Those interested in applying the methodologies of the new diplomatic or international history to the World War I era will be disappointed by this book. Relying primarily upon traditional types of U.S. diplomatic records, Tucker’s purpose is to restore the debate over neutral rights to a central place in the narrative of WWI. In this limited goal, he largely succeeds. However, by exploring the question of neutral rights in a vacuum, Tucker seriously underestimates the importance of broader economic, social, cultural, and political factors in shaping Wilson’s foreign policies during the years from 1914-1917.

Recent historical accounts like those of Thomas Knock have focused on the ways in which Wilson built a left-of-center coalition during the early war years that was committed to both progressive reform at home and to pursuing a progressive internationalist agenda abroad that included American membership in a future League of Nations.1 But Tucker portrays Wilson as a leader dependent on a few pro-British advisors such as Robert Lansing and Edward House and as obsessed with enforcing a legalistic and moralistic vision of nineteenth century neutral rights law rather than on planning for the future.

Under nineteenth century law, “the practices establishing the rights and duties of belligerents and neutrals were dependent, not upon logical deductions drawn from general principles, but rather upon the concrete circumstances attending war’s conduct in a particular historical period.” (61) Yet Wilson insisted upon viewing nineteenth century practice governing the right of neutral passengers to travel through war zones either on neutral or belligerent ships as absolute. This thinking made Wilson uncompromising in his attitude toward submarine warfare. Yet, under international law, belligerents were entitled to reprisals in the event of unlawful conduct by their enemies. The British blockade could reasonably be construed by the Germans as a violation of international law that earned them the right to reprisal. But Wilson, suggests Tucker, abandoned impartiality by accepting with only mild protest the British blockade while insisting--particularly in the wake of the Lusitania affair--that Germany abandon submarine warfare against merchant ships unless it could adhere to traditional rules governing the protection of civilians during attacks.

Robert Lansing and Edward House, according to Tucker, understood that the U.S. risked war with Germany by adopting a hard-line position on submarine warfare. But because they believed that the war was a struggle between freedom and tyranny they were willing to accept this risk in order to aid the Allies. By contrast, Wilson remained “adrift,” in his attitudes regarding U.S. belligerency even after the Lusitania affair, “suspended between a past he could no longer recover and a prospective future he could not bring himself to accept.” (130)

In the two years following the sinking of the Lusitania, Wilson continued to pursue negotiations with the Germans but refused to compromise on the issue of the rights of neutral passengers and ships. Such a course made war inevitable, Wilson’s desire for peace notwithstanding. Particularly vexing was Wilson’s insistence on the principle that American citizens had the right to travel on Allied merchant vessels. Tucker argues that on “almost any traditional calculus of national interest the principle seemed altogether insufficient” as a reason for declaring war.(143) But the president equated the principle with the “nation’s dignity and honor” and felt he could not “yield his position” without “jeopardizing prestige and credibility abroad and leadership at home.” (143,140)

In reemphasizing the debate over neutrality, Tucker offers a welcome corrective to those who credit Wilson with an almost superhuman clairvoyance in pursuing his vision of progressive internationalism and of a League of Nations before being felled by his stroke in 1919. The picture that emerges in Tucker’s rendering of Wilson is instead of a president who was at the war’s beginning more tied to the nineteenth than the twentieth century and who failed to anticipate the way in which modern war would render older principles of international law obsolete. In detailing Wilson’s stubborn insistence on the rights of neutral passengers to travel through war zones throughout the period from 1914-1917, Tucker demonstrates effectively that Wilson’s rigidity and moral absolutism predated his stroke and limited his intellectual flexibility in ways that sometimes prevented him from rationally calculating either the national interest or the best path toward international

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2 See, for example, Cooper, 422.
cooperation after the armistice. Tucker’s account will in turn force historians to ask anew whether Wilson’s uncompromising behavior toward his political opponents during the debate over the League of Nations was really so aberrational after all.

