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Robert David Johnson. *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. v + 448 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-65917-9.



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Robert David Johnson's *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* is an extremely important monograph in American diplomatic history. Johnson's work signals, I think, a reinterpretation of the historiography of US international relations between the wars, and it will also cause historians to rethink the meaning of terms such as "isolationism" and "strategic interests."

Johnson has set out to describe the foreign affairs ideology of a group of Republican senators whose viewpoints developed from the 1910s to the mid-1930s. Labeling these senators "peace progressives" or "dissenters," Johnson includes in this group such well-known congressional personalities as Robert La Follette, William Borah, Gerald Nye, John Blaine, and Burton Wheeler. Johnson describes how the Peace Progressives grew out of the domestic Progressive movement of the Roosevelt-Taft-Wilson era, but he also indicates to the reader how the Progressive ideology about professionalization and middle-class rationality combined with elements of Populist and even Jeffersonian thinking. Most of the senators, for example, came from Midwest and Great Plains states that had significant farming constituencies into the Great Depression. Given the hard times that individual farmers experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the First World War these senators had developed reactive, but not very consis-

tent, theses that blamed farmers' difficulties on "international banking conspiracies" or on speculators who had allegedly used the United States government to control investment in US and foreign markets to the detriment of family farmers and other working people (pp. 48-49).

Johnson, however, goes far beyond what his title suggests; in his first chapter he traces the history of dissent in American foreign relations thinking back to the 1770s and then works his way to the 1890s. Johnson starts with colonial, Federalist, and Jeffersonian attempts to find a form of American international relations different from traditional European balance-of-power politics based on the use of military force. He thus traces the thought of men such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Gallatin, Henry Clay, Charles Sumner, and even William Jennings Bryan as selected, though not always consistent, examples of individuals who attempted to find alternatives to an international relations system based on balance of power. These men instead emphasized a commerce-oriented foreign policy, the use of moral suasion and ideals to fulfill US strategic goals, and even anti-imperialism as the main focal points of US foreign policy. Certainly, these themes were at times violated by their progenitors and were not combined into one coherent ideology, but Johnson convincingly asserts that to understand twentieth-century US international

relations fully, one must begin to explore the ideals enunciated in the first years of the republic (pp. 10-33).

The monograph then goes on to describe pre-1919 Peace Progressive ideology, with Johnson showing that its stance in that period was not only lacking in coherence and consistency, but also was essentially a series of reactive foreign affairs statements with domestic politics as the main motivator. For instance, dissenting senators such as La Follette and George Norris blamed the First World War on the greed of corporations and international bankers and showed their Progressive, Populist, and even Jeffersonian roots by describing an "ideal" US political economy based less on corporate capitalism and more on the "small farmer, small merchant, or small enterprise" (p. 48). They also called for a renunciation of military preparedness, "large standing militaries," and cooperation with the Allied powers, seeking instead to rely for US security on "traditional" American measures such as a militia military, geographic distance from Europe, and renunciation of "entangling alliances" with the European belligerents (p. 55). Still, as Johnson shows, the senators' lack of a coherent ideology was demonstrated by their eventually unanimous votes for US entry into the war, in part resulting from their disagreements with each other over means to their goals. In addition, the dissenters spoke out on foreign affairs only when it touched on perceived constituent interests, especially economic ones.

The Treaty of Versailles and the ensuing debate over US entry into the League of Nations, however, was the key period of development for Peace Progressive ideology. Many of the senators who reluctantly voted for entry into the First World War, such as La Follette, saw the League articles, particularly Articles 10 and 11, as dangers to the conduct of US foreign relations, and they used their opposition to Woodrow Wilson as the focal point for their emerging thought. In particular, they believed that US intervention into the Russian civil war in conjunction with the British, the French, and the Japanese was a classic example of the League being used by the imperial powers to entice US involvement in anti-nationalistic and even counterrevolutionary activities. The League could not only endanger US sovereignty and "freedom of action" because of the need for enforcement in far-off places, but the need for a large standing army and navy to contribute to the League would continue obnoxious wartime measures against freedom of speech and assembly, anti-labor activities, and onerous taxation. In short, US membership in the League would force the nation to rely on military force, not traditional

American ideals, as the basis for its international relations policy.

