Author’s Response by Robert W. Tucker

I can only hope that my remarks do not convey the impression of ingratitude toward the reviewers. On the contrary, I am much indebted to them for their criticisms and the careful reading they gave the book.

On Professor Ball’s first point, the unlikelihood of a strategy of deterrence by arms working in the case of the allies. He is of course right about relative naval strength. But the real point of an armament program, in the beginning at any rate, was to show a clear determination to insist upon a strict neutrality. This had to be shown at the outset of war, or soon thereafter. Yet Wilson did just the opposite. On almost every count, he gave way to Great Britain while refusing to consider an arms program. Had Wilson followed a strict neutrality, the British course would surely have been quite different. On this we have the testimony of the British foreign minister. It may be argued that at the time the president did not know of the British position on differences with the United States over neutral rights and could not have been sure how the British would react. A simple test, however, would have revealed how far the British government was determined to push. The president was quite unwilling to run the test. Had he done so, and established clear limitations to British pretentions, Germany would have had less reason to employ the
submarine as she did. Less reason since she would have access to those goods allowed at the time by the law of contraband. But Great Britain would still have remained dominant at sea; strict neutrality by the United States would still not have cancelled out the advantages the British enjoyed by virtue of their naval supremacy and geographical position. The prospect that this would possibly lead to a decisive breakthrough by Germany could be safely dismissed.

Ball’s second point is that I treat “American neutrality oddly as the opposite of any belligerency.” This I do, but why only American neutrality? Any state's neutrality was the opposite of its belligerency. In traditional international law, during war a state had to be either a neutral or a belligerent. At the same time, it was possible for a neutral to use force, as an exceptional measure, in order to protect its neutral status. There were limits, though undefined, to the measures a state might take to defend its neutrality, since such measures unavoidably bordered on belligerency. In 1917, America did not defend neutrality by refusing “aligned belligerency.” Although choosing not to formally align itself with others, the United States abandoned neutrality and embraced belligerency. The view that one defends neutrality by accepting a belligerent status was rightly rejected by the noninterventionists. On the other hand, belligerency may be the only way to defend a state and its policy of isolation. The obvious, though not the only, case is the isolationist state that defends itself against armed aggression. For all practical purposes, however, an isolationist state was a state that remained neutral in the wars of others.

On the third point that Ball makes: he disagrees with the argument that by acquiescing to the British blockade but by continued and escalating protests against German submarines the United States abandoned the impartiality required of a neutral. I do not see what other conclusion may be drawn. The duty of impartiality was not exhausted by neutrals refusing to recognize the legal validity of a belligerent’s actions; it also required the neutral to take such action as would make the offending belligerent desist. Ball writes that such action in the instant case “would have meant war with one or both belligerents.” I dispute this in the case of Great Britain and cast some doubt on it in the case of Germany (provided, of course, that the United States had initially made the British conform to the law governing contraband and blockade). But that argument apart, the consequences Ball draws to show the absurdity of my argument (“it would have meant war with one or both belligerents”) is instead the simple truth of the matter. These considerations apart, Ball is narrowly right in his criticism that one cannot say that the ultimate German reaction was inevitable and at the same time insist that the Germans made a great mistake in not accepting Wilson’s Dec. 1916 peace proposal. I overshot the mark; but given the prior course of German-American relations, I did so by not too much.

I quite agree with Ball’s conclusion that Wilson’s internationalism “was a consequence of his nationalism, not a substitute for it,” and that what primarily motivated him was not innocent lives imperiled by German submarine warfare but innocent American lives. At the same time, he did emphasize as well the German disregard of the “inviolate principal of humanity” which defined the essential difference between war and murder, between the permitted and the forbidden taking of human life. Germany’s conduct of submarine warfare, he insisted, overrode this distinction. But so did the British blockade, though it did
so in a manner quite different from the submarine. Wilson chose to ignore the effects of the blockade on the German civilian population, though they were in time no less deadly than those of the submarine.