But in other ways, Tucker’s account falls short and would benefit from a consideration of some of the analyses of both the William Appleman Williams school and of the newer cultural and social history approaches. In a short chapter on “Interpretations,” Tucker traces the debate over neutral rights from the first wave of revisionism in the 1920s and 1930s through the post World War II era but then stops, suggesting that—with a few notable exceptions—historians since the 1960s have been more preoccupied with the League of Nations debate or with Wilson’s policies in Latin America and the Caribbean than with the debate over neutrality. But while this is doubtless true, the broader questions raised by the Williams school about the linkages between economic and security interests need more attention.

According to Tucker, neutrality was the corollary of isolationism but could sometimes come into conflict with it during European wars. But, as the Williams school so effectively detailed and as Tucker himself acknowledges, the United States was never really economically isolationist. Its interest in the rights of neutrals derived not from a desire to remain isolated from the world but from a desire to expand economically in a world that by the late nineteenth century was dominated by empires. In this sense, Wilson’s ardent defense of neutrality might be viewed more as a corollary to the Open Door Notes so touted by the Williams school than to a mythical 19th century isolationism. Similarly, Wilson’s plans for a League of Nations designed in part to enforce neutral rights law might be interpreted as a logical outgrowth of a fairly consistent vision of American international economic interests in a world that was dominated in 1914 by balance of power politics but that was moving toward hegemonic dominance by the United States. Even if Tucker disagrees with Williams-school revisionists, he needs to better explore the repercussions of this rich body of work for his own understanding of Wilson and the rights of neutrals under international law.

Equally important, Tucker needs to come to terms with the new literature on World War I in the fields of social and cultural history. Tucker, like so many diplomatic historians, assumes without demonstrating that on the major issues of war and peace “Wilson’s views were close to the public’s views.” (24) Tucker therefore neglects the role of public opinion in influencing Wilson’s wartime policies between 1914 and 1917. But an abundant literature that has emerged at the intersection of social and international history over the past two decades has demonstrated just how unpopular many of Wilson’s pro-allied policies were. Critics of Wilson’s pro-allied policies included not only the “pro-German groups” to which Tucker briefly alludes, but also many groups on the left—including

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Socialists, feminists, trade unionists, a diverse array of working-class immigrants, and Southern populists of both races--whose support Wilson badly needed to court if he were to triumph in the 1916 election. Just how unpopular Wilson's handling of the Lusitania incident was in these circles was aptly demonstrated by a widely circulated Socialist cartoon which portrayed a dandified Wilson doing the bidding of a fat and smirking munitions shipper by lecturing a muscular American worker on the need to "Be Prepared to Go to War to Defend Your Right to Travel In Europe This Summer." Such widespread sentiments must at least have given the president pause in 1915 and may help to explain why he continued to pursue negotiations with Germany even while persisting in an interpretation of neutral rights that—as Tucker convincingly argues—made U.S. intervention in the war all but inevitable.

Finally, Tucker's treatment suffers from an inattention to gender issues. In a dismissive footnote, Tucker suggests that “[f]or Wilson ‘honor’ meant more than chivalrous sentiments or ideals.” (215) But whether Wilson himself was personally motivated by chivalry begs the question: gendered posturing and language, as numerous historians have made clear, formed a critical component of the political culture of the era. In pursuing a policy viewed as weak toward Germany, Wilson risked being labeled a “mollycoddle” by politicians like Theodore Roosevelt. By contrast, if he pursued policies viewed as too servile toward business interests he was condemned by socialist and labor groups as a “silk-stocking militarist.” Given this context, Wilson’s own gendered language during the years leading up to war deserves more attention by historians—not primarily as an indication of Wilson’s own gender views but rather as a gauge of the gendered political image he was trying to promote of himself. Wilson apparently wanted himself viewed as a “man too proud to fight” without sufficient justification but also as one who was willing to fight if no other way were found to end the “unmanly business” of submarine warfare. (111) Given Wilson’s own frequent use of gendered language, 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 neutrals. At minimum, gender deserves to be


5 New York Call, 25 July, 1915, 1


included on Tucker's scholarly checklist as he tries to explain Wilson's “baffling” policies from the time of the Lusitania affair to the declaration of war. (127)

In sum, by neglecting much of the literature on Wilson since the 1960s, Tucker has helped to demonstrate its utility and its richness. Despite its many omissions, Tucker's book will be an important primer for those seeking to understand the details of the debate over neutrality from 1914-1917.