

BOOKS

[*Wilson's War: How Woodrow Wilson's Great Blunder Led to Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, and World War II*, Jim Powell, Crown Forum, 341 pages]

Making the World Safe—Again

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

THE STORY SOUNDS oddly familiar: a president surrounded by yes-men and convinced of his divine mission to remake the world involves his country in a war that has nothing to do with its genuine security interests. When the grandiose promises he once advanced on the war's behalf do not come to pass, he simply retreats into his own reality in which everything has worked out splendidly.

Yet instead of Iraq and WMD, this story involves Woodrow Wilson, Europe, and World War I. After years of enforcing a double standard consisting of denunciations of German submarine warfare but only the occasional criticism of Britain's illegal hunger blockade, Wilson took his country into war against Germany for what he insisted were the noblest of purposes rather than narrow considerations of national interest. Although the eventual peace treaty violated just about every one of Wilson's stated principles, the president crisscrossed America calling it "an enterprise of divine mercy" and the "incomparable consummation of the hopes of mankind." Wilson, wrote Sigmund Freud, "was rapidly nearing that psychic land from which few travelers return, the land in which facts are the products of wishes."

We often hear of the unintended consequences of government intervention into the economy. For example, attempts to lower the price of milk by means of price

controls will lead to shortages of milk. In *Wilson's War*, Jim Powell is at pains to demonstrate that foreign intervention, too, has its unintended consequences—hence his book's provocative subtitle.

Those consequences have much to do with the Treaty of Versailles that Germany was forced to sign in March 1919. Wilson had spoken of a "peace without victory," a settlement that would be just toward victor and vanquished alike. Here he was certain that the United States had a salutary role to play, since left to its own devices Europe would end its war with an unjust settlement that would merely sow the seeds for a future conflict. Ironically, of course, such a treaty was made possible by the very American intervention that Wilson believed could avert it. (Wilson neglected the example of the Congress of Vienna a century earlier, which without any American help brought forth a settlement that managed to avoid a continent-wide war until the Great War of 1914-18.)

Wilson's Fourteen Points, which outlined the principles he hoped would govern the settlement and the postwar world, pointed to just such a peace. But it was not to be: Wilson was bullied at the peace conference by vindictive European leaders who threatened to remain aloof from the president's pro-

posed League of Nations—the institution Wilson fervently believed would prevent future wars and which could justify the American sacrifice—if he did not consent to their violation of his principles. Why, Powell wonders, did Wilson think the treaty negotiations would go any other way?

The Fourteen Points' call for general disarmament, for example, gave way to the demand that only Germany was to disarm. The call for an impartial settlement of colonial claims translated in practice into stripping Germany of her colonies and distributing them among

the victors. And so the treaty went, all the way down to the so-called war-guilt clause, which assigned exclusive blame for the outbreak of the war to Germany and her allies. This would be the rationale behind the enormous reparations bill laid at Germany's feet two years later.

In recent months, Republican cheerleaders for war have begun selling t-shirts, directed at the "war never solved anything" Left, listing all the evils that war has supposedly eradicated. One of them is "fascism." It is true that in the 1940s war did smash fascism, though at the cost of empowering Soviet Communism and ushering in half a century of nuclear terror. More fundamentally, though, the t-shirt philosophers miss the point that fascism, far from being a spontaneous phenomenon that emerged out of nowhere, was itself a product of a previous war, namely World War I.

There are at least two senses in which this was the case. For one thing, the fascists were deeply impressed, even shaped, by the experience of the war and the massive material and ideological mobilizations it effected. The nationalism that was encouraged by the war, the collective efforts toward a common goal, the suppression of individual liberty, the subordination of private interests to public needs—fascists sought to

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apply all of these features of wartime experience to the postwar organization of society. The fascists emerged from the war persuaded that the classical liberalism of the 19th century was dead and that the society of the future would be centrally directed: its social policy, its culture, its economy.

The more frequently discussed way in which fascism derived from World War I involves the Treaty of Versailles. That treaty was so egregiously at odds with the Fourteen Points, on the basis of which the Germans had surrendered in the first place, that it was practically

tailor-made for the extremism and hyper-patriotic politics of an Adolf Hitler. As readers doubtless know, Hitler exploited German bitterness at the treaty and after taking power in 1933 began openly flouting its terms.

