

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/01/26/woodrow-wilson-civil-war-morality-and-foreign-policy/>

HARRY KAZIANIS, JAN 26 2011

President Woodrow Wilson, the only person to be elected to the presidency with a PhD in Political Science, left an undeniable mark on US history and world affairs. In a speech he delivered in 1909 about President Abraham Lincoln, he detailed an event he witnessed in November, 1860 just before his fourth birthday, "My earliest recollection is of standing at my father's gateway in Augusta, Georgia, when I was four years old, and hearing someone pass and say that Mr. Lincoln was elected and there would be war. Catching the intense tones of his excited voice, I remember running to ask my father what this meant" (McKinley, 1957 ). This was President Wilson's first memory as a child, a foreshadowing of the war that would have such a deep impact on his childhood and role as President.

War can shape the values of a nation. I believe war influenced one young boy to such an extent, that it changed world history. Woodrow Wilson grew up in the Confederate south during the most bloody years of the US Civil War. He saw death and carnage right outside of his boyhood home. His father, the head of the Confederate Southern Presbyterian Church, would join the conflict to minister to the dying and weary on the Confederate front lines. His mother would nurse wounded and dying soldiers. The town he grew up in of Augusta, GA would become a city on the edge of destruction, almost suffering an attack from Union General Sherman in his march to the sea, destroying all in his path. These facts are known by historians, but are lightly regarded, or dismissed by most prominent historians as after thoughts. Trying to judge the effects of war on a child is not an easy proposition. Wilson himself does not make the process an easy one. Many of his ideas on the war are buried in the past or labeled by historians as after thoughts. With every book written on Wilson, less is written about his childhood. Yet, when they are looked upon with the lens of Wilson, a war survivor, accomplished and his importance to US history and particular US foreign policy, their importance deserves a wider look.

Woodrow Wilson was impacted greatly by the Civil War. It is my belief it was the most important event of his life. The goal of this work is to show Woodrow Wilson's childhood experience in the Civil War had a profound effect on his life and future decisions as President. Historical scholars do not place the proper weight this significant event had on his life. One could make a compelling argument the events of the Civil War were the signature event that influenced all of his life decisions. The Civil War also had a large impact on his foreign policy decisions. The Civil War drove Wilson's concept of morality, which he used to create his foreign policy goals. I believe it was this idea of morality that pushed Wilson to create the League of Nations. Wilson fundamentally restructured US foreign policy goals more than any President before or since. Author Kendrick Clements quotes Wilson biographer August Heckscher, "a sense of the war's encroaching chaos remained with him in later life, less in the form of conscious memories than of impulses to create unity and stability in the world around him"(Clement, 2003). It was this "impulse" that drove his sense of morality in world affairs that lead him to champion the League of Nations crafted by his Civil War experience.

The stated goal of this paper is to bring to light the importance of Wilson's childhood past, to show the key points of that past, and show how it shaped President Wilson's future sense of morality and how that morality guided his decisions. I have selected his moralistic foreign policy embodied by the League of Nations as the manifestation of his childhood experiences. I feel without the Civil War, such concepts would not have been proposed by Wilson. During Woodrow Wilson's presidency, the US transitioned from a nation that embraced the concept of isolationism and a hatred or "European Entanglements" to a nation that was trying to create a new international system based on

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

Wilson's concept of Moralism. Such ideas came from a childhood raised in the Civil War. To quote author Arthur Link, "Woodrow Wilson's whole thinking about Foreign Policy was shaped by his concept of ministry and his believe in divine providence" (1971). To have a strong believe in something as powerful as providence, I feel the Civil War instilled such powerful notions. No historian or political scientists makes the appropriate linkage to his political and foreign policy views and the important events of his childhood experience in the Civil War. There is one author whose work will that will be detailed in length who does make some excellent arguments showing how Wilson was affected by the Civil War as a child through adulthood. The author makes some clear examples to argue that the Civil War affected Wilson's concept of national unity and why he tried so hard to rid or down play any lasting sectional angers. There are also several authors who allude to such linkage. None has yet proposed the concept of linking his foreign policy goals and aspirations with his childhood experience that shaped his morality and his quest for the League of Nations. It is the work of this paper to show they are as intertwined as the binding of a book to its pages.

President Wilson discussed throughout his life the childhood influence of the Civil War and the role it would play. To quote Wilson, "A boy never forgets his boyhood, and can never change those subtle influences which have become a part of him, that were bred into him when he was a child" (Augusta Historic, 2010). Wilson also remarked during a commencement at Princeton in 1904, "The child....a little spectator of the world...events fall out, years open their slow story" (1904). President Wilson's comments about being a "spectator on the world" and how a "boy never forgets his boyhood" are key quotes for any historian looking at the role Wilson's childhood would play in his future life decisions. These quotes embody the idea that Wilson is explaining how he viewed the world around him as a child and how this would later be something "a boy never forgets".

War can have the greatest impact on a person or society if experienced firsthand with the after effects lasting a lifetime. We have many modern day examples of soldiers returning home from conflicts like the Vietnam War, the Afghan War and the US invasion of Iraq. Soldiers suffer from the problems of PTSD for years, with effects that can spread through society. When a nation is involved in war, all citizens of a war fighting nation suffer in some capacity.

