

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

January/ February 2021

Volume 100 • Number 1

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Walter Russell Mead

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The End of the Wilsonian Era

Why Liberal Internationalism Failed

Walter Russell Mead

One hundred years after the U.S. Senate humiliated President Woodrow Wilson by rejecting the Treaty of Versailles, Princeton University, which Wilson led as its president before launching his political career, struck his name from its famous school of international affairs. As “cancellations” go, this one is at least arguably deserved. Wilson was an egregious racist even by the standards of his time, and the man behind the persecution of his own political opponents and the abuses of the first Red Scare has been celebrated for far too long and far too uncritically.

But however problematic Wilson’s personal views and domestic policies were, as a statesman and ideologist, he must be counted among the most influential makers of the modern world. He was not a particularly original thinker. More than a century before Wilson proposed the League of Nations, Tsar Alexander I of Russia had alarmed his fellow rulers at the Congress of Vienna by articulating a similar vision: an international system that would rest on a moral consensus upheld by a concert of powers that would operate from a shared set of ideas about legitimate sovereignty. By Wilson’s time, moreover, the belief that democratic institutions contributed to international peace whereas absolute monarchies were inherently warlike and unstable was almost a commonplace observation among educated Americans and Britons. Wilson’s contribution was to synthesize those ideas into a concrete program for a rules-based order grounded in a set of international institutions.

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His failure to win broad-based support at home for that vision broke him, and he died a bitterly disappointed man. In the decades that followed, however, his ideas became an inspiration and a guide to national leaders, diplomats, activists, and intellectuals around the world. During World War II, many Americans came to regret their country's prewar isolationism, including its refusal to join the League of Nations, and Wilson began to appear less like a martinet hobbled by poor political skills and more like a prophet whose wisdom, had it been heeded, could have prevented the second great global conflagration in 20 years. Inspired by that conclusion, American leaders during and after World War II laid the foundations of what they hoped would be a Wilsonian world order, in which international relations would be guided by the principles put forward in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and conducted according to rules established by institutions such as the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and the World Trade Organization.

This task was complicated by the Cold War, but "the free world" (as Americans then called the noncommunist countries) continued to develop along Wilsonian lines. Inevitable compromises, such as U.S. support for ruthless dictators and military rulers in many parts of the world, were seen as regrettable necessities imposed by the need to fight the much greater evil of Soviet communism. When the Berlin Wall fell, in 1989, it seemed that the opportunity for a Wilsonian world order had finally come. The former Soviet empire could be reconstructed along Wilsonian lines, and the West could embrace Wilsonian principles more consistently now that the Soviet threat had disappeared. Self-determination, the rule of law between and within countries, liberal economics, and the protection of human rights: the "new world order" that both the George H. W. Bush and the Clinton administrations worked to create was very much in the Wilsonian mold.

Today, however, the most important fact in world politics is that this noble effort has failed. The next stage in world history will not unfold along Wilsonian lines. The nations of the earth will continue to seek some kind of political order, because they must. And human rights activists and others will continue to work toward their goals. But the dream of a universal order, grounded in law, that secures peace between countries and democracy inside them will figure less and less in the work of world leaders.



Ideas man: Woodrow Wilson

To state this truth is not to welcome it. There are many advantages to a Wilsonian world order, even when that order is partial and incomplete. Many analysts, some associated with the presidential campaign of former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, think they can put Humpty Dumpty together again. One wishes them every success. But the centrifugal forces tearing at the Wilsonian order are so deeply rooted in the nature of the contemporary world that not even the end of the Trump era can revive the Wilsonian project in its most ambitious form. Although Wilsonian ideals will not disappear and there will be a continuing influence of Wilsonian thought on U.S. foreign policies, the halcyon days of the post-Cold War era, when American presidents organized their foreign policies around the principles of liberal internationalism, are unlikely to return anytime soon.

THE ORDER OF THINGS

Wilsonianism is only one version of a rules-based world order among many. The Westphalian system, which emerged in Europe after the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648, and the Congress system, which

arose in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century, were both rules-based and even law-based; some of the foundational ideas of international law date from those eras. And the Holy Roman Empire—a transnational collection of territories that stretched from France into modern-day Poland and from Hamburg to Milan—was an international system that foreshadowed the European Union,

Wilsonianism suffers not from a naive faith in good intentions but from a simplistic view of the historical process.

with highly complex rules governing everything from trade to sovereign inheritance among princely houses.

