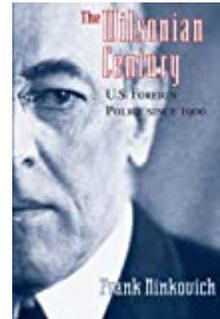


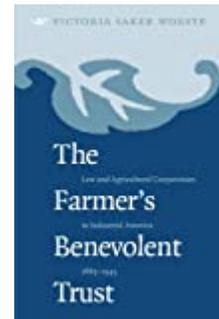
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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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Back to the Future

Diplomatic historian Frank Ninkovich offers an original and arresting interpretation of twentieth-century American foreign relations. He contends that the decisions of U.S. policy-makers have been based on ideology, not merely calculations of the national interest. “Normal internationalism,” according to Ninkovich, was “the basic ideology of the country” around 1900. “This ideology was a natural outgrowth of the commercial and cultural internationalism of the nineteenth century, a period when America’s political isolation was complemented by a flowering of transnational activity in the private sector.”

During the First World War, however, Woodrow Wilson’s insights into the perils of “modernity,” and modern warfare especially, produced “Wilsonianism,” the “crisis internationalism” that would eventually become the reigning ideology (p. 12).

In a chronological narrative of American foreign policy since 1900, Ninkovich illustrates the prevalence of “normal internationalism” before and immediately after World War I and offers a significant reassessment of Wilson and his intellectual legacy. American leaders at

the beginning of the century were profoundly optimistic about America's place in the world. The acquisition of world power status after the war with Spain was viewed "as part of a more encompassing progressive transformation then taking place throughout the world" in which "progress would bring peace, growing prosperity, and an integration of the world along liberal democratic lines" (pp. 22-23). Many American leaders were thus beginning to recognize that the nation was "entangled" in a "civilization," the benefits of which could only be maintained if traditional isolationism and outdated conceptions of the national interest were abandoned (p. 25). Accordingly, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft "made significant strides in the direction of globalizing" American foreign policy.

Ninkovich presents the much-maligned Taft as "far more the pioneering modern than T.R." in his internationalism (p. 26). Nonetheless, Roosevelt's vigorous consolidation of U.S. power in the Caribbean provided the nation sufficient security to enable it to embark upon an ambitious agenda of cooperation with the major European powers and Japan outside the Western Hemisphere. "Dollar diplomacy" was based on Taft's quite modern belief "that warlike methods – *Roosevelt* methods – were outdated and that peaceful cooperation and commercial expansion were now the order of the day." Though often couched in artless rhetoric and diplomacy, Taft's "cooperative global approach" became "the central theme of normal internationalism" for the rest of the century (p. 27).

Wilson shared his predecessors' commitment to international cooperation in order to preserve a liberal global civilization. However, Wilson discarded Taft's blithe optimism during World War I. Ninkovich admires Wilson's "imaginative understanding of the utter historical novelty of the war," which "relied on a creative interpretation of danger that went beyond traditional conceptions of interest." This "thoroughly modern" sensibility "made Wilsonianism a tremendously original intellectual achievement" (pp. 49-50). For Ninkovich, Wilson was no mere moralizing idealist. He describes the "bleak side" of Wilson's thought, "the serious and distinctly modern kind of threat that his idealistic solutions were intended to eliminate" (p. 12). Wilson recognized that modern warfare led inexorably to "total war" and was inherently so destructive as to make war "far too costly a means for achieving any ends that might conceivably be gained." A German victory, Wilson feared, might give Prussian autocracy the power to permanently disrupt the liberal international order so critical to Amer-

icans. European balance of power diplomacy was dead and "modern politics and warfare were global in scope," thus ensuring that war anywhere could escalate "into another world war more calamitous than the first" (p. 13). Hence, a League of Nations was needed to provide a new structure for world politics and to prevent modern civilization from self-destruction.

Wilson the Progressive believed that "world opinion" could be the arbiter of international affairs, and saw the League as a collective security organization to give force to democracy. Unfortunately for Wilson, few of his contemporaries shared his conviction that the war had been a product of the tenuous "structural conditions embedded within modernity." The consensus that Prussian militarism had been the cause of the war enabled the Entente powers – including the United States – to view the war as "only a temporary blockage of a road to international cooperation that had been fully reopened" by 1919 (p. 76). Wilsonianism thus failed to resonate, and the president's inept political behavior ensured the defeat of the Treaty of Versailles.

After 1920, Wilson's Republican successors enthusiastically restored a version of the "pre-Wilsonian internationalism of the Taft years" (p. 78). American foreign policy in the twenties was neither Wilsonian nor unilateral, as the United States took an active leadership role in promoting international cooperation in East Asia and Europe without entering the League. "By exercising leadership without responsibility," writes Ninkovich, "American statesmen of the decade attempted to construct a world without politics," a vision that, compared with Wilson's, was "positively utopian" (p. 81). The series of international crises beginning in Manchuria in 1931 exposed the fallacies of Republican internationalism without, however, reviving the appeal of Wilsonianism. "There is no doubt whatsoever," in Ninkovich's view, that Franklin D. Roosevelt was "an internationalist who was convinced of the absolute necessity of preserving a liberal global civilization" (p. 107). However, only the worsening international situation after 1938 enabled Roosevelt to convince Americans of the existence of the frightening possibility that the Axis powers might achieve global domination. Pearl Harbor established FDR's "Wilsonian strategic outlook as the 'realistic' one" (p. 137).