In order for one to make an argument that President Wilson's views and foreign policy goals were shaped by his childhood experience in the Civil War, one must have some historical background on what that childhood was like. Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born on December 28, 1856 in Staunton, Virginia. He was the third child of Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a Scottish-Irish immigrant who was raised in Ohio. Wilson's mother, Janet Woodrow, was an English born daughter of a Scottish -born and educated Presbyterian Minister.

The Wilson family would move to Augusta, Georgia in 1857. Joseph Wilson was appointed to be the head of the Presbyterian Church in Augusta (Wilson, 1962). Joseph Wilson would be in the heart of events in his own national church. Joseph identified strongly with the southern cause. When the southern Presbyterian section withdrew from the national church to form a Confederate based Presbyterian Church, it was Joseph Wilson who offered his church as a place of meeting for the new General Assembly. The newly created body elected him to its third highest position, permanent clerk. In a sermon to his Augusta congregation in January, 1861 entitled, "Mutual Relations of Master and Slave as Taught in the Bible", Joseph Wilson would show his full support for the southern cause. In his sermon, he felt that secession and the creation of the Confederacy was inevitable, "We should begin to meet the infidel fanaticism of our enemies on the elevated ground of a divine warrant for the institution we are resolved to cherish" (Montgomery, 2006). The sermon proved very popular and was published in newspapers across Georgia. In just three months, shots would be fired at Fort Sumter. The Civil War would begin.

Woodrow Wilson's family from the onset of the Civil War supported the southern cause in multiple capacities. Rev. Wilson took a very active role in supporting the Confederate Army from his church. In July, 1861 he took a train to Staunton, VA, the town where Woodrow was born, to convey letters from Augusta's local military that they were fully supported by their Georgian brethren (Montgomery, 2006). This is also the time where Wilson's father became involved in the Georgian Hospital Association, which was headquartered in Augusta. This organization setup small hospitals to provide medical care to soldiers and collected money to support them. They also shipped supplies and small packages from the families of soldiers to boost morale. Rev. Wilson would also in March, 1862 setup a separate Bible society of the Confederate States. Its first annual meeting was held a year later, at the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta which was lead by Rev. Wilson (Montgomery, 2006).

## Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

The city of Augusta itself would be the backdrop for the important events that would shape Woodrow Wilson's Civil War experience. Augusta luckily was not sacked by Union armies. Sherman's "March to the Sea" bypassed the city. This caused the city to take in a large amount of refugees and swell its population. This led the city by 1864 and 1865 to be a true "cesspool" of people who were war weary, tired and short on food and provisions (Osborn, 1957).

Augusta was a very important center of manufacturing and distribution for all war provisions for the Confederacy. It was a major railroad point in the Southern rail system with all of its lines leading to Savannah, Atlanta, Columbia and Charleston. Augusta was one of the few industrial centers in the south and had a large amount of industry for a southern city. It housed several pistol factories, field artillery works by Colt, cotton textiles, and the Confederate Army shoe factory which produced every shoe worn by southern soldiers (Montgomery, 2006). A former US Army arsenal was also located on the Sand Hills area, a suburb of Augusta. The arsenal was quickly attacked and taken over by local militia upon the outbreak of the conflict. When hostilities broke out, Rev. Wilson during a Sunday sermon cut short his service to urge his fellow parishioners to begin work in the arsenal. He remarked, "The Congregation must do its duty, and immediately at the close of these services the ladies will repair the munitions factory to help with the cartridges. You will now rise and sing the doxology and be dismissed" (Montgomery, 2006). Woodrow Wilson and his father would actually tour some of these factories as he wanted young Woodrow to gain a sense of southern industry (Montgomery, 2006).

Rev. Wilson would also take an active involvement in the field of battle during the war. In the spring of 1863, Rev. Wilson was contacted by the Domestic Missions of the Southern Presbyterian Church to spend two months that summer as a missionary for the Confederate Army. Rev. Wilson took the request to heart and immediately volunteered. He spent that summer preaching to the dying and wounded on the fields of battle. Author George Osborn would note, "The little boy, so accustomed to being at his father's heels, anxiously awaited his return in the fall of that year" (Osborn, 1968).

Augusta at this time was quickly becoming a center of hospital facilities for the south. This was partly because the Medical College of Georgia was located in Augusta and was close to the Presbyterian church of Rev. Wilson (Montgomery, 2006). Hospitals were erected in temporary places all over the city as the Confederate government would seize open spaces and public buildings to accommodate the wounded and injured. Local fighting would get especially fierce in 1863 with battles nearby in Atlanta. Confederate forces would then take over the Presbyterian Church that the Wilson's were running and turned it into a hospital. The metal fence parts around the church were melted down to make bullets for the Confederacy. All of the pews were removed to make room for the massive influx of people who would need to be cared for. The church manse, where the Wilson's lived, was right next door. The hospital saw both Rev. Wilson and his wife care for the sick and dying. There have been various writings in multiple scholars' biographies of Woodrow Wilson detailing his mother caring for the sick and dying. The army would use the hospital for four months from October 1863 to January, 1864. The church was damaged extensively during its conversion to a hospital. The church was repaired extensively over the next several months. The Confederate government was contacted to pay for all repairs as it had in other buildings that were taken over. There is no record of the bill for repairs ever being paid and seems the expensive repairs were paid for by the congregation (Montgomery, 2006).

