During World War I, the relationship among two long-standing U.S. policies — isolation from European political-military commitments and protection of neutral trading rights — and President Woodrow Wilson’s emergent post-war peace policy clashed irreconcilably. Wilson abandoned both isolation and neutrality, which were in conflict due to British and German naval practices, and chose war in order to shape the post-conflict peace. The result was failure on all three fronts: the United States resumed isolation and rejected the League of Nations system and, by the 1930s, denied itself the traditional rights of neutrals that before it had championed. The United States had isolation without benefits. Tucker presents Wilson as a frustrated statesman-tailor who, presented with repeated rips in the traditional fabric of United States policy, rends its apart after his muddled mending fails.

This book focuses attention on an oft-neglected subject of U.S. foreign policy: the reasons for entering World War I. Historians have covered the period well, but the underlying policy conflicts are treated as almost obvious. The political science wing of the international relations (IR) field has examined the European decisionmaking in 1914 intensively, but has largely ignored the U.S. side. Tucker embarks across this terrain, focusing on the strategic and diplomatic dilemmas with which Wilson wrestled and his advisors anguished, with Wilson often as much a source of the latter’s troubles as their foreign counterparts. For different reasons, this book will have appeal for the current wave of IR scholars interested in norms as either causal or constitutive factors. Tucker traces Wilson’s efforts to uphold and strengthen existing norms covering neutral rights and non-

1 For example, Thomas J. Knock writes “the vicissitudes of neutrality have been thoroughly treated elsewhere” in his To End All Wars (Princeton, 1992), 33.
combatant immunity against British and German efforts to exploit ambiguities and omissions in formal treaty law. Tucker also restores attention to neutrality as an American tradition and as an international legal concept, one that is usually misunderstood in terms either of Cold War-era non-alignment or abstention from involvement with belligerence.

Tucker does not present Wilson as incompetent or inherently indecisive; this is not the common-place account that Wilson’s psychological flaws harm his policy-making. But neither does Tucker endorse the view that Wilson was an inspired visionary. Rather, Wilson is confronted by bad choices: asserting neutral rights would put the United States on a path to war with Germany and at least economic conflict with the United Kingdom and France. Defending neutral rights would mean, in effect, abandoning isolation. The alternative to economic and military confrontation was mediating a peace settlement, which again would breach the isolationist tradition, even if the belligerents had been willing to do so (55, 85). It is important to stress, as Tucker does (79), that Wilson’s choices were not inevitable ones. Sticking by a policy of unwavering defense of neutral rights along with increased but ill-defined arms program, Tucker argues that Wilson might have preserved neutrality while sacrificing isolation to a degree by stepping in to mediate a peace that entailed some return to the pre-war status quo (82). Wilson forsook mediation because he wanted to preserve isolation, not because the prospects for successful mediation were low. By acquiescing in deed to British interference with neutral rights, Wilson set the United States on a course that would at some point entail war with Germany (86).

This is the first point at which I part with Tucker. A strategy of deterrence by armament to preserve neutral rights was unlikely to work for five reasons. First, the naval requirements for a strategy would have required years, not months, of construction. In August 1914, Britain had 45 capital ships built or being built while the United States had 14.2 The United States would have to build ships both to contend with British surface vessels as well as German submarines. Second, it was unclear what the military purpose of such arming would have been. Would the United States have convoyed its merchant ships and fired on British warships if they had attempted to divert U.S. vessels to British ports unlawfully? It is unclear what Britain should have feared from such a build-up. Third, the only alternative would have been to embargo the United Kingdom and France, but such defenses of neutral right had failed in the past, and would entail a massive economic harm. Prior to the war, 65% of U.S. exports by value went to Europe, with the United Kingdom accounting for 45% and Germany for almost 25% of that trade. Under the British restrictions, U.S. exports to Germany dropped precipitously but 53% of the loss was made-up by drastically increased trade to neutral states initially, and the rest was exceeded by increased exports to the allies.3 Embargoing the allied powers would have eliminated exports equal to roughly 2%

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Fourth, as Tucker points out (79-80), Wilson and his advisors did not want a German victory, and embargoeing the allied powers would have run that risk that Germany and its allies would have made a decisive breakthrough. Finally, given the domestic opposition to the armament program and military reorganization that Wilson proposed in Dec. 1915, it is implausible that stronger plans would have been accepted in late 1914.

The heart of Tucker’s account, however, is Wilson’s struggles in 1915 and 1916 with the consequences of Germany’s adoption of unrestricted anti-submarine warfare around the British Isles in Feb. 1915, the British ban on all trade with Germany in March, and the three notes to Germany after the sinking the Lusitania. Since Wilson was unwilling to seriously press Britain on its blockades, Germany resorted to further predations on merchant vessels. But Wilson was unwilling to openly push the United States into war with Germany over submarine warfare. Tucker concludes that Wilson was unable to decide what he valued more: maintaining isolation or championing of neutrality (115).

