Until the post-World War Two period Woodrow Wilson was the second most-hated American president by the German public (FDR came first). It was post-surrender German historical revisionism combined with the growing accessibility of confidential source material that led to a more dispassionate assessment of the 28th American president in German historiography. More recently, however, the claim of the administration of George W. Bush to be an heir of Wilson's legacy has cast a new shadow on Wilson's image, as the following quotation illustrates: “Few people are any longer likely to share the ... assertion that American diplomacy in the 20th was characterized by the attempt to create a peaceful world order”.

Inspired by present concerns, as they are, such recent views nonetheless confront the historian with a challenge. With his most recent book, rather an interpretative essay than a chronological account, Robert W. Tucker, one of the grand old men in the historiography of American foreign relations, has risen to this challenge in taking another close look at Wilson's much debated policy as a neutral in World War One. Essentially, this is the account of a failure. According to Tucker, Wilson was determined to keep America out of the war, and yet in attempting to defend America’s rights as a neutral power he ended up declaring war on Germany. It was an irony, one may add, that this failure inaugurated America’s career as a promoter of a liberal internationalism.
To Tucker America’s entry into World War One was anything but a foregone conclusion. As he shows, Wilson, notwithstanding his dispute with Imperial Germany about the latter’s submarine warfare, remained largely unimpressed by the various belligerents’ claims at moral superiority. Instead, he increasingly abhorred the senseless massacre into which the “Great War” was degenerating. He wanted the United States to stay out of it also for fear lest a belligerent America would suffer domestically and would jeopardize its standing as a morally independent and disinterested mediator between the two warring parties.

Tucker’s major point is that America’s ultimate entrance into the war in part resulted from a discrepancy that existed between Wilson’s sincere purposes and his political actions attempting to implement them. Tucker agrees that this discrepancy was partly due to a common interest the Wilson administration and the Western allies shared – the US government as the most important exporter of war supplies to the allies and, as a consequence, the beneficiary of a finally booming economy at home, - the allies as the recipients of much needed commodities that sustained their war effort. Inevitably, America at large thus became a more and more benevolent neutral with a clear pro-Allies bias. Significantly, Wilson more than once demanded a regime change in Germany and by implication total victory, whenever war with the Central Powers seemed imminent. It certainly never occurred to him and his advisers to advocate something similar for the United Kingdom. To be sure, there was the continued dispute with Germany about the forms and the legal meaning of its submarine warfare, and in the end, not to forget, there was Germany’s fateful decision of January 31, 1917, to proclaim the resumption of its unrestricted U-boat campaign.

Still, Tucker makes Wilson at least partly responsible for America’s unwanted involvement in the war by stressing the rigid legalistic line Washington adopted from early on in response to the German submarine challenge. As early as February 1915 the Wilson administration publicly stressed Germany’s – and only Germany’s, not Great Britain's - “strict accountability” for losses America suffered due to the indiscriminate use of the submarine by Germany. Thus Wilson increasingly committed himself and America’s prestige to an ultimately military response to German violations of America’s rights as a neutral. It did not help, Tucker adds, that Wilson, personally and rhetorically, raised the stakes the defense of America’s neutrality involved. To Wilson defending America’s neutrality meant not only preserving international law, but even more so opening up the way for a peaceful world order under the auspices of a League of Nations. To Wilson the instrument to arrive at that goal was American mediation between the belligerents. Tucker scrutinizes the Anglo-American soundings that ended up in Wilson’s public commitment of May 27, 1916, for an international organization globally guaranteeing peace. This, Tucker emphasizes, was Wilson’s decisive new departure, as the president promised that America would join such a League as a leading member thereby parting with its isolationist tradition.

Naturally, war with Germany would have paralyzed Wilson’s efforts. The German-American dispute about Germany’s U-boat warfare, therefore, assumed a more and more principled character, and only Germany’s so-called Sussex pledge of May 4, 1916, i.e. the promise to conduct the U-Boat campaign strictly in accordance with the rules of a cruiser blockade,
laid this controversy to rest for the time being. This German concession made it possible for Wilson at long last to adopt what Tucker accepts as a truly neutral stance. In this, he remarks, the president fundamentally differed from his closest advisers like Col. House or the legally trained Robert Lansing, the Secretary of State, whom Tucker regards as more influential than previous historiography did.

Whether Imperial Germany would uphold the Sussex pledge or would revert to unrestricted submarine warfare thus was absolutely crucial for maintaining the American government’s neutrality. From Wilson’s standpoint, the final German decision to resume the unrestricted U-boat campaign not only violated sacred neutral rights and international law, it also thwarted his prestigious grand design for mediation. As Tucker concludes in a final chapter devoted to America’s declaration of war, America's intervention in World War One fundamentally changed Wilson’s perception of the war’s nature: What before to him had been a mere power struggle now became a contest for values. What remained unchanged, however, was Wilson’s commitment to a universal “dominion of right” (p.203). To him this meant a world that accepted American principles assuring a lasting peace. His break with American isolationism was to be definite.

By and large, I find Tucker’s interpretation convincing. It is not altogether novel, but it has the merit of presenting in a succinct and penetrating way what one can derive from having waded through the countless pages of Arthur Link’s monumental biography of Woodrow Wilson. In particular, Tucker's text reaffirmed my own conviction of the supreme importance of the part the personality of Woodrow Wilson played in the evolution and the ultimate failure of America’s neutrality in World War One. Tucker enhanced the effect of this personal approach by skillfully selecting quotations from public and confidential sources like Wilson’s speeches and letters or from the House diary.

It is to be regretted that Tucker fails to include Wilson’s final peace move of December 1916 into his analysis. No doubt, such an extension of his text would not have basically changed his argument, but it would have helped to further illustrate his interpretation and would have made it better understandable to the non-expert reader.

In the end, the profile of Woodrow Wilson as a foreign policy decision maker that can be distilled from Tucker’s interpretation reminds one of Max Weber’s distinction between a policy of principle (“Gesinnungspolitik”) and a policy of responsibility (“Verantwortungspolitik”). Wilson, as Tucker understands him, tended to the first – principled – category of policy, as preserving international law was more important to him than keeping his “great nation” out of the war. In this respect he undoubtedly mirrored the attitude of the majority of his people, especially the intellectual circles.

This said I am still tempted to ask up to what degree Wilson really always was bent on sticking to his principles regardless of the consequences. Regarding the basic values to which he was committed the answer should be a clear yes. Still, one may ask to what extent Wilson was tempted to adjust his understanding and the application of his principles to circumstances. Tucker himself points out how swiftly Wilson changed and forgot judgments he had previously expressed regarding World War One and its “higher”
objectives, and he demonstrates that Wilson’s shifting was pretty much in line with the
treatment one or the other belligerent chose vis-à-vis America as a neutral. So he may have
been somewhat less principled and more flexible, at times even more opportunist, more of
a “practical idealist” (p. 27) than Tucker seems to be prepared to admit. This reservation
should not detract from the historic responsibility the then Berlin government shouldered
in embroiling America in World War One – thereby, ultimately and ironically, enhancing, if
not establishing America’s position as a preeminent world power.