At the same time the church was trying to care for the sick and wounded, the church would also bare the additional burden of becoming what one would consider a prisoners camp. The camp would be a temporary facility for captured Union troops. The churchyard was made into a detention camp and wait station before such soldiers would be sent off by rail to more permanent facilities. The young Wilson would witness many of the naked horrors of the Civil War from just outside the bedroom door of his childhood home.

Augusta, Georgia was also scarred in other ways from the war. As the fighting would get closer to the city, the mood would change quite profoundly. Augusta was placed under martial law under the rule of a provost master. No one was allowed on the streets without a pass at night. "In 1864, Augusta was infested with marauders, robbers and thieves.....these plundered Dr. Wilson's church. This time they not only stole the furniture, they made off with portions of the fence which surrounded the church" (Osborn, 1968).

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

The financial situation of the Confederacy and Augusta in the 1864-1865 timeframe was becoming desperate. Inflation was becoming a serious problem. An example of this was the records of Rev. Wilson's compensation during the time he was pastor during the Civil War. As of November 19, 1863, he was given a \$500.00 bonus to augment his regular pay (Montgomery, 2006). This would happen again in October, 1864 where he was given a \$1500.00 bonus, which was several times his yearly salary (Montgomery, 2006). In 1865 alone the Pastor was given payments of almost \$22,000, an amount that would have been a fortune back at this time. This was however paid with almost worthless Confederate currency (Montgomery, 2006). The family would have to survive on very little money. The burdens for the Wilson family grew worse as the war would continue.

Many years later during World War I when Woodrow Wilson was President, he would comment on his Civil War experience at this time. He "recalled that time, when his mother was able to concoct a delicious soup from cow-peas, little else being available to eat" (Montgomery, 2006). Not only was the young future President witnessing the horror of war, he was also concerned about where his next meal may come from.

At the end of the war, Wilson would mention in several instances his memory of seeing President Jefferson being led in shackles down the main street in Augusta after being captured by Union forces on May 17, 1865. This main street coincidentally was where the church and manse were located. Davis was brought by rail with his family and Confederate leaders to Augusta to be placed on a steamboat waiting at the Sand Bar Ferry (Montgomery, 2006). They were not allowed to leave the confines of the train until they arrived in Augusta. While they were in town, some of the prisoners were allowed to visit with family or friends there. President Davis was allowed to travel off the train to have dinner with General Edward L. Molineux, the commanding federal officer of Union troops stationed in Augusta (Montgomery, 2006). Davis would march past a young Woodrow Wilson.

With the historical groundwork laid out, how would seeing such a conflict through the eyes of a child impact the later President Wilson? Many historians have made the argument the war had no effect or one that can't be quantified in any meaningful measure. Some of the best biographical works of Wilson that have extraordinary detail about his life have no section about his experience in the Civil War at all. As the years have passed and each new work is written, less and less is written on his childhood.

Many scholars dismiss the influence of the Civil War. John Milton Cooper Jr. in one of the best works on Woodrow Wilson's life comments, "What effect this Civil War childhood had on the Wilson's' son is hard to judge. He almost certainly saw and heard wounded and dying soldiers in the town and in his father's church and prisoners of war in the churchyard.....yet those sights and sounds do not seem to have affected him deeply" (Cooper, 2009).

Even the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud would argue the war had no effect on Wilson. In his work along with William Bullitt called *Thomas Woodrow Wilson, A Psychological Study*, they would argue, "The Civil War left scars in the souls of almost all Southerners of his generation. It left no scar on him" (Bullitt & Freud, 1966). They would continue, "No passion for the lost cause ever burned in him. In his heart, he was not a Southerner, but a Scott Presbyterian who by accident was born in Virginia" (Bullitt & Freud, 1966). The view of most scholars from this small sampling contends the argument that the Civil War had very little effect on him or that he was too young to comprehend its carnage. Most writers feel that most of it faded from his mind after a certain amount of time had passed. Some scholars in their works of Wilson do not mention his childhood experience in the Civil War at all.

There is sadly only one major work currently in print that has some excellent information detailing Woodrow Wilson's childhood that is found nowhere else in the historical record. Erik Montgomery in his work, *Family Ties and Southern Perspectives*, has a treasure trove of information on Wilson as a boy that is not in any of the major works of President Wilson's life. This author has a unique position and access to the childhood of the young Wilson. Mr. Montgomery is the chair of a group who manages Wilson's' childhood home as a museum. This essay would not have been completed had it not been for the assistance of this group in introducing me to Mr. Montgomery's work. This scholar has access to a great amount of information that historians have not considered of great importance or did not know existed. Mr. Montgomery does not speculate or comment on the effects the Civil War may have had on a young Wilson. Montgomery would write, "Tommy Wilson had few specific memories of the war, but would occasionally make references to these memories in public addresses as an adult. Of course his adult years were spent in the

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

North, where life had moved on and people were not so fervently memorializing the “lost cause” as they were in the South” (Montgomery, 2006).