In this equation, saving isolation and neutrality as policies meant staying out of war with Germany or Britain. This is the second point on which I part with Tucker. Having outlined the meaning of maritime neutrality in international law and statecraft with clarity and precision that few if any Wilson scholars have done (56-71), he treats American neutrality oddly as the opposite of any belligerency. While the United States had not openly fought a European state over neutral rights in 100 years, there is no reason to equate war in 1917 with the abandonment of isolation or neutrality as a preferred policy. The United States had waged war in defense of isolation and neutrality; the United States did not ally with France or Britain in the Quasi-War or the War of 1812, respectively. In 1917, America again defended neutrality by refusing aligned belligerency. Indeed, when Wilson did ask Congress to recognize U.S. belligerency against Germany he never formally aligned the United States with the allied powers. He termed the United States an “associated” power despite cooperating as a de facto ally. Isolation was gone in deed and neutrality replaced by belligerency but Wilson sustained a simulacrum of both.

The key to understanding Wilson’s position was his fear of war in and of itself, not as an abandonment of isolation or neutrality. Tucker notes that Wilson wrote and spoke in 1915 (23) and in 1917 (202) of his dread of war, especially its likely effects on civil liberties and domestic reform. He also acknowledges Wilson’s policy of war avoidance in other discussions (171, 207, 214). Wilson must have been aware of the probable, qualitative difference between his use of force in Mexico and the Caribbean and combat with European

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5 Tucker’s first work was The Law of War and Neutrality at Sea (U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1957) as part of the Naval War College’s International Law Studies series. It was reissued by Lawbook Exchange, Ltd. in 2006.

6 The purpose of the Non-Intercourse Act was to use economic leverage to force Britain and France to respect U.S. neutral rights.
powers. And indeed, the greater purpose of longstanding U.S. isolation and neutrality was to avoid major war with great powers because of the horrendous consequences such wars would have had on American political institutions and social order. Wilson sacrifices a defense of neutrality to avoid war; his neutrality policy is subordinated to his war-avoidance policy.

Wilson's desire to avoid war was reflected in his 1916 efforts to bring about some mediated end to the war via a peace conference. But the Feb. House-Grey memorandum produced no action after Wilson qualified the over-reaching of his unofficial, anachronistic national security advisor, Edward House (170-171). Wilson adopts the more radical prospect of a postwar league by May 1916 (on the heels of the German capitulation in its reply to the United States' Sussex note), a bolder mediation offer in Dec., and the follow-up “peace-without-victory' speech in Jan. 1917, which Tucker recounts. He aimed to transform international politics and end the war without war. But neither isolation nor neutrality would really be abandoned in Wilson’s plan because the postwar order was to create a “community of power” rather than entangle the United States in formal alliances to balance power among rival states and was to guarantee freedom of navigation rather than sacrifice neutral trading rights. Wilson hoped to transcend the dilemmas he confronted.

What ended those hopes of peace without U.S. belligerency was the German decision to resume and widen unrestricted submarine warfare. War was then the only path to transform the world order. But Wilson only grudgingly accepted that path, trying first to retain isolation and neutrality by pursuing armed neutrality. The March 1917 Senate filibuster that Wilson condemned provided a pause for reflection, though Wilson proceeded to arm some ships. It is unclear how arming merchantmen alone would have protected U.S. ships against submarines effectively or brought about any change in postwar world politics. Wilson quickly abandoned armed neutrality and instead called for a declaration of war. Tucker correctly cites Sen. Gilbert Hitchcock’s comment that if arming ships was wrong in late March, after the filibuster, it was wrong in early March, before the filibuster (200). Why Wilson did it remains as puzzling as his policy shifts in the Lusitania notes (127).

One potential explanation for the policy reversals in the second Lusitania note and the brief ship arming is the absence of a strong U.S. foreign policy apparatus As Tucker points out, Wilson never had more than four advisors on foreign policy during the war at any time: House, the secretary of state (William J. Byran, then Robert Lansing), the secretary's counselor (Lansing, then Frank L. Polk), and Walter H. Page, the ambassador to London (25). No equivalent of the National Security Council staff existed; the State Department had only three assistant secretaries to cover administration and consular affairs; Wilson's White House staff consisted of private secretary Joseph P. Tumulty, his two assistants, and

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7 The historians of U.S. policy during WWI tend to adopt contemporaneous terms too readily. House was an honorary "colonel" by the Texas governor’s appointment, and House reported disliked the title (see "The Real Col. House," New York Times Magazine 16 Dec. 1917). I doubt few people born after 1960 could explain what an "order-in-council" is, let alone its legal basis. “Preparedness” is a similar term that remains obscure to the uninitiated.
some clerks. The State Department’s recently created geographic “divisions” (they were not bureaus) put Germany and the other central powers in the Near Eastern Affairs division, not the West European one, as of 1911. None of the policy vetting of multiple bureaus, let alone a formal inter-agency process existed under Wilson. Given the stress and surprise, Wilson and his advisors must have experienced in Feb. 1917, the confused attempt to avoid outright belligerency is understandable.