Wilson nevertheless acquiesced in the blockade. Professor Cooper writes that this acquiescence “seems to have arisen from a desire to avoid unnecessary and perhaps costly trouble, with no affecting benefits.” This was certainly true, but only so long as Germany did not respond. The only response open to her, apart from diplomatic protest addressed to the neutral states, was the submarine. The effectiveness of the submarine having been demonstrated in the early stages of the war, an otherwise unemployed German navy began pressing for its use as a commerce destructor. Even if we were to grant Cooper’s contention that this “does not mean that retaliation was the main reason for unleashing the u-boats,” the Allied blockade certainly afforded Germany a weighty reason – or excuse – for launching the submarine against enemy commerce. I do think that John Coogan went too far in Wilson’s case, though not in Lansing’s or House’s, in dismissing Grey’s distinction between the blockade affecting property and the submarine taking lives, and I so stated in the text. That distinction, however spurious in the end, did indeed lend an “emotional edge” to the disputes with Germany.

Cooper writes that I miss the broader significance of the reaction to the sinking of the Lusitania. I do not see what I could have added to my account to emphasize the significance of the event. I thought I had stressed that it was, in Cooper’s words, “the great turning point in America’s stance toward the war.” Quite different is Cooper’s contention that I am “dead wrong” in my assertion that Wilson could have taken the country into war over the Lusitania. He could have done so, however, had he only followed the path marked out in his first note to Germany following the sinking. At the very least, that path would have led to the breaking of diplomatic relations, a step at the time foreshadowed war. Wilson did not follow this course. Instead, his second and third notes either abandoned or softened the terms he had initially set out.

It is the case that in the period following the Sussex affair there was a relaxation of tensions with Germany and deterioration in relations with Great Britain. Between May 1916 and January 1917, Wilson bends his efforts to regain a neutrality lost in the early months of the war. In this, he is certainly helped by German forbearance with the submarine and English measures in the ever tightening of the blockade. His efforts fall short though; he can neither undo his actions of the preceding two years nor can he induce the belligerents to follow him into the uncharted territory of his peace proposal.

Professor Kennedy is critical of my analyses of Wilson’s view of Germany. In fact, Wilson’s view of Germany in relation to the United States is never altogether clear. In the sentence of mine that Kennedy quotes (“Wilson appears to have entertained little real fear over the consequences a German victory held out for American security.”) I added parenthetically “an outcome that, in any event, he did not expect, and particularly in the earlier period of the war.” At the same time, I wrote (a few pages later) that: “Wilson was not blind to the prospective threat of a triumphant Germany to the nation’s security interests. He appreciated that a German victory, even if it were not immediately to give rise to a
challenge to the Monroe Doctrine, might eventually impose a burden of military preparedness, which the country had been able to escape in the past.” These considerations, however, were not compelling enough to overturn long-held views about the nature and basis of American security. To the limited extent he did see a connection between American security and events in Europe, what was decisive for him was not the threat to the nation’s security that might arise in a distant future when a victorious Germany had recovered from the devastating effects of war, but the threat to America’s institutions and well-being that would arise if America were to become a party to the war.

Kennedy sees a consistency in Wilson’s attitude toward Germany that I am unable to find. He writes that Wilson “consistently sought to insure its defeat and limit its expansion.” To so characterize Wilson’s outlook and policy during the entire period of neutrality seems to me to be, if not simply wrong, than at the very least a marked exaggeration. Kennedy thinks the House-Grey negotiations and the famous memorandum that resulted prove his view. I think that all they bear out is Wilson’s determination to avoid war and that Walter Lippmann was right in once arguing that Wilson “would have been willing to have almost any peace in Europe if he could keep America out of war.” Lippmann went on to observe: “I think he saw that if once he could induce the belligerents to begin talking that they never could resume fighting. He was willing to try any device including the House negotiations that might bring on a conference, provided it did not commit him to entering the war.”

The period from late May 1916 to the end of January 1917 appears to support this position. At no time during this period does Wilson appear to favor the Allies over Germany. In late August, he voices the belief “that a psychological moment will come. I am praying that it will come very soon, when some suggestion made out loud by somebody that they (the belligerents) will have to listen to will be irresistible, that they will begin to parley. And once they stop fighting and begin the parley, they will never begin fighting again.” There is no favoritism or bias here. Nor is there any in Wilson’s prolegomenon to his peace note. The prolegomenon addresses the meaning of the war and is pure Wilson. The thought sequence is this: wars have always been without deeper meaning and significance, but at least they had glory. In this war the glory is gone. All we see is untold human suffering. To obtain enduring peace, it must be shown that suffering has been without real purpose. No “victory” can be allowed to obscure this lesson, lest we set the stage for yet another conflict. The prolegomenon expressed a view that necessarily had to be disguised when Wilson drafted his December 1916 peace note addressed to the belligerents. Yet it is there. Finally, throughout the fall of 1916, Wilson’s determination to pursue an even handed course, bolstered by his emphasis on the belligerents’ moral equivalence, were a constant worry to House and Lansing, so much so that in November House openly raised the flag of near rebellion.