There is however a small sampling of authors who argue the Civil War did have some lasting impact on Wilson. The first is a small section in the book, *Woodrow Wilson, the Early Years*, by George Osborn. Out of all the vast bibliographies that are written about Wilson, it has the best overall section that talks in detail about his Civil War experience as a child. The book was published in 1966. This gives more credence to the idea that the older the work on Wilson, the more of a focus on his childhood. It is an excellent starting point for anyone wanting to research this topic. While not dedicating his book to Wilson’s Civil War experience, he does speculate that Wilson would have been impacted by his experience. The author writes, “Tommy Wilson, approaching his seventh birthday, saw much of the inconveniences, the tragedies, the sufferings, and the ravages of war. For months across the street from the manse were the prisoners under guard and men ill clad, hungry, sick, wounded and dying. Perhaps he did not know many of the details, but he was conscious that his mother spent much time caring for the sick and wounded” (Osborn, 1968). The author then goes on to list many of the experiences Wilson would encounter in the Civil War and feels this must have affected him. The author does not speculate about the exact effects the war would have specifically on the young future President, but is unique in his argument that there would have had to have been some lasting imprint on Wilson.

Anthony Gaughan and his article entitled, “Woodrow Wilson and the legacy of the Civil War” is the second and over all best scholarly work that details Wilson’s Civil War experience and the possible effects on Wilson. He argues bluntly, “The Civil War weighed more heavily on Woodrow Wilson’s early life than any other historical event” (Gaughan, 1997). He also touches upon some of the events Wilson witnessed, “As a child, he observed firsthand the human toll of the conflict when his father’s church in Augusta was converted by the Confederate army into a hospital and stockade” (Gaughan, 1997). The author does not make the linkage needed to argue that the Civil War was the greatest event influencing Wilson’s decisions as President or foreign policy decisions. He is however the only author on record to actually speculate and make predictions on what Wilson’s Civil War experience may have caused him to do later in life. The author makes the argument that Woodrow Wilson’s “aversion to sectional prejudice stemmed in large part from his unusual background” (Gaughan, 1997).

Gaughan’s thesis is that Wilson’s experience in the Civil War caused many of his feelings of promoting national reconciliation and national unity throughout his life. This also shows one of the only opinions that the Civil War did in fact have a tremendous influence on this man’s life, and hence the nation. Gaughan feels that Wilson shows in his writings and opinions that the war’s outcome benefited all Americans in that the specter of sectionalism between the North and South was finally laid to rest.

The author feels that Wilson never considered himself a Northerner nor Southerner. He did however make many references to his fondness of the South. It must be noted he never would hold back a criticism of his roots if needed. Wilson would remark, “I am obliged to say again and again that the only place in the country, the only place in the world, where nothing has to explain to me is the South” (Gaughan, 1997). The author would quote Wilson while looking at many of his college writings that, “great men of our future” would be of a national, not sectional, in outlook (Gaughan, 1997). The author then details the great literary works of Wilson to show proper linkage between his Civil War experience and his writings. Wilson at one point felt, “Slavery as the ultimate source of the conflict” (Gaughan, 1997). He would say, “It was slavery that made them unlike, it was their unlikeness that made them antagonistic” (Gaughan, 1997). Wilson at this point rejected the notion that the South had left the union to defend states’ rights or its own view of the constitution. In his doctoral thesis, “He praised Alexander Hamilton for promoting a “sense of national unity and community of destiny” (Gaughan, 1997). The author also feels the doctrine of states’ rights was ludicrous to Wilson, “For all practical purposes the national government is supreme over the state governments” (Gaughan, 1997). The author shows how Wilson called the Civil War the “supreme and final struggle between the forces of disintegration and the forces of health, union, and amalgamation” (Gaughan, 1997).

The author also makes the point to use Wilson’s own literary scholarship to leverage his arguments even more. In *Woodrow Wilson’s great work, Division and Reunion*, Gaughan lays out his argument by using Wilson’s own literary work of the why the Civil War took place, his ideas of why the South lost, and what the results of the conflict were for

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

both sides. This work is important in getting into the mind of Wilson and his thoughts on the Civil War. This is in my opinion the best way to get a sense of how Wilson felt about the war and how it would influence the country as a whole. It is also because of this work I feel scholars are incorrect in so easily tossing aside his Civil War experience. In short, he cared enough about the Civil War to write a book about it. While not detailing his experiences, his scholarship choice is important. Wilson after receiving his PhD would in some ways reverse some of his positions about the Civil War. There seems now to be a conflict within Wilson when one compares and contrasts his early writing and work as a Professor later in his career.

In Wilson's book *Division and Reunion* and over several scholarly journals and books in the 1890's and 1900's, Wilson now argues the "South has seceded on principle, not out of economic interest" (Wilson, 1898). The South, he now argued, saw the conflict not as a struggle over slavery but rather a "final question and answer to the fundamental matter of self-government" (Wilson, 1898). He now has shifted his position and feels that southern leaders "perceived secession not as an act of revolution, but rather as a formal abrogation of a great treaty in the spirit of the principles of 1788" (Wilson, 1898). This would be the opposite few he shared just a few years ago while writing his PhD. He felt the South fought for a principle of government organization just as the North did and it was time to stop assigning blame for who was at fault. Wilson felt "Americans should view the secession crisis not as a tragic but a glorious chapter in the nation's history, because the two sections chose war not to protect their economic interests but to uphold constitutional principles" (Wilson, 1898).