In some cases, the treaty's poisoning effects on German political culture were less direct. The German hyperinflation of 1923, for example, in which it took 4.2 trillion marks to equal one American dollar, would not have occurred had it not been for the heavy reparations and the German government's subsequent attempts to inflate its way out of them. The resulting disorder and humiliation played a significant role in helping Hitler's party extend its influence.

The consequences of American intervention in the war were not confined to Germany; Powell suggests a number of ways in which they extended to Russia as well. The February Revolution of 1917 had seen a liberal Provisional Government assume power in place of the tsar. The new government's hold on the country was precarious. Wilson joined the Allies in pressuring and bribing the Provisional Government into staying in the war. It was the misery and dislocation brought about by Russian participation in the war that had made that government vulnerable in the first place. Had Wilson not cajoled Russia's Provisional Government into remaining in the fight, it might have withdrawn from the conflict and consolidated its position, thus depriving the Bolsheviks of perhaps the most rhetorically potent weapon in their arsenal of propaganda.

This is a debatable point, to be sure, since Russia's Provisional Government had promised from the start that it would engage in a more effective prosecution of the war than had the previous government, and Wilson's role in keeping Russia in the war was probably marginal. Powell concedes that pro-war elements in the Provisional Government may have won out even in the absence of Western threats, but adds that this virtually bankrupt government was especially susceptible to financial pressure.

But had it not been for American intervention, say Wilson boosters, Germany might have won the war. That is by no means a foregone conclusion, and it certainly seems unlikely that Germany would have been in so decisive a position as to be able to impose draconian peace terms on the West. Powell is not convinced that a German victory would have been catastrophic. Germany, he observes, would have had to confront the same problem of restless nationalities that had dogged Austria-Hungary and Russia. "The best the Germans might have hoped for would have been to annex Belgium and northwestern France, where much of World War I had been fought, as well as territories gained from Austria-Hungary and western Russia. ... If the Germans had won the war, they would have had a hard time holding their empire together because of all the rebellious nationalities—the same nationalities that figured in the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. The most likely outcome of a German victory: costly civil wars ending in German collapse."

There were no angels among the principal protagonists in the war, Powell reminds us, and the claim that one side's cause could be equated with democracy is propaganda of the worst kind. Wilson's speech calling for war, Powell rightly observes, was filled with "glittering generalities," above all the president's claim that "the world must be made safe for democracy." Wilson "didn't explain how this was to be done by allying with the British Empire, which had colonies around the world; with France, which had colonies in Africa and Asia; and with Russia, which was ruled by a czar." Belgium, whose official neutrality was breached by the Germans at the outset of the war, was an appalling colonial power responsible for as many as eight million deaths in the Congo.

No matter which side Wilson chose, he would be lending support to morally dubious causes. "If Wilson backed the British, French, and Belgians, he would have enabled them to seek vengeance against the Germans and protect their

empires in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. If Wilson backed the Germans, he would have enabled them to build an empire and seek vengeance against their adversaries."

Wilsonian propaganda made the German government out to be a uniquely wicked autocracy. But although Germany was no libertarian paradise, neither was it a repository of lawlessness and iniquity. As historian Walter Lacquer writes:

Germany was certainly not a free country by West European or American standards but it is useful to recall from time to time that there are degrees of oppression. It was no cruel dictatorship; there was a constitution and there were laws which had to be observed by rulers as well as ruled. In comparison with the dictatorships that were to emerge in Europe after the war, Wilhelmian Germany was a permissive country to an almost bewildering degree. Political murders were unknown, as was arrest and trial without due process of law. The Emperor himself was openly criticized in the press ... and if an officer assaulted a civilian, as had happened in the little Alsatian town of Zabern, this became a *cause célèbre* all over Germany. Workers on strike were not shot, censorship was applied only in extreme cases of *lèse-majesté* and blasphemy, and it is doubtful whether justice could have been flagrantly perverted as in the Dreyfus case.

Powell concludes with a chapter on the lessons that Americans should draw from Wilsonianism and its disastrous legacy. Conservatives have been known to observe that while failed private firms go out of business, failed government programs are rewarded with higher budgets. As Jim Powell notes in this important book, the same appears to hold true for failed foreign policies. ■

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[*God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Jim Wallis, Harper San Francisco, 416 pages]

[*Exodus: Why Americans Are Fleeing Liberal Churches For Conservative Christianity*, Dave Shiflett, Sentinel, 183 pages]

Prophets on the Right—and Left

By Philip Jenkins

IT ALL BEGAN with a car rental that should never have happened. “Though the man had a fine car of his own, just that day, for no reason he could think of, he decided to rent a car for his trip. And that’s where I met him, at Avis. I was in despair about finding a building for my new church. And right there, that man spoke a word of prophecy to me. He told me the part of town where I would find the building, and he told me I would find it in April. And on the very last day of that April, I signed the lease.” To hear the story, prophecy was no rare event in the speaker’s life, any more than finding an interesting movie or hitting a series of green lights on the way to work.

