A Light That Failed Completely

The League of Nations struggle was ferocious but honorable. Edith Wilson was only ferocious.

BREAKING THE HEART OF THE WORLD
Woodrow Wilson and the Fight
for the League of Nations.
By John Milton Cooper Jr.
Illustrated. 454 pp. New York:
Cambridge University Press. $34.95.

EDITH AND WOODROW
The Wilson White House.
By Phyllis Lee Levin.
Illustrated. 606 pp. New York:
A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner. $35.

By Jeff Shesol

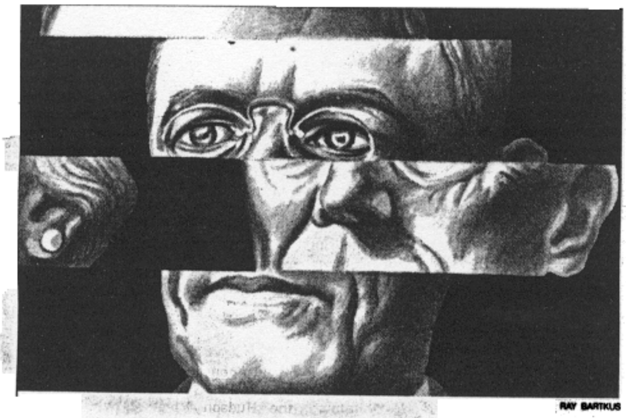
IF the time seems right for a reappraisal of Woodrow Wilson, as two insightful new books suggest, that in itself is nothing new: the time has always seemed right for a reappraisal of Wilson. That is because the struggle he waged over the creation of a League of Nations was at its core a debate over the terms of America's engagement in the world. This struggle, so central to our national purpose, has been perpetually replayed.

Over the decades, most historians have agreed that the sound and fury over America's participation in the League mattered little in the end — that the arc of United States foreign policy bent inexorably toward isolation. In "Breaking the Heart of the World," John Milton Cooper Jr. puts that view to a serious, scholarly test.

Cooper, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, has written on Wilson before, most notably in "The Warrior and the Priest," a recounting of the fierce rivalry between Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. His new book has a narrower focus: the causes and consequences of what participants labeled "the League fight."

That battle began even before the Great War had ended, and the combatants kept at it longer than American troops had fought in Europe. It was one of the most brutally partisan and bitterly personal disputes in American history. At the same time, it set a precedent (as yet unmatched) for the informed, principled discussion of the fundamental aims of American foreign policy.

Ironically, the idea of an international organization to enforce peace originated not with Wilson but with his Republican rivals, the same men who would defeat it a decade later. In 1910, former President Theodore Roosevelt proposed that the great powers establish a "League of Peace" to prevent conflict among nations, "by force if necessary." One of Roosevelt's first converts was his close friend the patrician Republican senator from Massachusetts, Henry Cabot Lodge. Endorsing Roosevelt's vision, Lodge coined a term to describe it: "the united nations."


RAY BARTKUS

By the time of the armistice of November 1918, Wilson had emerged as the League's most ardent advocate; and when he returned from Europe in July 1919 he presented his plan for collective security through a League of Nations as holy writ. He asked the Senate, "Dare we reject it and break the heart of the world?" To which Lodge, the majority leader, replied with a resounding "yes." By then, most Republicans had concluded that Wilson's commitment to collective security was boundless and reckless, a threat to America's autonomy in its own hemisphere.

Cooper's greatest contribution comes in his subtle rendering of a fight that is often depicted in black (Lodge) and white (Wilson). Here, Lodge is depicted as a limited interventionist rather than an isolationist; and Wilson is not an idealist but a realist, who saw that there would be no enduring peace without an organization to enforce it. The question, Cooper makes clear, was never really whether to engage in the world, but on what terms.

Cooper's analysis is acute, evenhanded and remarkably free of the sentimentality (or scorn) that so often colors writing about Wilson. But perhaps it is too free of emotion: the passions of the moment are described but never really imparted.

At times the book reads like an exhaustive, organ-by-organ autopsy of a patient who died of a simple trauma. Cooper shows that the "dread blow" that killed the League was not the Senate's rejection of the treaty in March 1920, but the massive stroke that Wilson had suffered almost six months before, at the end of a nationwide speaking tour to sell his plan to a largely indifferent public.