On Kennedy’s last two criticisms – I plead guilty to the first. Too little attention was paid to Wilson’s preparedness policy. With respect to the second, however, Kennedy’s criticism – that I should have analyzed Wilson’s view of international reform more carefully – must be rejected. Wilson's fear of a second world war, which “lay at the center of his thought,” was formed only in the later stages of the war, which should have been apparent given the context of my discussion in the final chapter. This fear did not shape his policies in 1914 or
even in 1915 until the late summer or early fall, when the president came to appreciate his policies were leading to war with Germany. As for my being “curiously credulous regarding Wilson’s goal of creating a new international order,” I am at a loss to understand how Kennedy reached this conclusion. Nowhere do I assume that this was “a rational workable objective” and that a “viable league of nations might have been achieved.” On the contrary, I express my skepticism on all of this. If I did not take up the “crucial questions” raised by Kennedy, it is because the book deals with Wilson’s neutrality policies and why we went to war, not with a critique of how and why a peace league could have been expected to work.

Professor McKillen’s general criticism is that I pursue the issue of Wilson’s neutrality policies in a vacuum, neglecting or underestimating the importance of economic, social, cultural, and political factors in shaping these policies. A particular grievance is that I overlook the Williams school and the questions raised by this school about linkages between economics and security interests. In my defense, I must say that my interest was to examine Wilson’s policies as such rather than to analyze the many factors influencing Wilson’s decisions, and especially the economic. Certainly, his neutrality was from the start shaped by economic concerns. In turn, those concerns were derived, as McKillen notes, from a longstanding desire to expand economically throughout the world (economically though not politically: political isolation from Europe was no myth but a reality).

I doubt whether paying more attention to gender issues would have helped in understanding Wilson’s neutrality. It may be true, as McKillen points out, that gender posturing and language formed a critical component of the political culture of the era. It does not follow that concern about appearing “manly” in the public eye played a role in Wilson’s obsession with defending the nation’s honor and prestige and his unwillingness to compromise with Germany on the disputed issues of neutral rights. Honor and prestige are qualities that we – men and women – identify with the nation; they are deemed important not only in their own right but because they are seen as indispensable for defending other interests of the nation. Honor and prestige remain as significant today as they did in the age of Wilson, though their meaning has altered in the intervening period. Female heads of state have given them the same deference as have male heads of state and they have been quite as determined to uphold them. And if it is argued that women have done so because they yet live in a male dominated world, the reply can only be that the argument remains at best unproven.

Professor Schwabe asks “up to what degree Wilson really was bent on sticking to his principles regardless of the consequences.” He thinks Wilson was perhaps more of a “practical idealist” than I was prepared to admit. Wilson certainly thought of himself as a practical idealist; it was, he thought, what separated him from Bryan. His first secretary of state’s readiness to sacrifice neutral rights to stay out of the war was “a singular sort of moral blindness,” Wilson declared to Edith Galt during the crisis brought on by the sinking of the Lusitania. Bryan’s failing was not as an idealist but as a practical man who had to come to terms with the world as it was, not as it ought to have been. Wilson was persuaded he was a practical man and his legion of admirers have shared this appreciation.
We need not accept the view of Wilson’s critics at the time and after to be skeptical of this self-portrait. If Wilson was neither a shameless opportunist nor a hypocrite, as Roosevelt and his friends charged, he scarcely fits the mold of the practical idealist. One need not point only to the position Wilson took in the fight over the League of Nations to so argue. For the position taken in 1919 - above all the refusal to compromise – was, after all, not a unique one. That position was characteristic of almost all earlier stances taken by Wilson in the great battles marking his career, whether in academia or in politics.