Robert Tucker’s book on Woodrow Wilson’s neutrality policy during World War I presents a thoughtful analysis of an important topic in twentieth-century American foreign relations. Without admitting it to himself, Tucker argues, and without thinking too much about the consequences of what he was doing, Wilson early on adopted policies clearly favorable to the Allies in the war. Once set on this course, Wilson found it hard to change direction and, indeed, the president became ever more committed to it as he equated American prestige and the laws of humanity with confronting Germany’s submarine campaign in the Atlantic. Tucker is critical of the president’s unneutral posture, arguing it was bound to undermine Wilson’s own goals of staying out of the war, mediating a “peace without victory,” and building a new international order based on the League of Nations. In the end, Tucker suggests, Wilson defeated himself.

There are several significant points for Wilsonian historiography in Tucker’s argument. First, his book is a refreshing break with the dominant interpretation of Wilson’s pre-1917 diplomacy put forward by Arthur S. Link and recently echoed to some degree by John Milton Cooper, Jr., and Thomas J. Knock. According to this view, Wilson was as neutral in thought and in practice as he could be given the character of international law in 1914, Britain’s control of the sea, American interests, and American public opinion. Drawing on the work of John W. Coogan, Tucker rightly replies that Wilson did in fact have a viable alternative to a pro-British policy: he could have “combined strict neutrality with measures of preparedness” (p. 79). Unlike the policy praised by Link and other scholars, this approach, Tucker argues, might have gained the respect of the belligerents and contributed...
to a deadlock in the war – two developments conducive to Wilson’s objective of mediating an end to the war on the basis of the status quo ante bellum.

Tucker makes another point all too often missing from recent scholarly works on Wilson. Like Lloyd Ambrosius, he sees that however much Link and others have tried to associate the president with internationalism, Wilson’s commitment to American participation in a league of nations was actually highly qualified. Wilson would only join a peace league on American terms; the league, Tucker notes, had to be based on “American principles” or the United States would continue its traditional refusal to make any political-military commitments overseas (pp. 206—07). In this sense – in the sense of refusing to engage politically in a world still dominated by traditional diplomacy – Wilson was an isolationist.

Tucker also provides an illuminating examination of the concept of “neutrality” in the pre-1914 international system. Neutrality law assumed that war was a legitimate instrument of national policy and that wars were likely to be “limited in terms of the parties involved, the fraction of the populations actively engaged, and the nature of the belligerent war aims” (p. 67). In such a world, the point of neutrality law was to keep warfare contained and allow those at peace to continue their normal lives as much as possible. Although the customs and rules associated with neutrality were somewhat vague, Tucker argues they had held up easily enough in conflicts that had broken out in the twenty or so years prior to 1914. What swept away the traditional code of neutrality was the unprecedented scale and stakes involved with World War I and, equally important, the growing belief as the twentieth century went on that warfare for any purpose other than self-defense was unjust and illegal.

For all of the positive qualities of Tucker’s book, however, significant parts of his interpretation are open to question. His analysis of Wilson’s view of Germany, for one thing, is problematic. According to Tucker, “Wilson appears to have entertained little real fear over the consequences a German victory held out for American security” (p. 4). Such fears chiefly animated the president during the initial weeks of the war, when Germany rapidly advanced into France, and Tucker suggests they were deep enough to cause Wilson to make his initial decision to accept Britain’s maritime system (pp. 89-90). But once the Allies halted the Germans at the Marne, these fears “markedly receded” (p. 89). Wilson not only became convinced that Germany would lose the war, but also more determined than ever to remain a “nonparticipant” in the conflict, even in the unlikely event the Allies looked headed to defeat (p. 204).

Yet abundant evidence indicates that Wilson was always anxious to make sure that Germany did not expand its power as a result of the war. He set in motion his pro-British neutrality policy in late September 1914, after the German armies began retreating in France. He did so, in fact, after being advised by Colonel House that Germany’s “purpose had already largely failed.” ¹ From late 1914 onward, Wilson also wanted to end the war with terms based on the status quo ante bellum. Given Germany’s occupation of Allied


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territory, such terms required a roll back of German power. They represented not so much a “peace without victory” as a minimum win for the Allies – a “peace without conquest” as Walter Hines Page aptly called it.  

Far from being unconcerned about the prospect of Germany winning anything from the war, as Tucker argues, Wilson consistently sought to insure its defeat and limit its expansion.