Johnson also reveals how and why he considers the Peace Progressives to be a "left-wing" alternative to Wilsonianism. Wilson's concessions to the British and the French, his treatment of Germany, and his opposition to Bolshevism provide Johnson with convincing evidence that Wilson and the League were perceived by the Peace Progressives as the institutional advocate of a global status quo that would have stifled independence movements (much as Arno Mayer suggested about Wilsonianism in his coverage of the topic in the 1950s and 1960s). The dissenting senators saw these independence movements as a positive force in global history, and they believed that the United States should support independence movements based on national self-determination because American political support in the twentieth century would then coincide with US "traditions" of supplying moral support to oppressed peoples opposing monarchism and imperialism (pp. 70-104).

The League debate as the turning point in Peace Progressive ideological formation led to a full-blown critique of American foreign policy, the emergence of anti-imperialism as the main and consistent element in that developed thought, and a "blueprint" for the formulation and implementation of American foreign policy. The American revulsion over the destruction of the First World War, the distaste for entangling commitments, the flowering of a potentially powerful peace movement in the 1920s, and the death of Robert La Follette, Sr., helped more internationally oriented senators such as William Borah become the mouthpieces of the Peace Progressives. They asserted that US international relations should revolve around anti-imperialism and opposition to British and French policy in Europe and in other parts of the world. Similarly, the Peace Progressives argued that the executive branch had too great a control over foreign policymaking and that US corporations had too great a control over the executive branch (with international bankers supposedly leading the nation to imperial adventure, militarism, and war). They suggested as remedies "open diplomacy," a democratic control of foreign policy (including the use of public opinion as a control mechanism), and congressional leadership in international relations (pp. 115-120 and 127-129). In addition, the Peace Progressives would have reconstituted US military policy in terms of something they called "defensive preparedness," consisting of a small standing army, a large national guard, a substantial (yet cheap) air force, and a small navy, all of which would have supposedly de-

tered policymakers from overseas interventions (such as in China or Latin America) at the behest of “international bankers.”

All of these measures were still aimed at maintaining a domestic political economy organized around the small farmer and producer, but the Peace Progressives held a much more sophisticated and broader conception of US “strategic” interests than previous historians have given them credit for. Johnson demonstrates, for example, that the dissenters fully realized how important global image was to US interests when they argued that the US suffered because it was identified with traditional imperial powers such as Britain or France and failed to provide sufficient moral support to nations such as Russia that were struggling for “democracy” (pp. 131-133). Moral power and the power of American ideals, in fact, provided the main armament in the Peace Progressive arsenal and, though some anti-Bolshevik rhetoric was uttered by the dissenting senators in the early 1920s, Peace Progressive leaders such as Borah led attempts to have the Soviet Union diplomatically recognized as a means of striking against communism. The Peace Progressives saw the United States enhancing its strategic (i.e., political, diplomatic, military, economic, and even cultural) security by opposing European imperialism, supporting independence movements, curtailing US military interventions (especially in Latin America), and ensuring a stable and prosperous political economy at home and abroad (pp. 133-150).

Here Johnson is at his most perceptive. He creatively argues that a definition of US “national security” must go beyond merely discussing military and diplomatic affairs and must take into account the health of the domestic political economy as well as the reception of American culture and ideas overseas. To be sure, Johnson is part of a historiographical trend, begun by historians such as Akira Iriye, Melvyn Leffler, and Emily Rosenberg, that substantially broadens the meaning of “strategic.” At the same time, however, Johnson’s work also harkens back to that of the “deans” of American diplomatic history, such as Samuel Flagg Bemis, Arthur Whitaker, and Frederick Merk, all of whom saw early American foreign relations dominated by the goal of achieving republican security in a monarchical world by supporting the spread of republicanism in the Western Hemisphere. This linking of past history and historiography is, I think, one of the greatest strengths of Johnson’s monograph.