As for human rights, by the early twentieth century, the pre-Wilsonian European system had been moving for a century in the direction of putting egregious violations of human rights onto the international agenda.

Then, as now, it was chiefly weak countries whose oppressive behavior attracted the most attention. The genocidal murder of Ottoman Christian minorities at the hands of Ottoman troops and irregular forces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries received substantially more attention than atrocities carried out around the same time by Russian forces against rebellious Muslim peoples in the Caucasus. No delegation of European powers came to Washington to discuss the treatment of Native Americans or to make representations concerning the status of African Americans. Nevertheless, the pre-Wilsonian European order had moved significantly in the direction of elevating human rights to the level of diplomacy.

Wilson, therefore, was not introducing the ideas of world order and human rights to a collection of previously anarchic states and unenlightened polities. Rather, his quest was to reform an existing international order whose defects had been conclusively demonstrated by the horrors of World War I. In the pre-Wilsonian order, established dynastic rulers were generally regarded as legitimate, and interventions such as the 1849 Russian invasion of Hungary, which restored Habsburg rule, were considered lawful. Except in the most glaring instances, states were more or less free to treat their citizens or subjects as they wished, and although governments were expected to observe the accepted principles of public international law, no supranational body was charged with the enforcement of these standards. The preservation of the balance of power was invoked as a goal to guide states; war,

although regrettable, was seen as a legitimate element of the system. From Wilson's standpoint, these were fatal flaws that made future conflagrations inevitable. To redress them, he sought to build an order in which states would accept enforceable legal restrictions on their behavior at home and their international conduct.

That never quite materialized, but until recent years, the U.S.-led postwar order resembled Wilson's vision in important respects. And, it should be noted, that vision is not equally dead everywhere. Although Wilson was an American, his view of world order was first and foremost developed as a method for managing international politics in Europe, and it is in Europe where Wilson's ideas have had their greatest success and where their prospects continue to look strongest. His ideas were treated with bitter and cynical contempt by most European statesmen when he first proposed them, but they later became the fundamental basis of the European order, enshrined in the laws and practices of the EU. Arguably, no ruler since Charlemagne has made as deep an impression on the European political order as the much-mocked Presbyterian from the Shenandoah Valley.

THE ARC OF HISTORY

Beyond Europe, the prospects for the Wilsonian order are bleak. The reasons behind its demise, however, are different from what many assume. Critics of the Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs often decry what they see as its idealism. In fact, as Wilson demonstrated during the negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles, he was perfectly capable of the most cynical realpolitik when it suited him. The real problem of Wilsonianism is not a naive faith in good intentions but a simplistic view of the historical process, especially when it comes to the impact of technological progress on human social order. Wilson's problem was not that he was a prig but that he was a Whig.

Like early-twentieth-century progressives generally and many American intellectuals to this day, Wilson was a liberal determinist of the Anglo-Saxon school; he shared the optimism of what the scholar Herbert Butterfield called "the Whig historians," the Victorian-era British thinkers who saw human history as a narrative of inexorable progress and betterment. Wilson believed that the so-called ordered liberty that characterized the Anglo-American countries had opened a path to permanent prosperity and peace. This belief represents a sort of Anglo-Saxon Hegelianism and holds that the mix of free markets,

free government, and the rule of law that developed in the United Kingdom and the United States is inevitably transforming the rest of the world—and that as this process continues, the world will slowly and for the most part voluntarily converge on the values that made the Anglo-Saxon world as wealthy, attractive, and free as it has become.

Wilson was the devout son of a minister, deeply steeped in Calvinist teachings about predestination and the utter sovereignty of God, and he believed that the arc of progress was fated. The future would fulfill biblical prophecies of a coming millennium: a thousand-year reign of peace and prosperity before the final consummation of human existence, when a returning Christ would unite heaven and earth. (Today's Wilsonians have given this determinism a secular twist: in their eyes, liberalism will rule the future and bring humanity to “the end of history” as a result of human nature rather than divine purpose.)