From the literature detailed above, many authors have different viewpoints about the impact the Civil War had on Wilson. There is even greater contention on what affects there would have been. If one is of the persuasion that the Civil War did affect Wilson in some way, where does one start to sort out and make deductions on those affects? How does one quantify such a deep psychological quandary? While one can see the various arguments to the impact of the Civil War on President Wilson, how do fields such as Human Development explain the impact of war on a young child? One could look at the impact war has had on other children and make predictions on the impact this may have had on a young Wilson. What could we gather from the scientific knowledge of Sociology or Cognitive Development? Such questions were posed to Dr. Barbara Newman, a world renowned expert on cognitive development. Doctor Newman's textbook, *Development through Life: a Psychosocial Approach*, is the standard textbook for almost all new Human Development students throughout the United States.

Dr. Newman, through a personal interview and her textbook, would explain any child at the age in which Woodrow Wilson saw the events of the Civil War would have had lifelong changes in cognitive development, behavior, social skill, socializing, the creation of values, self worth, and morality (Newman, 2010). This was just a small sampling of the impressions and attitudes a child would gather from witnessing war. This would then have an impact on any future decisions or opinions this individual would formulate in the future.

From reviewing the text that Dr. Newman wrote and my own personal interview with her, it is very clear any war would impact a child on multiple cognitive and psychological levels (Newman, 2010). The age of when a dramatic event or events happens is very key to our understanding Dr. Newman explains in her text (2009). In the age bracket of four to six, a child develops a sense of morals. According to Dr. Newman's text, "In the early school age (4-6 years old), children are developing an initial moral code" (Newman, 2009). This is the age bracket Wilson would witness many of the horrors of the Civil War. She later describes in the text, "The development of conscience, with its capacity to reward and punish, brings an internalization of moral standards. Moral development is accompanied by a heightened sensitivity to violating basic cultural standards, many of which relate to interpersonal behavior, especially toward adults and peers. The child's experiences with transgressions, guilt, or praise for pro-social behavior have implications for the elaboration of the self-theory and particular for the establishment of self-esteem" (Newman, 2009). It is the concept of morals that is heavily influenced in this life stage. These are created in six stages according to Dr. Newman. In the first stage, judgments are based on whether behavior is rewarded or punished (Newman, 2009). In the second stage, judgments are based on whether consequences result in benefits for self or loved ones (Newman, 2009). In the third stage, judgments are based on whether authorities approve or disapprove of a concept or idea (Newman, 2009). In the fourth stage, judgments are based on whether the behavior upholds or violates the laws of society (Newman, 2009). In the later fifth stage, judgments are based on whether the behavior upholds or violates the laws of society (Newman, 2009). In the sixth and final stage, judgments are based on ethical

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

principles that apply across time and cultures (Newman, 2009).

President Wilson, witnessing a civil war outside his bedroom, was cognitively developing his moral center at the time. The science of Human Development, in just this one of many theories, shows the reader that his concept of morality was deeply affected by the critical events around him. Wilson's ideas of conducting US foreign policy on the basis of morality were born from his Civil War experience that taught his sense of morality. The League of Nations may have been the final extension of such an experience.

In the interview conducted with Dr. Newman, she would also detail some of the other cognitive impressions and effects on a child who would have been raised during an armed conflict. Dr. Newman explained that a consequence of exposure to violent or dramatic acts is the disruption it produces in children's cognitive functioning and mental health (Newman, 2010). Children who have been exposed to violence or dramatic acts are more than likely to suffer from the effects of post traumatic stress disorder. Referring to Dr. Newman's text, this can occur from, "direct experience of a grave threat to personal safety or injury, witnessing the injury or death of another person, or learning about the violent death or injury of a family member or someone close" (Newman, 2009).

Multiple authors have detailed the carnage and death Woodrow Wilson witnessed. It is possible he may have suffered from PTSD as a consequence. The effects of such a disorder can impact a person for the rest of their lives according to Dr. Newman. Affected individuals, when triggered by something that reminds them of an event, could begin to panic, possibly go into a rage, or wish to run and hide upon the reawakening of such horror (Newman, 2010). Some people will try to block out such horrific visions, as they are too much to handle. This may have been one of the ways Wilson was impacted, as was detailed in quotes about feeling the war faded into memory. This maybe a clue; he may have tried to block out such horrific memories. Dr. Newman concluded by explain many suffers of PTSD would be haunted by such visions for the rest of their lives unless they are treated by a professional (Newman, 2010). In the era President Wilson lived, the concept of "therapy" was in its infancy and no such treatments were widely available.

After his experience in the Civil War, Wilson would go on to become dean of Princeton University. He would also become the Governor of New Jersey. In time, he would seek the Presidency. Woodrow Wilson, after a tough and bitter three way 1912 political election against William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt would become President (Blum, 1956). It is his election as President and the First World War where President Wilson's experience in the Civil War would affect his foreign policy decisions as President and lead to his quest for a League of Nations.