On at least one main point, however, Johnson still differs significantly with Leffler, as well as with corpo-

ratist historians such as Michael Hogan, Joan Hoff, and Frank Costigliola. He sees the Peace Progressives as the “third alternative” in the 1920s domestic struggle for control of foreign affairs, a struggle previously seen by historians as encompassing only Democratic Wilsonianists and Republican business internationalists only (pp. 151-152). The Peace Progressives saw the ideal foreign policy entailing an “independent internationalism” from the League, much as Joan Hoff discussed. However, they also sought to use US economic and moral influence in favor of neutral powers, independence movements, and “world order,” instead of assisting the major European powers such as Great Britain and France in debt and reparations reconstruction and revision (pp. 157-158, 175, and 176). In other words, Johnson suggests, with a great deal of primary evidence, that the 1920s were much more politically complicated when it came to foreign policy debates in the United States and that the Peace Progressives must be taken into consideration as this “third alternative.”

Johnson also goes far in disputing the myth that the Peace Progressives were “isolationist” in thought or deed. The Peace Progressives were opposed to most forms of military intervention, but they were not advocates of a United States that abstained from international intercourse. In fact, they were prepared to rely on an age-old tool of American international intervention to keep the nation secure. Convinced that US economic power could be potentially more powerful than standing military force and that global economic order was utterly dependent on the US political economy, the Peace Progressives believed that US economic power could force other nations to disarm and even to cease their imperialistic activity (pp. 182-192).

Johnson also demonstrates, moreover, the degree to which the dissenting senators could be labeled “American exceptionalists” and American imperialists themselves. The Peace Progressives, for all of their criticism of US imperialism during the Republican administrations of the 1920s, were just as prone to indulge in rather aggressive ideas about the use of power. They would, for instance, have used Allied war debts to force the British and French to treat Germany more leniently, to force the major European powers to disarm, and to funnel US economic aid only to “productive” industries such as mining, food, and consumer goods as a way to “starve” traditional European power politics. In short, the Peace Progressives had their own ideas about Great Power intimidation as a means to US strategic goals, though they would never have agreed with the label of “imperialism” as a description of their strategy (pp. 161-162, 163-164, 166, and 171).

Johnson's evidence also suggests that the Peace Progressives were not isolated in their domestic political support, even though they made up only a minority of the Senate. In the 1920s, their support was not limited to their regional constituencies but was linked more closely to the interwar American Peace Movement. The Peace Progressives, for example, found limited support for their policies on Latin America, Soviet recognition, and Versailles revision from Walter Lippmann and the editors of *The New Republic* (pp. 210-215). They found even greater support, however, from people such as Oswald Villard, Ernest Gruening, and Jane Addams and organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. These individuals and groups, especially the latter, supplied the dissenting senators with information on political positions and policy choices before the days of large congressional staffs, an interesting sidenote on how public policy debates were prepared for and conducted in a pre-New Deal Congress.

Johnson concludes with another departure from previous historiography by arguing that it was the Great Depression that shattered the Peace Progressives and turned them once again into politicians who viewed foreign affairs strictly through a domestic lens. The Democratic opposition, which had been splintered in the 1920s, came to the Congress as a strong majority in 1932, and the disaster of the Great Depression forced Peace Progressives to worry less about reforming the international relations system and more about assisting their constituents. Their anti-military ideas ceased to be morally grounded and became more concerned with the effects of high defense budgets on taxpayers. War became less a symptom of international power politics and more the fault of greedy munitions makers, who were also responsible for onerous taxes on working people in the United States (pp. 277-294). Moreover, President Franklin Roosevelt stole the thunder of the Peace Progressives' most articulate criticism of US international relations by withdrawing the Marines from Nicaragua in 1934 and instituting the Good Neighbor Policy. The Great Depression, and not just the reaction to the First World War and the coming of the Second, caused senators such as Gerald Nye to call for US non-involvement in European affairs after the early 1930s.