"Such strokes," Cooper writes, "often exaggerate their victims' personality traits." Medical science confirms this, as does Wilson's heightened arrogance, irascibility and aversion to compromise. In that sense, the stroke happened at exactly the wrong time to the wrong person.

Enter exactly the wrong bedside attendant: Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, the president's second wife. In "Edith and Woodrow," Phyllis Lee Levin seconds Cooper's diagnosis. The author of a biography of Abigail Adams, Levin has written a rich, rousing narrative that begins as a romance and ends as an "outrage visited on the country's institutions." The tale is not new. But Levin tells it with authority and verve.

Wilson, whose first wife had died in the summer of 1914, was besotted by the following spring. His ardor for Edith Bolling Galt, a wealthy, headstrong Southern widow, was so pronounced that it unnerved White House aides. They thought him distracted, "obsessed."

THEIR concerns were well founded. Levin argues that even before Edith's marriage to Wilson in December 1915, she exerted an influence grossly out of proportion to her grounding in domestic and foreign policy. At Wilson's insistence, Edith weighed in on diplomatic crises and reviewed highly classified papers.

She also bore powerful grudges on her beloved's behalf — urging retribution against all she deemed insufficiently loyal. Edith was not incapable of moderating Wilson's potent self-righteousness, but mostly she reinforced it. And when he was too weak to display it himself, she did it for him.

It is here that Levin's story really becomes gripping. As Wilson took ill, his wife convened a "bedside government" consisting of herself and two deputies, Wilson's devoted aide, Joseph Tumulty, and the presidential physician, Cary Grayson — a triumvirate that, in Levin's words, "could neither face nor acknowledge the harsh realities of the president's sickness."

Edith later wrote that "I, myself, never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs." Levin's book makes a strong counterclaim, lending credibility to contemporary accounts that Edith had, in fact, become the first woman president of the United States.

The book paints a sinister picture of Edith Wilson's White House: the lights dimmed, curtains drawn and "gloomy secrets and impostures" taking the place of candor. One marvels at Edith's ability to keep reporters, senators, cabinet members and the vice president, Thomas Riley Marshall, in the dark about Wilson's condition.

While Wilson struggled even to hold a pen, Edith issued a flurry of handwritten edicts, each beginning with the words, "the President says." With Tumulty, she scripted the State of the Union Message, vetoed the Volstead Act (passed to enforce the Prohibition amendment) and reorganized the cabinet. She also deferred action on a good deal of pressing business, exercising what Levin calls a "grotesquely subjective" sense of what merited her husband's limited energies.

Unworthy of his time, apparently, was any talk of a deal on the League of Nations. The importuning of Senate Democrats, waiting desperately for Wilson to release them to vote for the treaty "with reservations" rather than let it die, fell on deaf ears.

Still, Levin is perhaps too eager to attribute malicious motives to her subject. She risks losing sight of the fact that it was not a conspiracy of three that misled the nation (and mislaid the Constitution), it was a conspiracy of four — a number that included the president himself, who was just well enough to know how unwell he really was.

Both books conclude that Wilson's health was the critical factor in the League's defeat. It is of course unclear whether American participation in the League of Nations would ever have amounted to real leadership. But the carnage of the 20th century was to make abundantly clear that in the absence of a genuine global commitment to keep the peace, there would be no peace to keep.

The establishment of the United Nations did much to restore Woodrow Wilson's standing — as did the end of the cold war a half-century later. In both cases, the world seemed readier to realize his vision of self-determination and collective security. But the League fight remains, as ever, unresolved. The terms of American engagement are still unsettled. The Bush administration's abandonment of international accords on biological warfare, greenhouse gas emissions and weapons sales, as well as its oft-stated intent to scrap the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, betrays a familiar wish to separate America's interests from the rest of the world's.

Yet the tragic events of Sept. 11 may have changed all that. The administration's response has quieted, at least for the moment, charges of unilateralism. In this latest round of the long League fight, it is not yet clear whether Wilson or Lodge has the upper hand. □

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