To understand what polices and decisions were influenced by his Civil War experience and his war created sense of morality, one must have a basic idea of Wilson's major foreign policy goals and attitudes. Woodrow Wilson, after trying to keep the United States out of World War I for three years, made the decision that there was no other choice but to join the Allied cause and engage the Axis Powers. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917, President Wilson would ask congress for a declaration of war. Wilson would declare the US would join the war effort, "to make the world safe for democracy" (Wilson, 1917).

Wilson's goals for the war were truly far reaching and truly based on his concept of morality that was founded in the Civil War. Henry Kissinger, the famous "Realist" US Secretary of State would write, "Wilson's appearance on the scene was a watershed for America, one of those rare examples of a leader who fundamentally alters the course of his country's history" (Kissinger, 1994). Wilson would state his warm aims and his goal for a new American international relations system in his famous, "fourteen points" (Wilson, 1918). His ideas of a new basis for international relations were founded firmly on his own moral center. In his "fourteen points", he laid out the goals of a peace crafted on a new set of morally based principles he envisioned that would guide the international order (Clements, 2003). These fourteen points embodied concepts today we consider as the basis of international relations: free trade, freedom of the seas, evacuation of conquerors from invaded territories, open negotiations in public view, a world body of nations that would settle disputes, and the concept of self determination (Hoff, 2008).

At the time, such concepts were radical and a complete rewrite of the governing system of world politics. All of these ideas were based on the moral idea that international relations must move away from the realist idea of power politics

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

to a more morally based concept. According to Secretary Kissinger and many other international relations scholars, President Wilson's goal was to create a new system of International Relations (Kissinger, 1994). Many of Wilson's ideas would form the basis of a much more advanced international relations theory called "Liberalism". Other advanced international relations theories would then branch off from this. Some of these include "Democratic Peace Theory" and "Liberal Institutional Theory". President Wilson was disgusted by the concepts of "Balance of Power", "Colonialism", and secret treaties (Cooper, 2008). All of this comes from his profound sense of morals. Wilson himself would remark, "The question upon which the whole future peace and policy of the world depends is this: Is the present war a struggle for a just secure peace, or only for a new balance of power? There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power: not organized rivalries, but an organized peace" (Wilson, as quoted by Kissinger, 1994). America would not go to war to protect the old European concepts of realism or balance of power, but to create a new international system based on community, security, and peace (Alsop, 1956).

It was to this end Wilson proposed the League of Nations, the center peace of his foreign policy goals. Morality guided every one of these ideas and concepts. The Civil War created such a sense of morality. He felt war would be stopped through the concept of collective security, that if a nation was threatening the established peace, all other nations would band together to stop the aggressor (Magee, 2008). Wilson felt very strongly about the League of Nations as a mechanism where the United States would not have to fight another horrific war again. In battling for the passage of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations he would write:

"This is the Covenant of the League of Nations that you hear objected to, the only possible guarantee against war. I would consider myself recreant to every mother and father, every wife and sweetheart in this country, if I consented to the ending of this war without a guarantee that there would be no other. You say, "Is it an absolute guarantee?" No; there is no absolute guarantee against human passion; but even if it were only 10 percent of a guarantee, would not you rather have 10 percent guarantee against war than none? If it only creates a presumption that there will not be war, would you not rather have that presumption than live under the certainty that there will be war? For, I tell you, my fellow citizens, I can predict with absolute certainty that within another generation there will be another world war if the nations of the world do not concert the method by which to prevent it" (Baker and Dodd, 1924).

The League of Nations was President Wilson's most important foreign policy goal at the conclusion of World War I. To him, if nations were to join an organization with the stated goal of collectively working towards peace, the chances of another great war could be greatly reduced. His moralistic vision of a world based on collective security drove his quest for the league. This Moralism was created out of his childhood experience in the Civil War.

Wilson also wanted to end secret treaties; all nations would negotiate out in the open and in the view of public opinion. Wilson felt that one of the causes of the First World War was the creation of secret treaties and alliances that were not scrutinized in public opinion. Morality, based on Wilson's witnessing the horrors of the Civil War, would erase the old European game of Power Politics to create a new world order. If America could wash away her sins of sectionalism in the Civil War, so could the world in ending its lust of realist wars and a cruel quest for power.

Wilson's ideas were revolutionary and before the power centers of Europe would ever accept them. America had not engaged in the various European power struggles since its creation, heeding the farewell address of President Washington many years prior. America would transition from isolationism to a crusade to rewrite century's old rules of international politics (Link, 1968). America's price for joining World War I by default according to Wilson would be the recreation of international relations to a more moralistic and collective security based system.