Johnson's sources for his assertions are hard to dispute, if only for their comprehensiveness. They include congressional hearings, appropriations documents, a huge collection of personal papers, the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, as well as contemporary newspaper and journal articles, press statements, and relevant

secondary works. *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* might have been improved, however, by a comprehensive bibliography. Johnson's endnotes are excellent, but a complete bibliography with cited primary and secondary works would have been most helpful to readers.

There are four other areas where the book might have been improved. In chapter 1, which deals with dissenting thought in the history of American foreign relations from the 1770s to the 1890s, Johnson writes quite a bit about dissenters' search for alternative ways of conducting international relations without resorting to military coercion. Although he demonstrates how many of the dissenters, including Jefferson, violated their own words in actions they took against European territory in North America, Johnson never mentions US westward expansion as imperialism vis-a-vis the Indian nations. The fact that policymakers and thinkers who were so concerned about aggressiveness in foreign affairs did not view the Indian nations as political entities could have been more fully explored as one of the major contradictions in early American foreign affairs ideology.

In addition, throughout the monograph, Johnson demonstrates how the Peace Progressives believed that US international relations were motivated by political executives whose strings were pulled by big business and Wall Street interests, especially "international bankers." On only two occasions does Johnson implicitly counter this thesis. For example, on p. 120, he asserts that the banking conspiracy idea, applied to Sino-American relations, sheds little light on Chinese-American relations in the 1920s. On p. 314, he also delineates how the Peace Progressives' ideas for European policy in the 1920s, again based on ideas about banking conspiracies, do not seem very "impressive" today. At no point does Johnson explicitly counter the Peace Progressives' economic determinist thesis. Given the other parts of the book, Johnson can hardly be called a New Left historian, but his failure to inform the reader explicitly and repeatedly that policymakers make policy independently from big business is a shortcoming of this work.

Johnson also talks about the Peace Progressives as being a more "left-wing" alternative to Wilsonianism, but perhaps it could be argued that the Peace Progressives were more "conservative" than either the Wilsonianists or the business internationalists of the 1920s, depending on how one defines those terms. In fact, "conservative" and "liberal" become somewhat relative when dealing with the Peace Progressives. In their resistance to US

military adventures (their cautious perceptions about the use of military force and their ideas about limited, though not isolationist, American involvement), large standing armies, and high taxes, as well as in their emphasis on domestic prosperity, American ideals as moral strategic power, and the United States as an example for independence movements, the Peace Progressives could easily be seen as the more conservative of the 1920s US foreign affairs elites. The monograph would have been improved by a conclusion that dealt with these semantics.

Finally, more could have been done to put the Peace Progressives into a late-twentieth-century context of dissent in American foreign relations thought. Johnson mentions the Vietnam War and the Peace Progressives as forerunners to senators such as William Fulbright, but a more comprehensive treatment would have been in order. Along these same lines, to what extent were the dissenters “right” or “wrong” in their enunciations about the power of ideals in US strategic power? How far can a nation pursue foreign policy goals with ideals that are not backed up by military force? Were the Peace Progressives proven wrong by the events of the 1930s and 1940s, as most realist historians would suggest, or is the matter more complicated? The ideology is certainly an enticing one, especially in the 1990s when strategic interests are being rethought to a certain extent and when domes-

tic matters are pressing on increasingly slender US budgetary resources. Johnson certainly puts the Peace Progressives’ ideas into historical context with respect to the pre-1935 period. Historians are not supposed to project or prescribe far beyond the chronological scope of their projects, but a short analysis of Peace Progressive ideology in light of the passing of the Cold War, or at least up to the end of the Cold War, would have been appropriate here.

These points, however, should be put in context. Overall, this is a marvelous book. Johnson’s contribution to the historiography of 1920s United States international relations and American peace studies and his exploration into the meaning of labels such as “isolationist” and “strategic” are intriguing, thought-provoking, and crisply communicated in his well-articulated prose. Johnson set out to reinterpret an entire era, and he largely succeeded in doing so. He is to be commended for moving back before the 1890s for his starting point, thereby avoiding the current tendency of many historians of US international relations to think that all things important must have happened after 1898.

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