

# George W. Bush: Wilsonian Liberal

More Guns and Butter

by Mark Royden Winchell



If constitutional liberties are as old as the republic itself (older if you include the tradition of English common law), violations of those liberties are just as old. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson threw their political opponents in jail, Andrew Jackson pursued a policy of genocide against this continent's original inhabitants, and Abraham Lincoln unleashed a wave of terrorism on innocent civilians that would make Osama bin Laden blush. The closest precedent to the hysteria currently gripping our nation, however, can be found in the second administration of Woodrow Wilson (1917-21). In shaping the American understanding of foreign policy, Wilson was probably the most important president of the 20th century. His influence has become so pervasive in establishment circles that, as we enter a new century, it passes for bipartisan wisdom. This fact has had disastrous implications both for America's role in the world and for life within our own borders.

Many regard Theodore Roosevelt as the father of American imperialism. Roosevelt, however, was a throwback to the 19th century. If he wished to extend the American empire, it was for fairly crass political and economic reasons. In contrast, Wilson was a Puritan ideologue who envisioned an ideal world order. The prospects for a noninterventionist foreign policy had been severely damaged by William Howard Taft's humiliating defeat for reelection in 1912. (The only nonimperialist in the race, Taft came in a dismal third to Wilson and Roosevelt, who was running a third-party campaign on the Bull Moose ticket.) By the time Wilson ran for a second term in 1916, his bellicose Republican opponent Charles Evans Hughes managed to make the President himself look like the peace candidate. In his campaign, Wilson reminded the public that "He Kept Us Out

of War," even as he was plotting to involve America in the conflict raging in Europe. As disingenuous as he may have been as a politician, Wilson was never less than totally sincere in his ultimate objective to "make the world safe for democracy." His ability to win wide public support for that goal led to an unprecedented increase in the size and scope of government. Since that time, we have scarcely looked back.

In order to justify our entry into what was essentially a foreign war, domestic warmongers needed to demonize Germany as a superpower bent on spreading Prussian authoritarianism throughout the civilized world. Lurid press accounts of the "Rape of Belgium" tended to confirm this demonology in the public mind. Then, on May 17, 1915, the British liner *Lusitania* was sunk off the coast of Ireland by a torpedo from a German submarine. The death of 1,200 noncombatants, including 128 Americans, was enough to cause such saber rattlers as Theodore Roosevelt to demand an immediate declaration of war. Wiser political figures, such as Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, urged restraint.

As despicable as the attack may have been, the *Lusitania* was carrying British munitions. It had sailed without convoy or protection, and the captain had ignored instructions to proceed at full speed and with great caution upon entering the war zone. As a *Washington Post* editorial pointed out, Germany had a right to prevent contraband from reaching the Allies. Long-standing international custom would have required the German submarine commander to visit and search the ship, but the British had taken to disguising machine guns on deck and opening fire. For the British to rely on passengers to protect the *Lusitania* from attack was "like putting women and children in front of the army." While Bryan wanted to warn Americans to avoid booking passage on ships that might be vulnerable to attack, Wilson took a harder line, asserting the "indispensable" right of Americans to travel the high seas and demanding both

---

Mark Royden Winchell's latest book is "Too Good to Be True": The Life and Work of Leslie Fiedler, published by the University of Missouri Press this past spring.

an apology and reparations from Germany. After a subsequent exchange of hostile notes between Wilson and the Germans, Bryan resigned in protest.

Although it did not approach the horrors that would be unleashed on September 11, 2001, the slaughter aboard the *Lusitania* helped confirm the image of Germans as bloodthirsty madmen who had to be stopped. (The actual declaration of war came nearly two years later, when Germany threatened to sink any ship attempting to enter or leave British ports.) In the midst of all this righteous indignation, not enough people questioned whether the perfidious Hun posed a demonstrable threat to American interests or whether a crusade to make the world safe for democracy could or should be won. While jingoist Anglophiles were already beating the war drums on general principles, Wilson secured the support of what passed for the mainstream American left with a combination of utopian militarism abroad and ambitious social reform at home.