The storyteller was a powerful black urban pastor, deeply charismatic, articulate, and nobody’s fool, and he was emanating total confidence in a highly interventionist God who would have been instantly recognizable to John Wesley and probably to St. Paul. By fortunate confidence—or was it coincidence?—I heard this story as I was reading Jim Wallis’s book *God’s Politics*, which has created a sensation among liberals still shell-shocked after the 2004 presidential election.

Wallis’s thesis is that American society and politics are as God-haunted today as they have ever been and that individuals like the pastor represent, if anything, the mainstream in American life. Yet despite our saturation in religious ways of

thought and speech, the mass media present a ludicrous image of active, passionate religion as the sole preserve of the white Right, of stereotyped evangelicals who count no day complete if they have not chipped away at the rights of women or deprived the widow and orphan of their inheritance. But as my pastor friend illustrates, religious and particularly evangelical rhetoric has historically been as prevalent on the liberal or radical side of American life as among conservatives. I doubt whether the reverend has many Republicans in his large congregation or indeed whether many of his followers have met a Republican recently.

It would take a truly blinkered historian to omit God from the history of America’s social movements past and present, from the struggles to abolish slavery and establish civil rights to the rise of feminism and organized labor. Apart from the obvious evangelical and millenarian fervor driving change, any worthwhile account of American history must take full measure of Catholic social activism and liberal Judaism. Social change and agitation have long been phrased in religious terms and commonly in prophetic imperatives. Wallis places himself firmly in this tradition, drawing on the incendiary denunciations of injustice that motivated the great Hebrew prophets from Amos onwards.

Wallis, a left-wing evangelical who edits the activist religious journal *Sojourners*, believes the Christian tradition is deeply hostile to many assumptions that today mark the conservative Right, especially in matters such as militarism, aggressive foreign policy, tough law-and-order attitudes, and economic individualism. As Wallis asserts, trying to excise references to the poor from the Bible leaves a meager text indeed. In his eyes, then, his own “Christian Left” is at least as logical a manifestation of the faith as social or political conservatism.

His analysis carries a practical message. Wallis tells his story to arouse liberals to return to explicitly religious justification for activism and relearn

God-talk. Since last November, Democrats have indeed realized their God Gap, as repeated polls indicated the power of moral values in mobilizing support for George W. Bush. Liberals have also finally grasped the scale of popular revulsion against the values pushed by the media, the empty quest for sexual hedonism and material goods. Expect Wallis’s prescriptions to have a powerful influence in 2008 and probably in the 2006 midterms.

Wallis is obviously correct in his basic premise. Religious thought and rhetoric certainly underlie America’s liberal and radical traditions, and Biblical texts can be interpreted to justify collectivist social programs. This does not mean, of course, that those represent the only possible interpretations, and Wallis’s Biblical exegesis leans heavily towards the militantly anti-supernatural readings that prevailed among liberal churchmen in the mid-20th century—and which more recent scholars take with several pillars full of salt. But even if Wallis is presenting a one-sided picture, he makes a plausible case.

It is far less obvious, though, that the Democratic Party today can deploy this kind of sentiment. We can easily imagine Hillary Clinton in 2008 invoking the prophets and the epistle of James and—who knows?—doing so with transparent sincerity. But appealing to “people of faith” will promptly and inevitably encounter the acid test of practical policy. If you want to see dogmatic certainty in operation, just ask Democratic Party leaders and financiers to yield an inch even on an issue as outrageous as partial-birth abortion. If such a proposal is made, particularly dressed in the language of religion, we can expect hardcore party activists to storm the sanctuary.

Deep-dyed blue activists might tolerate a little harmless God-talk so long as it is not meant to have any implications in this world. But only scratch the surface of the sky-blues, and we will encounter a rich vein of bilious anti-clericalism, that class-based contempt that imagines every pastor as Elmer Gantry, every believer as a budding recruit for