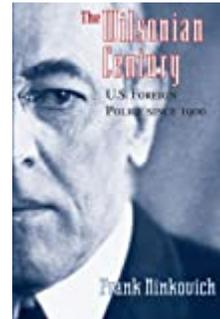


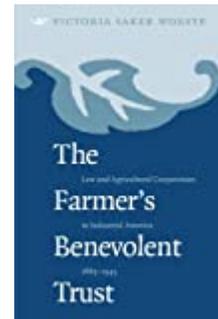
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Frank A. Ninkovich.** *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. 320 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-58648-9; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-58136-1.



**Victoria Saker Woeste.** *The Farmer's Benevolent Trust: Law and Agricultural Cooperation in Industrial America, 1865-1945.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xviii + 369 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2421-4; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4731-2.



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Historians of American foreign relations are an articulate and prolific group within the scholarly profession, but they tend to be “splitters” rather than “lumpers,” or “hedgehogs” not “foxes,” to use Sir Isaiah Berlin’s phrase. Excellent monographs based on extensive multi-archival research characterize the scholarly work produced in the discipline. One of the criticisms of the subject area, raised from time to time, is that there are not successful overarching explanations of the history of American foreign relations – no workable thesis or interpretation that makes all of the pieces fall into place and provides a convincing statement of “why.” Two perennial contenders for the overarching explanations of American foreign relations are George F. Kennan’s *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (1951) and William A. Williams’ *The Tragedy of Ameri-*

*can Diplomacy* (1959). These books have become basic readings in courses on American foreign policy, laying out interpretations of the subject in easily understood terms of “realist” or “radical.” While most historians complain that these attempts to describe American foreign relations in such starkly contrasting terms are simplistic and inadequate, particularly in the light of the enormous and sophisticated body of monographic literature that has been produced in the field, these books remain the classics. Frank Ninkovich has attempted to develop an interpretation of twentieth-century American foreign policy that goes beyond the challenge that Kennan and Williams represent.

Ninkovich argues that a new view of international re-

lations was formulated by Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, and Woodrow Wilson (early in his administration). This was a notion of liberal, democratic internationalism, an idea that the United States as a newly arrived great power had a role to play in international affairs in Latin America, Asia, and even Europe as a liberal, democratic state. This was in contrast to the role of the United States throughout most of the nineteenth century when the country was focussed largely on continental, or at least hemispheric, matters – the exceptions, which may not be insignificant, being the active search for export markets. In the aftermath of the events of 1898 and 1899, the United States assumed a physical presence in Latin America and the Far East that was significantly different from earlier activity. The presumption was that co-operation and fair play among the great powers in their relations with each other in dealing with the rest of the world would assure stability and minimize a resort to war. The increasing reliance on international law was one means through which this goal could be achieved. Widespread belief in the progress of mankind made this optimistic view of international relations possible.

The First World War shattered all of this for Woodrow Wilson, Ninkovich concludes. As the war unfolded, Wilson saw that industrialism and modern government and society had created a machine that would destroy civilization if left unrestrained. While evidence for this existed across Europe, the best example was Russia, which had descended from an absolute monarchy to a liberal democracy to Bolshevik anarchy. Wilson feared a general collapse of civilization, Ninkovich says, and “fear” rather than “idealism” shaped Wilson’s view that world opinion, basically reasonable, needed to be mobilized as a check on the self-destructive tendencies of governments (as seen in the war) and that world organization (the League of Nations) must be created to give structure to implementing world opinion and controlling international violence. Wilson was ahead of his time and unable to convince either America or Europe that the First World War had created a new era in which war was no longer a rational policy. The result was that the 1920s saw an attempt to revert to essentially nineteenth century great power politics. However, the emergence of violent, aggressive, and murderous totalitarian regimes in Europe and Asia seemed by the 1930s to prove correct Wilson’s view of the dangers to all that was posed by the autarch in specific places. In short, “Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

As war in Europe and Asia spread, Franklin D. Roosevelt began to articulate a revised version of Wilson’s

world view – elimination of the destructive threats to civilization by the fascist powers, world opinion marshalled through a world organization, and co-operation among the leading powers. While this was more or less successful by 1945, the post-war situation did not result in the kind of co-operation among the leading powers that Roosevelt had presumed. The cold war era, like the decade that preceded it, was characterized by fear that civilization would be destroyed by the totalitarian powers, now on the left. Cooperation in the United Nations, as envisioned by Roosevelt was frustrated by the lack of unanimity within the Security Council. As the United States responded to the communist threat by commitments of military and economic support in the Mediterranean, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, and the United States came to rely increasingly on nuclear weapons and massive retaliation, the notion of “world opinion” became intertwined with that of “confidence.”

Was the United States reliable enough to assist its friends in a crisis? In order to generate confidence the United States had to intervene to show that it could and would. While many examples are given, Ninkovich makes a strong case for Vietnam to illustrate his point. After a bungled Bay of Pigs invasion, a passive response to the Berlin War, a dubious victory in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and a questionable attempt to neutralize Laos, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had little choice but to support the government of Vietnam in order to look reliable and inspire confidence among its allies. Ninkovich goes on to show that these efforts, and particularly in Vietnam, were not always convincing to America’s allies, and furthermore the compulsion to resist these threats to civilization that were not quite threats to the United States itself was increasingly difficult for the American public to accept.

Ninkovich is able to make a persuasive case for this Wilsonian perception of the needs of American foreign policy right up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, with the transformation of Eastern Europe, the end of the Warsaw Pact, and the creation of the new decentralized Confederation of Independent States, the kind of threats to civilization that existed since the 1930s had arguably disappeared. Despite Cuba or Iraq or Serbia or even China, the fear that Woodrow Wilson articulated as the necessity for American and world action has diminished. Picking up Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the “End of History,” Ninkovich claims that international relations have reverted to something like the environment of the early years of the twentieth century. With those great enemies of liberalism – fascism and communism –

gone, the United States can once again work for liberal, democratic internationalism as envisioned by Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft, that is to say, encouraging liberal democratic politics and open markets. It is fair to say that Ninkovich's notion of the *Wilsonian Century* will generate a great deal of comment and criticism, rejecting as it does both "realism" and "radicalism," but this

fresh interpretation may create a new focus in the ongoing debate about America's foreign relations.

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