Many authors have purposed various other reasons as to why Wilson created such a sweeping and revolutionary set of foreign policy goals along with the creation of the League of Nations. One of the most widely held arguments are the concept of Wilson's religious beliefs guiding his moralistic vision of a better world. Author Ray Baker (1928) would write, "At the center of the life of the Wilson family stood the church. The Presbyterian Church with its stern doctrine, its veneration for holy writ, its profound sense of the presence and judgments of god, its emphasis upon the value of human personality." John Maynard Keynes, the world renowned economist, who remarked upon meeting President Wilson at the 1919 Paris Peace Summit, "thought Wilson's thinking about the world and international affairs did not rest upon a secular ideology or definition of national interest. It lay instead in his personal religious

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

faith, a faith so absolute that it determined not only what he thought, but more importantly how he thought" (Magee, 2008). Many scholars have argued it was the gospel so taught to Wilson from his father and mother that led him to the ideas of developing a new world order based on the concepts of Moralism and collective security. Author Arthur Link feels it is was Wilson's religious upbringing that guided his foreign policy views, " This idealism meant for him to subordination of immediate goals and material interests to superior ethical standards and the exaltation of moral and spiritual purposes" (Link, 1957).

The concept that these authors put forth, that religion played the biggest influences in his foreign policy goals, does not take away from the argument that it was his sense of morality that was the greatest overarching idea that influenced his idea. Morality and religion in many ways are linked together. Wilson's religious convictions may have been from his morality, which was created during his childhood experience in the Civil War. One argument in many ways complements the other.

Other historian's feel Wilson was guided by was public opinion. Historians have argued that if America was going to enter the war, it would be on the ideas crafted by the peace movement of the time and America fighting for the goals of self determination and the "spread of democracy" (Daniels, 1924). Wilson himself would write many times throughout his life that all peoples should have the right to elect a democratic government and not be subjugated by imperial powers in any capacity. He would define this as one of his fourteen points. Wilson himself would argue, "When properly directed", he once declared, "There are no people not fitted for self-government" (Link, 1957).

This line of argument does not weaken in any way that his moral view point crafted in the Civil War guided his ideas. Wilson could have been guided by public opinion. Almost all elected officials in all of history have been influenced by it in some way. There is a great deal of evidence he followed it very carefully when considering if the US would involve itself in World War I. He may have felt that Germany had crossed a morale line in the sand, and that public opinion agreed with him. Also, public opinion did not give birth to League of Nations; it was only Wilson and his concept of morality that created such a revolutionary concept.

I believe that none of the alternatives arguments about why Wilson crafted his moralistic vision of international relations and the League of Nations hold as much as weight as his Civil War experience. Why if Wilson was so religious, did he not keep the US out of war entirely? If Wilson was so interested in keeping his goals aligned with public opinion, why did he not listen to the massive amount of public opinion that wanted nothing to do with the war?

One must look at the accumulation of evidence in Wilson's Civil War upbringing. It is very hard to deny Wilson was impacted by the war, all one has to do is look at the massive amount of evidence. Granted such evidence is not easy to find with the trend in Wilson's biographical works.

One can also look to science and human development, such as the work of Dr. Barbara Newman, to see firsthand how a child would be impacted by war. A child from the ages of four to seven according to her work would have their whole moral and ethical code changed by witnessing a dramatic event such as war. Some children may even be affected so deeply that they suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. Unless Wilson was somehow completely shielded for the Civil War from 1861-1865, there is no way Wilson did not know what happening and witnessed the horrors of this war. The lasting mark of this war on Wilson was a profound sense of morality, which is profoundly displayed on how he would look at the world. The way he looked at the world guided his idea of rewriting the way man would forever look at international relations. Wilson himself remarked, "The child....a little spectator of the world", almost foreshadowing the idea that he was a spectator of the conflict. Recall the remark Wilson made that "a boy never forgets his boyhood" also provides the reader clues into the importance he himself places on his childhood. There is no possible way Wilson was not affected by the Civil War. His own admissions that the war did not affect him were a coping mechanism for him to deal with his Civil War experience. It was at the heart of who he was as a man and how he would guide this nation as President. One can theorize that if Wilson had not gone through his agonizing Civil War experience, he would have never proposed his fourteen points and the League of Nations. His ideas would never have been picked up later by others to create the United Nations. History was changed by his experience. His experience in the Civil War would create the moral foundation to purpose the foreign policy he crafted.

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

President Wilson through the lens of his childhood in the Civil War, sought to remake US foreign policy, not only in the hope that the US would never have to send its children off to the fields of battle, but to fight “the war to end all wars”. Moralism would be the roadmap to such a vision, based on his childhood witnessing the carnage of a nation fighting a brutal Civil War. Wilson's sense of morality was created as a child cognitively through his witnessing the most brutal war up until that point our nation had ever seen. He by his own admission did not want the United States fighting a war in Europe to just re-institute the old European balance of power or create a new version of power politics that had produced such a horrible conflict (Schonberg, 2006). Wilson would never have sent American soldiers to die for such a morally reprehensible concept. Wilson, through his idea of the League of Nations, through his beliefs in the spread of self-determination and democracy to the parties of this bloody conflict, America would be fighting for something greater. The United States according to Wilson fought the Civil War to purge itself from slavery and later he would argue the horrors of sectionalism and constitutional struggle. If America was to go to war in an even more bloody and costly conflict, Wilson felt this war must be fought for a similar principle. He felt this world war must be fought to “make the world safe for democracy” and a League of Nations that would guarantee peace from an aggressor from ever starting such a conflict again. I believe Wilson felt America sacrificed its young citizens in the Civil War to save the union of its states. Now it was sacrificing again to create a new international order where a League of Nations would guarantee the peace. Without Wilson's experience in the Civil War, such ideas would never have been realized.

