly believed they were fighting for self-defense, not for conquest. A compromise peace, the “peace without victory” that Wilson preferred, would likely have left all the warring powers substantially intact, with the probable exception of some form of independence for formerly Russian Poland. All, except Russia perhaps, could then have their narrative of successful self-defense.

And even in Russia, a compromise peace would probably have looked much better than the alternatives Russia faced by the winter of 1916-1917. In Germany, a common analogy was to a “Hubertusburg peace,” the 1763 peace in which Prussia had salvaged its survival. As Bethmann put it, if Germany could just defend its potential and the country created in 1870, “we should thank God” (103).

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*German politics.* Chickering is not sure Bethmann Hollweg could have pulled it off. His appraisal of the German political situation is astute. There were two basic camps. One favored escalation of the war and a broad program of annexation. The other, led by Bethmann Hollweg, was against escalation and preferred a “peace of understanding.”

At the end of July 1916, the Kaiser decisively sided with Bethmann Hollweg. The Kaiser stayed firmly on that side at least until late-December 1916. Then the Kaiser began to conclude that Wilson had decided to take the Allied side, after the fiasco involving Wilson’s December peace note and Secretary of State Robert Lansing’s foolish “verge of war” statement, which almost caused Wilson to fire Lansing that day.

Bethmann Hollweg remained more hopeful about Wilson, but his job was getting harder. Yet, even at the end of January 1917, the Kaiser still grudgingly approved Bethmann Hollweg's last letter to Wilson. This was the letter in which the Chancellor tried keep the peace path open and confided an outline of possible German peace terms. This was the message Wilson tossed aside, too quickly, in his anger and bewilderment about Germany's simultaneous U-Boat move.

Chickering calls attention to the bureaucratic compromises Bethmann Hollweg made in his internal negotiations on some of the peace move substance, for instance, on Belgium, during the autumn of 1916. But there is no doubt that the whole approach Bethmann Hollweg and his allies pitched internally and to their allies was the approach of a 'Hubertusburg peace,' a compromise peace to salvage prewar Germany. Helfferich even made headway explaining the facts of life to a grudging group of Prussian conservatives.

Historians don't much like Bethmann Hollweg. Some of this is because of blame for 1914, and indeed Bethmann blamed himself for his part in it. To contemporaries the Chancellor seemed too political, too tactical, too vacillating – he was no Bismarck. And yet, like a seawall buffeted by wave after wave, for more than a year he firmly resisted effort after effort to widen the U-Boat war and provoke America. He was determined in constantly seeking a compromise peace. The object of unremitting attacks from the conservatives, he fought back. He successively obtained the dismissal of heads of both the Navy and the Army.

Bethmann Hollweg developed the peace option. He won the Kaiser's approval for it. And it is not really fair to swipe at German ambassador to the United States Johann von Bernstorff too, as Chickering does in his review, based on the biography of Bernstorff by Reinhard Doerries, which -- as was then fashionable -- uncritically accepted Fritz Fischer's view of Bethmann Hollweg, assumed the German peace efforts were conducted in bad faith, and therefore paid relatively little attention to the substantive details of the diplomacy.<sup>91</sup>

Sometimes Bethmann Hollweg made concessions in internal documents in order to avoid an argument with the generals. He explained this clearly enough to others at the time. He found it a waste of time to take seriously some "imaginative catalog of war aims drafted by some nameless General Staff officer." He knew "perfectly well" that "the moment I present a tangible chance for peace to the Kaiser, I shall have my way with him." The high command would make noise. "But peace will be made all the same." These bureaucratic documents had "little or no practical value." Once there was a chance to move, "all earlier statements of war aims would be dissipated into thin air" (106).

These statements could be seen as bluster. But it is what the Chancellor did. He let Wilson know that Germany was prepared to restore Belgium, and did that through both the American ambassador in Berlin and the German ambassador in Washington. At least by the beginning of 1917, British leaders had accurate intelligence reports about this offer. Very privately, Bethmann Hollweg confided to the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, by that minister's own account to his army's commander, that, "The key to the [peace] situation lies in the West. If Germany gives away France and Belgium and a bit more, then peace will come." The Austro-Hungarian minister confided that, "The Chancellor has promised me, in strict confidence, to make the sacrifice" (105).

Even in his last message to Wilson, on January 31, 1917, Bethmann Hollweg ignored the old bureaucratic documents and wrote his own outline of a compromise starting point to send to the American president. He won the Kaiser's approval to transmit it. In January 1917, when Army commander Paul von Hindenburg challenged Bethmann Hollweg about his

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<sup>91</sup> Reinhard R. Doerries, *Imperial Challenge: Ambassador Count Bernstorff and German-American Relations, 1908-1917* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). The book was originally published in German in 1975 and later supplemented for the English translation. The book is best on Bernstorff's relation to the German espionage and sabotage efforts in the United States in 1915 and 1916.

bottom line on territory in France, Bethmann Hollweg bluntly refused to tell him. “Policy,” he told the Field Marshal, “was always the art of the attainable” (236).

Yet Chickering’s argument has weight. Could Bethmann Hollweg deliver? But there was only one proper answer to this concern about German good faith: Test them. Try to end the war.

As outsiders kept telling him, Wilson could easily have set preconditions for a peace conference. Such preconditions could, for example, have included a commitment on Belgium. The Germans expected such a challenge, which is why they had volunteered the concession before the Americans even raised the issue.

A principal purpose of diplomacy is to test what is possible. It was in his failure to do even that, at a uniquely promising moment during the most terrible war thus far in human history, in what he knew was the most important challenge of his public life, that Wilson failed.

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The deeper question underneath the unease about the power of Prussian militarism is this: Wasn’t it all for the best? Perhaps it was best that the war went on to eventual Allied victory.

I think not. If the war had continued, those who feared the influence of Prussian militarism would have been even worse off if the US had not entered the war. That entry was a product of circumstances for which the Allied side can claim little credit. The Allies had adopted policies that very much risked defeat.

The still-deeper question is whether it was a good thing that America entered the war and thereby did defeat Prussian militarism, at least for a time. My argument is that, even by that standard, it was a tragedy that the war widened and deepened, instead of coming to an end. With all its dissatisfactions, a compromise peace would have been better for Europe and the world, heading off a Bolshevik revolution in Russia and much more.

By placing this great turning point in human history under the historian’s microscope, we recover a hidden world of choices that the reviewers have helped to explore. Reflecting on such choices in a splendid roundtable like this, we not only better understand the world’s past, we also prepare ourselves for the way choices actually arise at other turning points we may encounter in the future.