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Robert W. Tucker. *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914-1917.* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007. 272 pp. \$39.50. ISBN: 978-0-8139-2629-2 (cloth).

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Christopher Ball, John Milton Cooper, Jr., Ross Kennedy, Elizabeth McKillen, Klaus Schwabe

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Aspiring Ph.D. candidates in U.S. diplomacy in the 1960s received a full introduction to the literature on Woodrow Wilson's leadership of the United States into WWI and his ensuing quest with the Versailles Peace settlement and the League of Nations. From skimming Charles Tansill and the post-WWI revisionists to Thomas Bailey's classic studies, we moved on to the post-WWII assessments of Edward H. Buehrig, Ernest May's *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (1959), and Arthur Link's multi-volume study that followed Wilson almost letter by letter through the perils of neutrality into war.¹ These studies brought up reminders about earlier studies on Thomas Jefferson and James Madison grappling with issues of neutrality leading up to the War of 1812 and recollections about orders-in-council, blockades, and contraband. And then we moved on to the "Good War" of WWII, cheered FDR's un-Wilson like maneuverings on the neutrality legislation of the 1930s, and watched the Cold War transformation of neutrality into a policy of neutralism advanced by third world leaders against the wishes of U.S. leaders.

Robert W. Tucker is well-situated to provide us with an interpretive meditation on Wilson and the difficulties and dilemmas that he faced in advancing a traditional American policy of neutrality and isolation. As Professor Emeritus of American Diplomacy at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Professor Tucker has influenced students of diplomacy and the attentive public with books and articles ranging from Thomas Jefferson to George W. Bush and the Iraq War. Tucker points out that half a century ago he published *The Law of War and Neutrality at Sea* (1957) which focused on the consequences of WWI on the institution of neutrality, and that his more recent study of the statecraft of Thomas Jefferson and Jefferson's efforts to deal with neutrality revived his interest in Wilson.²

¹ See Tucker's Chapter III "Interpretations" for a historiographical discussion on the literature dealing with neutrality and U.S. entry into WWI.

² I might add that when Bradford Perkins reached Wilson and the 1914-1917 period in his lecture course on U.S. diplomacy at the University of Michigan, the attentive graduate students in the class of over 100 undergraduates noted that Wilson reminded Perkins of Jefferson and the latter received some final critical remarks from the podium.

The reviewers have significant books on aspects of Wilson's diplomacy or forthcoming studies and they appreciate Tucker's study of neutrality and his close reading of Wilson's failed efforts to keep the U.S. out of the maelstrom of WWI. They also welcome the critical perspective that he applies to Wilson's leadership and his effort to suggest that the President had some alternatives in dealing with the Allies of Great Britain and France and the Central Powers led by Germany even if they question the feasibility of some of the author's suggestions. The reviewers also raise a number of questions concerning Tucker's close focus on Wilson and his thoughts at the expense of more analysis of the context in which Wilson made his decisions and different historical approaches.

1.) Tucker's depiction of Wilson does not attract extensive disagreement. Christopher Ball, for example, notes that Tucker's Wilson is neither psychologically flawed nor "incompetent or inherently indecisive," nor an "inspired visionary." (1) In contrast with his chief advisers, Secretary of State Robert Lansing and Colonel Edward House who definitely wanted the Allies to win and the U.S. to at least avoid a confrontation with Great Britain over its actions against neutral trade with Germany, if not join the war on London's side, Tucker's depiction of Wilson attempts to keep the U.S. out of the war and defend neutral rights receives a sympathetic assessment from the reviewers. Klaus Schwabe, however, does question whether Wilson, as a "practical idealist," readily adjusted his principles to changing circumstances. Ross Kennedy questions whether Tucker has given sufficient weight to Wilson's concerns about Germany in his willingness to accept British policies infringing on neutral rights and in his endorsement of Colonel House's negotiations with the British in 1915.

2.) Tucker's central thesis on Wilson's handling of the difficulties raised by WWI before 1917 challenges both Ernest May's perspective that war was coming with Germany, irregardless of Wilson's policies on neutrality, when Germany had enough submarines to isolate Great Britain, and Arthur Link's view that Wilson did as well as he could to be neutral within the context of international law, British control of the seas, and U.S. interests and public opinion. Tucker suggests that Wilson was slow to articulate a policy on the war and recognize the consequences of implementing policies that favored the Allies. Admittedly faced with traditions and pressures to take an isolationist stance towards another European war and a desire to defend neutral rights at odds with isolationism, Wilson tried to maintain both and stay out of the war. As Tucker critically notes, Wilson found himself failing to maintain a neutral stance with respect to acceptance of British policies on contraband, such as shutting off American food shipments to Germany, and the British blockade and mining of the North Sea as well as other actions. On the other hand, Wilson insisted on the right of Americans to travel into Germany's war zone on neutral and belligerent passenger liners and merchant vessels. Ross Kennedy and Ball note, with some doubts on its possible effectiveness, Tucker's suggestion that Wilson had the alternative of defending neutral rights vis-à-vis both sides if he backed it up with an effective policy of military preparedness from the start to impress both sides before he turned to mediation, most significantly in the House-Greg memorandum negotiations with Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, which went against a traditional isolationist stance.