There is a third point with which I disagree with Tucker — that the U.S. acquiescence to the British blockade but continued and escalating protests against German attacks on U.S. merchant and non-combatant belligerent vessels meant that the United States “abandoned the impartiality required of a neutral” (86, 133). This is the crux of his argument that Wilson’s neutrality policy made war with Germany inevitable. First, it is hard to see how this conclusion can be derived from Tucker’s prior discussion of neutrality and its requirements (56-71). The law of maritime neutrality required belligerents to allow private merchant ships to trade with belligerents provided that neutral governments were not aiding the belligerent governments directly, except in contraband, which was ill-defined, and or unless a legitimate blockade was in place. The problem was Britain’s unprecedented expansion of what counted as contraband, and Germany’s reprisals, which were directed at neutral and belligerent vessels. Britain also violated the well-established customary rules of blockades by failing to establish a blockade that was limited to Germany’s coast and instead blockading access to the Baltic Sea. However, only the belligerents that violated neutral rights claimed that their reprisals were justified; no neutrals recognized the legal or normative validity of these actions. Short of abandoning trade with or fighting against the infringing belligerents in defense of merchant vessels, there was little any neutral could have done. The latter action would have meant convoying U.S. merchant with U.S. warships and forcibly resisting any British attempt to search or divert the ships or any German attempts to sink them. Such a course would have meant war with one or both belligerents. Geography and British policy meant that neutral trade would benefit the allied powers and harm the central powers. This did not make neutrals partial to one belligerent anymore than if bad weather had sunk most German-bound ship and spared most British-bound ones. Second, the ultimate Germany reaction — submarine attacks without warning against all vessels in its declared war zones — was not inevitable. As Tucker notes (210), Wilson’s advisors feared that if Germany had responded favorably to Wilson’s Dec. 1916 peace proposal and if the allies rejected it, the U.S. public might have viewed German retaliation via unrestricted sea attacks as justified. Under the same conditions, if Germany did not retaliate, House feared the United States “would inevitably drift into a sympathetic alliance with her” (210). Germany’s twin choices to reject the U.S. peace proposal and to attack vessels indiscriminately pushed the United States to war. As Tucker notes, this was Germany’s great mistake (211-212).

These disagreements should not distract, however, from my support for Tucker’s overall arguments. U.S. protests against Britain were less severe than those against Germany, and

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this certainly affected German views of the United States as a potential mediator (211). I agree with Tucker that we should see this as a consequence of Wilson’s commitment to the norm on non-combatant immunity (134) rather than sympathy for the allies’ cause over the central powers (98) or simply that life mattered more than property. The problem that Wilson created for U.S. policy was he sought to champion a norm rather than the law. The great source of tension between the United States and Germany was that the United States insisted that its citizens be able to travel safely on non-combatant belligerent vessels (132). This is the substance of U.S. protests over the Lusitania, Arabic, and Sussex sinkings since these were British or French vessels upon which Americans were killed. The United States was right, however, to demand that non-combatant enemy vessels be given warning to stop before being fired upon. Under existing custom, the sinking of private, belligerent cargo or passenger vessels was not permitted unless the safety of the captor’s ship or its operational success demanded it, and even then it had to ensure the safety of the passengers and crew, which excluded abandoning them in life-boats at sea (92-93). For submarines, the extraordinary was commonplace since the submarines lacked spare crew to bring the ship to port or the ability to safely escort it. The issue is whether Wilson should have accepted this as a new reality.

Likewise, Tucker is correct that the United Kingdom cast aside prior understandings of what trade items could be restricted and how they could be restricted, and thereby also violated the principle of non-combatant immunity by barring food as contraband (134). Prior to 1914, the only conditions under which food or provisions were considered contraband were if they were directed to a belligerent’s armed forces, government departments, or their contractors. The United States protested these policies, but never threatened to break diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom, as it did against Germany in April 1916.

Wilson refused to countenance the violation of non-combatant immunity, but the crucial difference between German and British violations of norms of non-combatant immunity was that Germany was killing U.S. citizens when it did so and Britain was not. So here I part with Tucker again. I agree with Tucker that it was not that innocent life mattered more than property (98), for innocent German lives were imperiled by British actions, but that innocent American lives were imperiled by German submarine warfare. Wilson was not a starry-eyed one-worder but was committed to transformed global order because it was the best pathway to secure his vision of U.S. interests. His internationalism was a consequence of his nationalism, not a substitute for it.

Tucker is correct in his overall strategic assessment. Wilson waited too long to bring U.S. strategic resources in line with his goals. Even if he hoped not to intervene militarily in the European war, the United States lacked the military resources and the popular support to credibly threaten such an option against any of the belligerents. For the central powers, the

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United States was already effectively supplying most of what the allies needed, and for the allies, the United States was already doing most what it could to aid them. Wilson’s failure was as much rooted in his inability to rally Congressional and public support for a more cohesive strategy early on as it was in any diplomatic ineptness.