Wilson believed that the defeat of imperial Germany in World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires meant that the hour of a universal League of Nations had finally arrived. In 1945, American leaders ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Wallace on the left to Wendell Willkie and Thomas Dewey on the right would interpret the fall of Germany and Japan in much the same way. In the early 1990s, leading U.S. foreign policymakers and commentators saw the fall of the Soviet Union through the same deterministic prism: as a signal that the time had come for a truly global and truly liberal world order. On all three occasions, Wilsonian order builders seemed to be in sight of their goal. But each time, like Ulysses, they were blown off course by contrary winds.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

Today, those winds are gaining strength. Anyone hoping to reinvigorate the flagging Wilsonian project must contend with a number of obstacles. The most obvious is the return of ideology-fueled geopolitics. China, Russia, and a number of smaller powers aligned with them—Iran, for example—correctly see Wilsonian ideals as a deadly threat to their domestic arrangements. Earlier in the post-Cold War period, U.S. primacy was so thorough that those countries attempted to downplay or disguise their opposition to the prevailing pro-democracy consensus. Beginning in U.S. President Barack Obama's second term, however, and continuing through the Trump era, they have become less inhibited. Seeing Wilsonianism as a cover for American and, to some degree, EU ambi-

tions, Beijing and Moscow have grown increasingly bold about contesting Wilsonian ideas and initiatives inside international institutions such as the UN and on the ground in places from Syria to the South China Sea.

These powers' opposition to the Wilsonian order is corrosive in several ways. It raises the risks and costs for Wilsonian powers to intervene in conflicts beyond their own borders. Consider, for example, how Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria has helped prevent the United States and European countries from getting more directly involved in that country's civil war. The presence of great powers in the anti-Wilsonian coalition also provides shelter and assistance to smaller powers that otherwise might not choose to resist the status quo. Finally, the membership of countries such as China and Russia in international institutions makes it more difficult for those institutions to operate in support of Wilsonian norms: take, for example, Chinese and Russian vetoes in the UN Security Council, the election of anti-Wilsonian representatives to various UN bodies, and the opposition by countries such as Hungary and Poland to EU measures intended to promote the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the torrent of technological innovation and change known as "the information revolution" creates obstacles for Wilsonian goals within countries and in the international system. The irony is that Wilsonians often believe that technological progress will make the world more governable and politics more rational—even if it also adds to the danger of war by making it so much more destructive. Wilson himself believed just that, as did the postwar order builders and the liberals who sought to extend the U.S.-led order after the Cold War. Each time, however, this faith in technological change was misplaced. As seen most recently with the rise of the Internet, although new technologies often contribute to the spread of liberal ideas and practices, they can also undermine democratic systems and aid authoritarian regimes.

Today, as new technologies disrupt entire industries, and as social media upends the news media and election campaigning, politics is becoming more turbulent and polarized in many countries. That makes the victory of populist and antiestablishment candidates from both the left and the right more likely in many places. It also makes it harder for national leaders to pursue the compromises that international cooperation inevitably requires and increases the chances that incoming governments will refuse to be bound by the acts of their predecessors.

The information revolution is destabilizing international life in other ways that make it harder for rules-based international institutions to cope. Take, for example, the issue of arms control, a central concern of Wilsonian foreign policy since World War I and one that grew even more important following the development of nuclear weapons. Wilsonians prioritize arms control not just because nuclear warfare could destroy the human race but also because, even if unused, nuclear weapons or their equivalent put the Wilsonian dream of a completely rules-based, law-bound international order out of reach. Weapons of mass destruction guarantee exactly the kind of state sovereignty that Wilsonians think is incompatible with humanity's long-term security. One cannot easily stage a humanitarian intervention against a nuclear power.

The fight against proliferation has had its successes, and the spread of nuclear weapons has been delayed—but it has not stopped, and the fight is getting harder over time. In the 1940s, it took the world's richest nation and a consortium of leading scientists to assemble the first nuclear weapon. Today, second- and third-rate scientific establishments in low-income countries can manage the feat. That does not mean that the fight against proliferation should be abandoned. It is merely a reminder that not all diseases have cures.

What is more, the technological progress that underlies the information revolution significantly exacerbates the problem of arms control. The development of cyberweapons and the potential of biological agents to inflict strategic damage on adversaries—graphically demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic—serve as warnings that new tools of warfare will be significantly more difficult to monitor or control than nuclear technology. Effective arms control in these fields may well not be possible. The science is changing too quickly, the research behind them is too hard to detect, and too many of the key technologies cannot be banned outright because they also have beneficial civilian applications.