3.) Tucker does note how Wilson's firm stance in principle on the submarine does lead him to back off by accepting the submarine as a legitimate instrument of naval warfare and pursuing negotiations with Germany to try and avoid a crisis that would lead to war. (127) What Wilson insists on in negotiations over the sinking of the *Lusitania*, *Arabic*, and *Sussex*, is that Germany followed pre-1914 international law practice of cruiser warfare in which the attacking vessel had to provide for the safety of the passengers and crew and neither sink ships without warning nor just put people in life-boats at sea and abandon them. A question that this issue raises is who were the Americans insistent on entering the waters of German's war zone and risking their lives on passenger lines and merchant vessels? In *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*, the subject of a forthcoming H-Diplo roundtable, Kristin Hoganson explores the significant expansion of American interest in and participation, both in person and in fictive travel clubs, in overseas travel, with England and Europe as key destinations, as well as the acquisition of foreign products from domestic furniture and display items to foreign cuisine. If the Americans traveling into the war zone and the Americans at home who supported Wilson's stance on the right of Americans to travel, represented members of Hoganson's consumer constituency, it would add significant context on this issue.

4.) Several of the reviewers suggest that more context is needed for understanding Wilson and the American response to the war. John Milton Cooper, for example, notes a "sense of the context in which the actors operated," with emphasis on three major points starting with the beginnings of the war and the British blockade. Cooper stresses a "sense of removal from the war on the part of the American public and most of its leaders" which influenced Wilson, House, Lansing and Bryan's "desire to avoid unnecessary and perhaps costly trouble, with no offsetting benefits." (2) A second point is the American reaction to the sinking of the *Lusitania* which Cooper describes as "that era's 9/11" but producing an overwhelming anti-war response that reinforced Wilson's own conflicting desires to defend America's neutral rights and avoid war. (2-3) Cooper's third point refers to the year after the *Lusitania* crisis and increasing public criticism of Great Britain over the blacklist of American firms and Ireland.

5.) Elizabeth McKillen suggests that Tucker "seriously underestimates the importance of broader economic, social, cultural, and political factors in shaping Wilson's foreign policies." (2-3) McKillen recommends that Tucker give more weight to William Appleman Williams' perspective linking economic and security considerations, although Tucker does note at several points that Wilson and his few advisers recognized that "economic interests had tied the United States to the Allied cause. It was not the only tie, nor even the most important, but after seven months of war its ever-increasing significance was apparent." (105, 54) If Tucker does not find Wilson and his advisers discussing economic concerns in their deliberations, letters and memos, should he, nevertheless, give more weight to this factor in Wilson's policies?

6.) McKillen also would welcome more attention to the "new literature on World War I in the fields of social and cultural history" and gender issues. (3-4) In noting extensive criticism of Wilson's pro-allied policies from groups on the left, McKillen suggests that this may have contributed to why Wilson persisted in his efforts to negotiate with Germany and

became more neutral and critical towards London. As McKillen points out, “gendered posturing and language” was widespread in the political culture of the late 19th-early 20th century. “Given Wilson’s own frequent use of gendered language,” McKillen suggests, “it seems plausible to assume that concerns about appearing manly in the public eye played at least some role in his obsession with defending the nation’s honor and with his unwillingness to compromise on the principle of the rights of naturals.” (4) Does gender, for example, help explain why Wilson as opposed to Bryan insists on the right of Americans to travel on belligerent passenger and merchant vessels?

Participants:

Robert W. Tucker is Professor Emeritus of American Diplomacy at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. He is a member of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences and the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Tucker is the author of *The Nuclear Debate: Deterrence and the Lapse of Faith* (1985); *The Inequality of Nations* (Basic Books, 1977), *The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy* (Johns Hopkins, 1971), *Nation or Empire? The Debate over American Foreign Policy* (Johns Hopkins, 1968), *The Just War* (Johns Hopkins, 1960); and three books with Dr. David C. Hendrickson: *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America’s Purpose* (1992); *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (1990), and *The Fall of the First British Empire: Origins of the War of American Independence* (1982). He was co-editor of *The National Interest* from 1985 to 1990, and president of the Lehrman Institute from 1982 to 1987. He has published essays in *Foreign Affairs*, *World Policy Journal*, *The National Interest*, *Harpers*, and *The New Republic*. Dr. Tucker received his B.S. from the United States Naval Academy in 1945 and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1949.

Christopher Ball is completing his Ph.D. at Columbia University entitled “Ideologies of Security: Visions of Democracy and International Order in the Making of United States Grand Strategy Policy.” Ball has been a lecturer at the University of Iowa, Johns Hopkins, and Iowa State University. He is an editor at H-Diplo and currently supervises book reviews and the general list.

John Milton Cooper is the E. Gordon Fox Professor of American Institutions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He earned his AB at Princeton in 1961 and his PhD at Columbia University in 1968. His books include *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (1969); *Walter Hines Page: The Southerner as American, 1855-1918* (1977); *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (1983); *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (1990); and *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (2001). Professor Cooper is currently writing a biography of Woodrow Wilson.

Ross A. Kennedy received his Ph.D. in history from the University of California at Berkeley. He has taught at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and

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American Studies, and is currently Assistant Professor of history at Illinois State University. His book, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security*, is forthcoming from Kent State University Press.

Elizabeth McKillen is a professor of History at the University of Maine. She is the author of *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy: 1914-1924* (1995) and many articles on U.S. labor internationalism. Currently, she is at work on two book projects: one on the subject of U.S. Labor and American Empire, 1898-1920 and another on U.S. Labor and the International Labour Organization. McKillen received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1987.

Klaus Schwabe is Emeritus, Aachen University of Technology. He completed his Ph.D. at Freiburg in 1958 under the direction of Gerhard Ritter, and his Habilitation in 1969. His teaching career included positions at Freiburg, Chair at Frankfurt University, and Chair at Aachen University of Technology until his retirement in 1997. He has written numerous monographs including *Woodrow Wilson* (1972); *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking 1918-1919* (1985); and *World Power and World Order, from 1898 to the Present. A History of the Twentieth Century* (in German) (2005) which was featured as an H-Diplo roundtable in May, 2007.

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