While a policy of “guns and butter” can be economically hazardous, it has often been a politically winning combination for liberal politicians. As the election of 1916 approached, Wilson prompted a Democratic Congress to pass sweeping measures dealing with workman’s compensation, child labor, an eight-hour working day, and rural credit. In addition to enacting every major domestic plank of the 1912 Progressive Party platform, the President won the support of such progressive liberals as Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly, Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, John Dewey, Charles A. Beard, and Thorstein Veblen. He was also backed by the Railway Brotherhoods, the American Federation of Labor, and the Non-Partisan League. Advocates of limited government might have raised a few eyebrows, but everyone else seemed to be on the gravy train—with the recently passed personal income tax paying the bills.

While garnering liberal support and expanding the powers of the federal government, Wilson effectively isolated groups and individuals on the far left, who continued to oppose entering the European war and who could not be bought off. These opponents subsequently became the targets of governmental repression under the Espionage Act, passed on June 15, 1917, a mere two months after the United States had entered the world war. Although this law was ostensibly directed at foreign nationals whose behavior was obstructing the war effort, its provisions were broad enough to suppress the First Amendment rights of virtually anyone who opposed the administration’s policy. Wilson soon launched a loyalty program for government employees and established a Committee on Public Information with broad propaganda and censorship powers. In fact, the war fever was at such a high pitch that Wilson had to reign in some of his more zealous subordinates. Local and state officials and private bands of vigilantes went virtually unchecked. Although it was not technically a crime to belong to the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies), members of that organization and many independent radicals were targeted for harassment. Because these people were hardly sympathetic victims in the eyes of most Americans, their rights were easily violated.

Despite widespread opposition to the war on the part of many Wobblies, the IWW was an economic organization, which took no official position on foreign or military policy. Nevertheless, when the union struck against mining and lumber interests in the Far West in 1917, several governors claimed that it was an attempt to obstruct the war effort. On September 5, the federal government began a nationwide roundup of hundreds of IWW

leaders. Eventually, thousands of Wobblies were arrested, many of them on the basis of uncirculated antiwar pamphlets that had been printed before America entered the war. While most were released after the intimidation of a few days in jail, union president Big Bill Haywood and 165 other men were indicted in Chicago for violating the Espionage Act. Although it is doubtful that any actual spies were ever convicted under this act, it allowed the government to imprison dissidents for months under appalling conditions without ever formally charging them. (By the time they were actually tried and convicted, many had already served out their entire sentences while awaiting trial.) The excuse of a wartime emergency enabled the powers that be to crush a dissident group that had enjoyed constitutional protection during peacetime.

If anything good came of this systematic assault on the Bill of Rights, it was the backlash it produced on the part of several factions that championed constitutional liberties for fundamentally different reasons. The most superficial of these consisted of partisan Republicans, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, who cared more about scoring political points against the Democrats than about defending universal principles. A more sincere commitment was shown by a group of leftists, led by patrician socialist Roger Baldwin, who formed the National Civil Liberties Bureau. At a time when there was no other *organized* support for the embattled dissidents, the Civil Liberties Bureau risked the wrath of the government to guarantee constitutional protection to American citizens and resident aliens alike. (Baldwin spent several months in prison for failure to comply with the military draft.) Finally, the jackbooted tactics of the Wilson administration took heat from such Western Progressives as Robert M. LaFollette, William F. Borah, and George M. Norris. Although these men opposed both the war and domestic repression, they kept their distance from doctrinaire socialists such as Baldwin and Eugene V. Debs, as well as from anarchists, such as some of the Wobblies.

At first glance, George W. Bush would seem to be an unlikely inheritor of the Wilsonian legacy. Perhaps to his credit, he has never been accused of being an intellectual with a paradigmatic worldview. Unfortunately, the political establishment in Washington (whether “liberal” or “conservative,” Republican or Democrat) is filled with people who fit that description. The bipartisan foreign-policy consensus of the Cold War era virtually destroyed the noninterventionist tradition of the Old Right. Although that tradition made something of a comeback after the fall of the Soviet Empire, American policy abroad continues to be shaped by former Cold Warriors who are ideologically committed to maintaining the American Empire. Persons of such a mindset predictably saw the attacks of September 11 as the justification for a more interventionist military posture around the globe.

It is one thing to want to strike back at those who attacked us. It is a fundamentally different matter to launch a “War on Terrorism.” If terrorism consists of attacking civilians for military or political ends, most countries—including our own—have been guilty of such a practice. By definition, a war on terrorism cannot be won. (In the heady days after September 11, President Bush actually spoke of fighting a war against evil itself.) To define our objectives in such grandiose terms, however, gives our government warrant to attack virtually any country in the world without explicit provocation. While Iraq may become the first casualty of the Bush Doctrine, it probably will not be the last.