While Wilson's conception of global danger was finally accepted, his promotion of "international organization, rather than great-power cooperation, as the key to maintaining the peace" was rejected by FDR (p. 137). Roosevelt doubted the efficacy of any international orga-

nization, and the United Nations was consequently designed to play a limited role in world affairs, as evidenced by the granting of veto power to permanent members of the Security Council. FDR adhered to the “banal” notion “that a stable world could be based only on an unforced, natural great-power harmony – ‘civilized’ cooperation” (p. 142). Normal internationalism thus had a new lease on life even in 1945. The triumph of Wilsonianism would have to await the postwar collapse of great-power cooperation “and the reemergence, this time in the form of the Soviet threat, of the cluster of modern global problems first glimpsed by Wilson and later described in detail by FDR” (p. 144).

Ninkovich demonstrates that Wilsonianism was central to the intensely ideological and global Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. More interestingly, however, he also shows that Wilsonianism changed considerably in the postwar era. With the emergence of containment and the national security state, it was “normalized as a way of dealing with a threat of indefinite duration” and became an American “national program” rather than a project of international organization (p. 146). The Cold War was, in Ninkovich’s words, “a historical struggle over which ideology or way of life would be able to form the basis of a global civilization,” and it was to be “a war to the finish,” with no room for both ideologies to coexist (p. 150). American fears in the early Cold War were reminiscent of Wilson’s and FDR’s. “By 1950,” Ninkovich observes, “virtually every element of Wilson’s assessment of the Great War was present,” including the danger of world conquest by the Soviets and a looming world war (p. 174).

The American response to North Korea’s invasion of South Korea in June 1950 revealed the extent to which Wilsonianism had become “naturalized” (p. 177). A strategically irrelevant spot in the Cold War, the Korean peninsula took on a whole new meaning once the administration of Harry Truman concluded that the loss of South Korea could cause world opinion to lose faith in American commitments. The Korean War that ensued “was a Wilsonian war” to “demonstrate the cohesiveness of world opinion” (p. 178).

After Korea, the American preoccupation with preserving credibility and bolstering world opinion motivated the administrations of Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy to run enormous risks in several Cold War crises. When Eisenhower explained the “domino theory” during a press conference in 1954, he was merely adding another “in a long string of metaphorical expres-

sions [to] the Wilsonian worldview” (p. 192). American policy was now becoming permanently concerned with the world’s perceptions of events such as the possible loss of Indochina. American commitments in Asia and even Europe would seem less credible if even strategically irrelevant countries succumbed to communism. During the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson’s policies foundered on the rock of public incomprehension of the Wilsonianism that had so captivated American elites. Having based Cold War interventionism on largely normative, unspoken Wilsonian assumptions, American statesmen were at a loss to articulate a compelling case for an indefinitely long war in an obscure region to prevent a hypothetical falling of dominoes elsewhere.

Though Vietnam was a logical consequence of American Wilsonianism, the prevailing ideology did not lose its resonance with American leaders. President Jimmy Carter tried and failed to transcend it. Wilsonianism was too deeply institutionalized in the national security state for any leader to change course until the collapse of the Soviet Union made it obsolete. The post-Cold War world that has emerged since 1991 has seemed strange and somewhat disconcerting to many Americans precisely because the nation has had to readjust “to the kind of normal, nonutopian world that Wilsonianism had been intended to preserve” (p. 281). Discounting the salience of the UN, Ninkovich sees the world returning to “where it had been in 1900,” as the Cold War and Wilsonianism constituted “a lengthy interlude” in the story of an unfolding normal internationalism. The world now witnesses “the kind of historical evolution that Taft and the Republican statesmen of the 1920s believed had already come to fruition, the kind of world that FDR in World War II had hoped for with fingers crossed, the kind of world anticipated prematurely by Jimmy Carter” (p. 289).

Ninkovich relates his story in effective language enhanced by many forceful, apposite statements that enable him to highlight the ironies and paradoxes of American foreign policy. The text is marred only by an occasional stylistic overreach; his remark on Cuba’s turn to Communism, that “for Americans, the inconceivable had incomprehensibly become the intolerable,” is an example of such (p. 205). As an interpretation of the ideological character of American foreign relations in the twentieth century, Ninkovich’s book is a highly significant contribution. Though written in a hard-hitting style certain to provoke dissent on specifics, it is one of the finest discussions of Wilson’s ideas and their subsequent meaning available. Perhaps more importantly, Ninkovich’s thesis of a Wilsonian century imparts a new sense of continu-

ity in American diplomatic history and provides a compelling reassessment of internationalism.

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