In addition, economic incentives that did not exist in the Cold War are now pushing arms races in new fields. Nuclear weapons and long-range missile technology were extremely expensive and brought few benefits to the civilian economy. Biological and technological research, by contrast, are critical for any country or company that hopes to remain competitive in the twenty-first century. An uncontrollable, multipolar arms race across a range of cutting-edge technologies is on the horizon, and it will undercut hopes for a revived Wilsonian order.

IT'S NOT FOR EVERYBODY

One of the central assumptions behind the quest for a Wilsonian order is the belief that as countries develop, they become more similar to already developed countries and will eventually converge on the liberal capitalist model that shapes North America and western Europe. The Wilsonian project requires a high degree of convergence to succeed; the member states of a Wilsonian order must be democratic, and they must be willing and able to conduct their international relations within liberal multilateral institutions.

At least for the medium term, the belief in convergence can no longer be sustained. Today, China, India, Russia, and Turkey all seem less likely to converge on liberal democracy than they did in 1990. These countries and many others have developed economically and technologically not in order to become more like the West but rather to achieve a deeper independence from the West and to pursue civilizational and political goals of their own.

In truth, Wilsonianism is a particularly European solution to a particularly European set of problems. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe has been divided into peer and near-peer competitors. War was the constant condition of Europe for much of its history, and Europe's global dominance in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century can be attributed in no small part to the long contest for supremacy between France and the United Kingdom, which promoted developments in finance, state organization, industrial techniques, and the art of war that made European states fierce and ferocious competitors.

With the specter of great-power war constantly hanging over them, European states developed a more intricate system of diplomacy and international politics than did countries in other parts of the world. Well-developed international institutions and doctrines of legitimacy existed in Europe well before Wilson sailed across the Atlantic to pitch the League of Nations, which was in essence an upgraded version of preexisting European forms of international governance. Although it would take another devastating world war to ensure that Germany, as well as its Western neighbors, would adhere to the rules of a new system, Europe was already prepared for the establishment of a Wilsonian order.

But Europe's experience has not been the global norm. Although China has been periodically invaded by nomads, and there were periods in its history when several independent Chinese states struggled for

power, China has been a single entity for most of its history. The idea of a single legitimate state with no true international peers is as deeply embedded in the political culture of China as the idea of a multistate system grounded in mutual recognition is embedded in that of Europe. There have been clashes among Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, but until the late nineteenth century, interstate conflict was rare.

In human history as a whole, enduring civilizational states seem more typical than the European pattern of rivalry among peer states.

If the Wilsonian order has become so controversial in the West, what are its prospects in the rest of the world?

Early modern India was dominated by the Mughal Empire. Between the sixteenth century and the nineteenth century, the Ottoman and Persian Empires dominated what is now known as the Middle East. And the Incas and the Aztecs knew no true rivals in their regions. War seems universal or nearly so among human cultures, but the European pat-

tern, in which an escalating cycle of war forced a mobilization and the development of technological, political, and bureaucratic resources to ensure the survival of the state, does not seem to have characterized international life in the rest of the world.

For states and peoples in much of the world, the problem of modern history that needed to be solved was not the recurrence of great-power conflict. The problem, instead, was figuring out how to drive European powers away, which involved a wrenching cultural and economic adjustment in order to harness natural and industrial resources. Europe's internecine quarrels struck non-Europeans not as an existential civilizational challenge to be solved but as a welcome opportunity to achieve independence.

Postcolonial and non-Western states often joined international institutions as a way to recover and enhance their sovereignty, not to surrender it, and their chief interest in international law was to protect weak states from strong ones, not to limit the power of national leaders to consolidate their authority. Unlike their European counterparts, these states did not have formative political experiences of tyrannical regimes suppressing dissent and drafting helpless populations into the service of colonial conquest. Their experiences, instead, involved a humiliating consciousness of the inability of local authorities and elites to protect their subjects and citizens from the arrogant actions

and decrees of foreign powers. After colonialism formally ended and nascent countries began to assert control over their new territories, the classic problems of governance in the postcolonial world remained weak states and compromised sovereignty.