Ultimately, Wilson would not get his League of Nations to pass the US Senate. The center of his moralistic vision of a new world order would be struck down. He would be stricken by a massive stroke and conclude the rest of his Presidency a faded leader.

President Wilson and his ideas of collective security, a league of nations trying to mitigate the international system of anarchy, and self-determination for all nations are key aspects of international relations today. They are the cornerstone of US foreign affairs. After the carnage of World War II, the US and its allies would create the United Nations, which is heavily active in world affairs today. Self-determination is considered by most nations a fundamental right of the international system. There are no European colonies in Africa or Asia, and the idea of colonialism has been abandoned. Presidents from Franklin Roosevelt in crafting the post World War II peace to President George W. Bush in his argument for invading Iraq to create democracy have used the tenants of Wilsonian ideas to justify their actions. President Obama has even used President Wilson's ideas of morality to justify his own policies (Washington Post, 2010). These concepts were born during a conflict that was driving a nation apart in a bloody civil war. Author Bowles Alsop (1956) quotes President Wilson, “It is moral force that is irresistible. It is moral force as much as physical force that has defeated the effort to subdue the world” (in speaking about the end of World War I). The US Civil War would not only influence the childhood of a young President Wilson, but the ideas of a nation that was trying to justify its reason to go to war once more. Those ideas are with us even today.

## Works Cited and Consulted

Alsop, B. (1956). *The Greatness of Woodrow Wilson, 1856- 1956*. New York, NY. Reinhart and Company, Inc.

Augusta Historic Society. *Woodrow Wilson's Childhood Home Website*. [www.wilsonboyhoodhome.org/](http://www.wilsonboyhoodhome.org/) . Accessed April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010 & October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

Baker, R., Dodd, W. (1924). *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. New York, NY. Harper Publishing.

Blum, J. (1956). *Woodrow Wilson and The Politics of Morality*. Boston, MA. Little, Brown and Company.

Bullitt, W., Freud, S. (1966) *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*. Boston, MA. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Clements, K. (2003) *Woodrow Wilson*. *Americans Presidents Reference Series*. Washington, DC. CQ Press

Cooper, J. (2008). *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism, Internationalism, War and Peace*. Washington,

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

D.C. Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Cooper, J. (2009). *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography*. New York, NY. Random House Publishing.

Daniels, J. (1924). *The Life of Woodrow Wilson*. USA. WH Johnston Press

Gaughan, A. (1997). *Woodrow Wilson and the Legacy of the Civil War*. *Civil War Journal*. (43,3) 225-242.

Hoff, J. (2008). *A Faustian Foreign Policy: From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge University Press.

Kissinger, H. (1994) *Diplomacy*. New York, NY. Simon and Schuster.

Link, A. (1957). *Wilson: The Diplomatist*. Baltimore, M.D. The John Hopkins Press

Levin, N. (1968). *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press

Magee, M. (2008). *What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and a Faith-Based Foreign Policy*. Waco, TX. Baylor University Press.

McKinley, S. (1957). *Woodrow Wilson, A Biography*. New York, NY. Fredrick Praeger Publishing.

Montgomery, E. (2006). *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: Family Ties Southern Perspectives*. Historic Augusta Press. Augusta, GA

Newman, B. (2009). *Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach*. Belmont, CA. Belmont Cenage Learning.

Newman, B. (2010). Interview with Dr. Newman to explore the cognitive affects of war on children and how they may relate to a young President Wilson. Conducted October 29, 2010.

Menand, Louis. (2001). *The Metaphysical Club*. New York, NY. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Osborn, G. (1968). *Woodrow Wilson, The Early Years*. Baton Rouge, LA. Louisiana State University Press.

Schonberg, K (2006). *Wilsonian Unilateralism: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy Sense 9/11*.

Paper Presented at the Annual at the Annual Convention of International Studies, March 24-26, 2006

Thorsen, N. (1988). *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson, 1875-1910*. Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press.

Wills, G. (11 March, 2010). *As a Progressive, Obama Hews to the Wilsonian Tradition*. The Washington Post.

Wilson, E. (1962). *Patriotic Gore*. New York, NY. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Wilson, W. (1898). *Division and Reunion*. New York, N.Y. Longsmann Green Publishing.

Wilson, W. (1904). *Princeton Baccalaureate Address, June 12, 1904*.

Wilson, W. (1917). *Declaration of War during Joint Session of Congress, April 2, 1917*

Wilson, W. (1918). *Fourteen Points Address to Joint Session of Congress. January 18, 1918*

# Woodrow Wilson: Civil War, Morality and Foreign Policy

Written by Harry Kazianis

—

Written by: Harry Kazianis  
Written at: University of Rhode Island  
Written for: Professor Lawrence Charap  
Date: 2010

---

## About the author:

Harry serves as Editor-In-Chief for The Diplomat as well as a CSIS: WSD Handa Fellow. He has served in the past as Deputy Editor for e-IR. He specializes in security studies with a keen interest in modern Chinese military strategy and foreign policy. Harry has written in publications including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum and the Foreword Report.