Tucker’s shaky interpretation of Wilson’s attitude toward Germany is perhaps most evident in his discussion of the House-Grey memorandum, a pro-Allied intervention plan devised by Colonel House. He downplays Wilson’s apparent agreement with House’s late 1915 assertion of a deep American security stake in the Allied cause and suggests the president had backed away from House’s intervention scheme by December (pp. 151-55). He also emphasizes that although Wilson approved the House-Grey memorandum in early March 1915, the president refused to commit himself both to enter the war if a peace conference failed and to support peace terms “not unfavorable to the Allies” (p. 170). In Tucker’s view, Wilson did not genuinely endorse the memorandum’s ideas; the president went along with House’s effort because he did not want to suffer the diplomatic damage of disavowing his advisor’s work (pp. 47—49).

The evidence, though, appears to run counter to Tucker’s argument here. Prior to House’s departure for Europe, Wilson admitted the colonel’s point that the United States could not afford to find itself ever facing Germany alone, without the Allies. It is true, as Tucker suggests, that when Wilson sent House to Europe in December 1915, he was intrigued by the possibility of peace talks with Germany as well as with Britain. But the president also shared House’s suspicions of Berlin’s motives, endorsed the colonel’s determination not to be put “in a disagreeable position with the Allies,” and agreed House should visit London first, before going to Germany. As Tucker himself concedes, Wilson approved of House’s negotiations with the British over the intervention plan once House was in London and praised the memorandum when he saw it (pp. 169-70). Contrary to Tucker’s assertions, moreover, Wilson did not modify the memorandum’s statements suggesting American support for peace terms favorable to the Allies. Both House’s diary and the cable Wilson typed up for Grey regarding the memorandum refer to only one change made by Wilson to the agreement, namely the watering down of America’s pledge to enter the war on the side of the Allies if Germany was “unreasonable” in peace talks. The president left unchanged the memorandum’s language on peace terms, which included a section specifying House’s

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3 House Diary, 15 December 1915, *PWW* 35:356.
5 House to Wilson, 15 February 1916, n. 2, *PWW* 36:180. See also House Diary, 6 March 1916, *PWW* 36:262; House to Grey, 7 March 1916, *PWW* 36:266. Tucker seems to base his interpretation of Wilson’s modifications to the House-Grey memorandum on Charles Seymour’s discussion of the document in *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*. But Seymour only refers to one correction, not two. Wilson inserted the word “probably,” he says, in connection with entering the war in order to have the sentence in question correspond with another “probably” *already in the original document*, in its second sentence. Tucker appears to misunderstand this passage and to think Seymour is talking about the insertion of two “probablies” into the memorandum, instead of just one. See Seymour, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (Boston and New York: 1926), 2:201.
support for the transfer of Alsace-Lorraine to France and Russia’s acquisition of an outlet to the sea. Wilson did not share House’s eagerness to get in the war, in short, but he did want to co-ordinate mediation efforts with London and he did want peace based on the Entente’s minimum terms, not Germany’s.

In addition to understating Wilson’s fears of German power, Tucker also devotes far too little attention to Wilson’s preparedness policy. He barely mentions it at all, even though one of his key claims is that Wilson’s own goals would have been better served had the president embarked upon a defense build up soon after the war started rather than waiting until late 1915. Readers are left wondering why Wilson delayed in proposing a preparedness program, why he embraced preparedness when he did, and how his defense program related to his diplomacy toward to the belligerents. These issues obviously have relevance for an analysis of Wilson’s neutrality policy, yet Tucker does not address them.

Finally, one wishes that the author had analyzed Wilson’s view of international reform more carefully. Tucker asserts near the end of the book that Wilson’s fear of a second world war “lay at the center of his thought,” but he does not explain how this fear shaped the president’s neutrality policies in 1914 or 1915 (p. 206). In fact, he seems to contradict his assertion about the centrality of this fear in Wilson’s thinking by suggesting that Wilson only became interested in mediation and a peace league in later 1915, as the president came to realize his neutrality policies were leading to war with Germany (pp. 145, 174). In addition, however much Tucker criticizes Wilson’s stance on neutrality issues as counterproductive, he is curiously credulous regarding Wilson’s goal of creating a new international order. The author seems to assume this was a rational, workable objective; had Wilson only pursued the “right” policies, he implies, a “peace without victory” and a viable league of nations might have been achieved. How, though, would a peace league actually work? How did Wilson think it would work? And why would Germany embrace it when Wilson clearly wanted it based on the frustration of any German gains in the war? Tucker has little to say on any of these crucial questions.

Still, this is an interesting and significant book. The meaning of “Wilsonianism” is elusive, and historians will doubtlessly always disagree over the rationale, purposes, and quality of Wilson’s statesmanship. I found Tucker’s arguments stimulating, even when I wasn’t persuaded by them or thought they were incomplete. I enjoyed reading this book and highly recommend it to anyone interested in Wilson’s statecraft or in U.S. foreign relations in general.