Even within Europe, differences in historical experiences help explain varying levels of commitment to Wilsonian ideals. Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands came to the EU understanding that they could meet their basic national goals only by pooling their sovereignty. For many former Warsaw Pact members, however, the motive for joining Western clubs such as the EU and NATO was to regain their lost sovereignty. They did not share the feelings of guilt and remorse over the colonial past—and, in Germany, over the Holocaust—that led many in western Europe to embrace the idea of a new approach to international affairs, and they felt no qualms about taking full advantage of the privileges of EU and NATO membership without feeling in any way bound by those organizations' stated tenets, which many regarded as hypocritical boilerplate.

EXPERT TEXPERT

The recent rise of populist movements across the West has revealed another danger to the Wilsonian project. If the United States could elect Donald Trump as president in 2016, what might it do in the future? What might the electorates in other important countries do? And if the Wilsonian order has become so controversial in the West, what are its prospects in the rest of the world?

Wilson lived in an era when democratic governance faced problems that many feared were insurmountable. The Industrial Revolution had divided American society, creating unprecedented levels of inequality. Titanic corporations and trusts had acquired immense political power and were quite selfishly exploiting that power to resist all challenges to their economic interests. At that time, the richest man in the United States, John D. Rockefeller, had a fortune greater than the annual budget of the federal government. By contrast, in 2020, the wealthiest American, Jeff Bezos, had a net worth equal to about three percent of budgeted federal expenditures.

Yet from the standpoint of Wilson and his fellow progressives, the solution to these problems could not be simply to vest power in the voters. At the time, most Americans still had an eighth-grade education or less, and a wave of migration from Europe had filled

the country's burgeoning cities with millions of voters who could not speak English, were often illiterate, and routinely voted for corrupt urban machine politicians.

The progressives' answer to this problem was to support the creation of an apolitical expert class of managers and administrators. The

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progressives sought to build an administrative state that would curb the excessive power of the rich and redress the moral and political deficiencies of the poor. (Prohibition was an important part of Wilson's electoral program, and during World War I and afterward, he moved aggressively to arrest and in some cases deport socialists and other

radicals.) Through measures such as improved education, strict limits on immigration, and eugenic birth-control policies, the progressives hoped to create better-educated and more responsible voters who would reliably support the technocratic state.

A century later, elements of this progressive thinking remain critical to Wilsonian governance in the United States and elsewhere, but public support is less readily forthcoming than in the past. The Internet and social media have undermined respect for all forms of expertise. Ordinary citizens today are significantly better educated and feel less need to rely on expert guidance. And events including the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 2008 financial crisis, and the inept government responses during the 2020 pandemic have seriously reduced confidence in experts and technocrats, whom many people have come to see as forming a nefarious "deep state."

International institutions face an even greater crisis of confidence. Voters skeptical of the value of technocratic rule by fellow citizens are even more skeptical of foreign technocrats with suspiciously cosmopolitan views. Just as the inhabitants of European colonial territories preferred home rule (even when badly administered) to rule by colonial civil servants (even when competent), many people in the West and in the postcolonial world are likely to reject even the best-intentioned plans of global institutions.

Meanwhile, in developed countries, problems such as the loss of manufacturing jobs, the stagnation or decline of wages, persistent poverty among minority groups, and the opioid epidemic have re-

sisted technocratic solutions. And when it comes to international challenges such as climate change and mass migration, there is little evidence that the cumbersome institutions of global governance and the quarrelsome countries that run them will produce the kind of cheap, elegant solutions that could inspire public trust.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR BIDEN

For all these reasons, the movement away from the Wilsonian order is likely to continue, and world politics will increasingly be carried out along non-Wilsonian and in some cases even anti-Wilsonian lines. Institutions such as NATO, the UN, and the World Trade Organization may well survive (bureaucratic tenacity should never be discounted), but they will be less able and perhaps less willing to fulfill even their original purposes, much less take on new challenges. Meanwhile, the international order will increasingly be shaped by states that are on diverging paths. This does not mean an inevitable future of civilizational clashes, but it does mean that global institutions will have to accommodate a much wider range of views and values than they have in the past.

There is hope that many of the gains of the Wilsonian order can be preserved and perhaps in a few areas even extended. But fixating on past glories will not help develop the ideas and policies needed in an increasingly dangerous time. Non-Wilsonian orders have existed both in Europe and in other parts of the world in the past, and the nations of the world will likely need to draw on these examples as they seek to cobble together some kind of framework for stability and, if possible, peace under contemporary conditions.