Like our earlier war to make the world safe for democracy, the “War on Terrorism” has resulted in an expansion of the size and power of government at home. When Republicans are out of power, they talk about eliminating Cabinet departments; Bush Senior, however, gave us the Department of Veterans Affairs, while Bush Junior has created a Department of Homeland Security. Although it is not clear that swelling the bureaucracy and moving boxes on the organizational chart will make us more secure, it will create more patronage jobs for the political class—an objective that almost always enjoys bipartisan support. In an effort to maintain the high public-approval rating necessary to wage war, Bush has abandoned any pretense of budget restraint, even in areas having nothing to do with national security. (The recent farm-subsidy bill was pork-barrel politics at its worst.) Like Woodrow Wilson, FDR, Lyndon Johnson, and (to a lesser extent) Ronald Reagan, our affable current leader has found the pursuit of guns and butter necessary for political success. Democrats are technically correct in pointing out that we have been swept from an historic budget surplus back into a river of red ink. But the cause is an orgy of public spending, not tax cuts that have yet to take effect.

Because there has been relatively little domestic opposition to the War on Terrorism, the First Amendment has not yet been subjected to the attack that it suffered under Parson Wilson. However, suspected terrorists (American citizens among them) have been held indefinitely without being charged with a crime or enjoying the benefit of counsel. The one area where a large number of Americans have encountered a police state is at the airport. Much of the current nonsense could be avoided if the airlines would simply reinforce cockpit doors, arm pilots, and issue counterfeit-proof identification cards to Al Gore, 85-year-old grandmothers, and others who pose no realistic threat to air safety. I can only conclude that the current system (in which DEA agents are allowed to pack heat but have their fingernail clippers confiscated) is the result of either criminal ineptitude or the government’s desire to make a show of brute force. A population that will acquiesce to such indignities is unlikely to mount the barricades to defend the civil liberties of others.

To what historical role models should present-day constitutionalists look for inspiration? Certainly not to knee-jerk political partisans. The landslide vote in favor of the draconian Patriot Act proves that Democrats are not likely to challenge the Bush administration on the War on Terrorism. If anything, they are clamoring for a bigger share of the action—although no one seems to think that Congress should actually discharge its constitutional responsibility to declare war. From time to time, principled conservatives have made common cause with left-wing civil libertarians. But a permanent alliance seems unwise. If authoritarians have trashed the Constitution, the American Civil Liberties Union—which is what the National Civil Liberties Bureau became—has frequently read its own ideological biases into that document. As a result, the ACLU has discovered privileges never intended by the Framers (the right to have an abortion or to be protected from public displays of religious sentiment), while virtually ignoring some actual provisions of the Bill of Rights (e.g., those contained in the Second and Tenth Amendments). What we need are constitutional traditionalists with backbone. The old-time Progressives were of that breed. So, too, was Robert Taft, when he persuaded the Senate to reject Harry Truman’s attempt to conscript striking railway workers into the Army in late 1945. (That measure had just passed the House, 306 to 11.) Can anyone imagine Trent Lott taking such a stand today?

Although it is theoretically possible to endorse an interventionist foreign policy while advocating limited government at home, such a pairing rarely works in practice. Throughout the Cold War, the welfare state expanded under both Republicans and Democrats. An increase in government benefits was the political price of a bipartisan foreign policy, which was deemed more imperative than any domestic reform conservatives might envision. Moreover, the bigger the government and the more awesome its responsibilities, the easier it was to curtail the liberties of those citizens who were not team players. As long as the ultimate end is noble enough, only pedants and obstructionists will quibble over means. In the “post-911 world,” their time is apparently past. We are all Wilsonian liberals now.

## Upon Learning of a Friend’s Affair Last Summer

*by Ruth Moose*

I envy  
not the sex so much as having the words,  
lover, tryst, paramour, and others  
to try on like hats  
in the attic of my mind. Think  
of the games inventing afternoon escapes,  
arranging alibis, secrets so dangerous,  
so delicious you smile in your sleep.  
Imagine all that creative energy:  
hours spent reckless  
in heated maps,  
making excuses,  
marking regret clauses,  
breathing heavy  
excuses.