For U.S. policymakers, the developing crisis of the Wilsonian order worldwide presents vexing problems that are likely to preoccupy presidential administrations for decades to come. One problem is that many career officials and powerful voices in Congress, civil society organizations, and the press deeply believe not only that a Wilsonian foreign policy is a good and useful thing for the United States but also that it is the only path to peace and security and even to the survival of civilization and humanity. They will continue to fight for their cause, conducting trench warfare inside the bureaucracy and employing congressional oversight powers and steady leaks to sympathetic press outlets to keep the flame alive.

Those factions will be hemmed in by the fact that any internationalist coalition in American foreign policy must rely to a significant

degree on Wilsonian voters. But a generation of overreach and poor political judgment has significantly reduced the credibility of Wilsonian ideas among the American electorate. Neither President George W. Bush's nation-building disaster in Iraq nor Obama's humanitarian-intervention fiasco in Libya struck most Americans as successful, and there is little public enthusiasm for democracy building abroad.

But American foreign policy is always a coalition affair. As I wrote in my book *Special Providence*, Wilsonians are one of four schools that have contended to shape American foreign policy since the eight-

*Biden can learn from
Truman's example.*

teenth century. Hamiltonians want to organize American foreign policy around a powerful national government closely linked to the worlds of finance and international trade. Wilso-

nians want to build a world order based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Jacksonian populists are suspicious of big business and of Wilsonian crusades but want a strong military and populist economic programs. Jeffersonians want to limit American commitments and engagement overseas. (A fifth school, of which Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, was a leading proponent, defined the U.S. national interest around the preservation of slavery.) Hamiltonians and Wilsonians largely dominated American foreign-policy making after the Cold War, but Obama began to reintroduce some Jeffersonian ideas about restraint, and after the Libyan misadventure, his preference for that approach clearly strengthened. Trump, who hung a portrait of President Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office, sought to build a nationalist coalition of Jacksonians and Jeffersonians against the globalist coalition of Hamiltonians and Wilsonians that had been ascendant since World War II.

Even as the Biden administration steers American foreign policy away from the nationalism of the Trump period, it will need to re-adjust the balance between the Wilsonian approach and the ideas of the other schools in light of changed political conditions at home and abroad. Similar adjustments have been made in the past. In the first hopeful years of the postwar era, Wilsonians such as Eleanor Roosevelt wanted the Truman administration to make support of the UN its highest priority. Harry Truman and his team soon saw that opposing the Soviet Union was most important and began to lay the foundations for the Cold War and containment. The shift was

wrenching, and Truman only just managed to extract a lukewarm endorsement from Roosevelt during the hard-fought 1948 election. But a critical mass of Wilsonian Democrats accepted the logic that defeating Stalinist communism was an end that justified the questionable means that fighting the Cold War would require. Biden can learn from this example. Saving the planet from a climate catastrophe and building a coalition to counter China are causes that many Wilsonians will agree both require and justify a certain lack of scrupulosity when it comes to the choice of both allies and tactics.

The Biden administration can also make use of other techniques that past presidents have used to gain the support of Wilsonians. One is to pressure weak countries well within Washington's sphere of influence to introduce various hot-button reforms. Another is to offer at least the appearance of support for inspiring initiatives that have little prospect of success. As a group, Wilsonians are accustomed to honorable failure and will often support politicians based on their (presumed) noble intentions without demanding too much in the way of success.

There are other, less Machiavellian ways to keep Wilsonians engaged. Even as the ultimate goals of Wilsonian policy become less achievable, there are particular issues on which intelligent and focused American policy can produce results that Wilsonians will like. International cooperation to make money laundering more difficult and to eliminate tax havens is one area where progress is possible. Concern for international public health will likely stay strong for some years after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. Promoting education for underserved groups in foreign countries—women, ethnic and religious minorities, the poor—is one of the best ways to build a better world, and many governments that reject the overall Wilsonian ideal can accept outside support for such efforts in their territory as long as these are not linked to an explicit political agenda.

For now, the United States and the world are in something of a Wilsonian recession. But nothing in politics lasts forever, and hope is a hard thing to kill. The Wilsonian vision is too deeply implanted in American political culture, and the values to which it speaks have too much global appeal, to write its obituary just yet. 🌐