

to study ancient languages, which are now rarely taught outside expensive private schools. But the editors of the Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers series do a disservice when, in an effort to cater to modern readers, they toss out the ancient wisdom altogether. Rather than reduce Cicero to “Friendships can change,” we should instead ponder moments in Cicero’s text that startle us out of our passivity and presentism. Consider his lamentation that “people in this world see nothing good in anyone unless that person can somehow profit them—as if they were buying cattle,” or his reformulation of friendship as “nothing other than agreement with goodwill and affection between people about all things divine and human.” In such passages, *How to Be a Friend* is provocative rather than merely didactic.

Still, *How to Be a Friend* and *How to Be Free* may be of interest to Woolf’s “amateur classicist” who prioritizes facing translations; the Loeb edition of *De Amicitia* needs a refresh, and *How to Be a Friend* is a suitable alternative. Long’s new Epictetus could replace or at least complement the nonagenarian hardback currently available from Harvard University Press. Less relevant to the needs of the academic classicist, May’s *How to Win an Argument* and Romm’s *How to Die* nevertheless excel in their greatest-hits approach to curating texts. It’s worth investigating each volume, then, before purchasing. In any case, my real reservation is not about the organizational inconsistency of the series, but about its occasional distillation of ancient texts into soulless banalities that flatter and reinforce our twenty-first-century sensibilities. If Cicero merely anticipates contemporary truisms, we might as well leave his works on the shelf, where they can at least draw out that fish tank’s understated redwood hues. ■

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## A Priestly President

### The Moralist Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made

Patricia O’Toole

Simon & Schuster, \$35, 656 pp.

**O**n April 2, 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson gave a soaring address asking Congress to declare war against Germany and make the world “safe for democracy,” nearly all of the legislators stood and cheered. “Mr. Wilson,” said Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge afterward, “you have expressed in the loftiest manner possible the sentiments of the American people.” Yet Wilson’s speech marked a sharp policy reversal—as Lodge himself noted just a few weeks later, commenting to former President Theodore Roosevelt that “if that message was right, everything he has done for two years and a half is fundamentally wrong.”

In fact, Wilson’s Secretary of State, Robert Lansing—a clear-eyed realist who often tried to temper his boss’s idealism—had been attempting for months to persuade the president to abandon neutrality and break with Germany. But Lansing had run into what he later described as Wilson’s “unfortunate stubbornness of purpose which defied facts.” Having been hailed—and reelected the previous November—as the president who had “kept us out of war,” Wilson had not given up hope of holding the Great War at bay. Following his reelection, he determined to write to all belligerent nations, hoping—after so much death and destruction—to encourage peace talks and, as he said publicly in January 1917, “a peace without victory.” Lansing (correctly) regarded this appeal as futile, amazed that Wilson did not see that the only right course was to join the Allies in fighting Germany and its imperialistic designs.



Woodrow Wilson in 1921

“It is hard to fault Wilson’s aspirations,” Patricia O’Toole writes in her sympathetic but critical biography *The Moralist*. And yet, she argues, Wilson should have foreseen that his appeal would fail: “Both sides believed as fervently as ever that they must—and would—win. Lost in dreams of peace, Wilson had allowed himself to be transported from the world as it was to the world as he thought it should be.” His April 2 speech, she notes, came “only after the U-boats and the Zimmermann telegram”—in which Germany proposed a German-Mexican alliance against the United States—“made it impossible to go on defending neutrality.” By then, Wilson had reluctantly accepted “that he would have no role in shaping the postwar world unless the United States entered the war.” Even so, O’Toole notes, the president felt “sickened” by the prospect of sending troops into “the hell” of the Western Front. “Think what it was they were applauding,” he told his private secretary after the address to Congress: “My message today was a message of death for our young men.”

And so the fateful decision was made, however reluctantly and with great foreboding. But Wilson proved lucky. American forces were not too late—and proved critical in limiting the actions of German U-boats and in tipping the military stalemate in Europe. As a result, O’Toole writes, “Wilson was hailed in London, Paris, and Rome as the leader who saved the world from the Kaiser.” Her splendid, penetrating biography gives readers the opportunity to ponder anew where this statesman, who tried so hard to have his nation do right, went wrong—and where he, lastingly, went right.

Born in Virginia four years before the Civil War, Wilson was the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers. According to John Morton Blum’s *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (1956), as a young man he learned to view Presbyterians as “a special people chosen by God to know His purpose



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and do His will.” O’Toole, however, insists that the Presbyterianism of Wilson’s father was not overbearing, and that while Woodrow Wilson “remained a devout Christian all his life,” he, like his father, did not claim a “special relationship with God.”

But as president, Wilson certainly seemed to many observers to *act* as if he did. O’Toole believes that “the popular acclaim for his high-minded vision for the postwar world seems to have exacerbated his moral vanity,” adding that “he had nothing but contempt for Republicans who questioned the wisdom of his internationalism.” Unlike many politicians, the priestly Wilson was not gregarious, and while he grasped the need to cooperate in politics, he frequently delegated the courting of senators and congressmen to more sociable subordinates. “When circumstance forced Wilson to do the asking,” O’Toole comments, “he did not ask as

one man to another, much less as a man in need [of a deal]. He asked from the mountaintop of the presidency”—often leaving the legislators with the impression that their failure to comply would mean “betraying the American people.”

This approach worked well in his first term, when he persuaded Congress to enact his program of economic reform, including the creation of the Federal Reserve Board, the income tax, the Federal Trade Commission, and antitrust legislation—and did so, O’Toole observes, “by arguing that his course was morally right.” But these “moral” economic advances would not have been achieved without what O’Toole calls “an immoral bargain.” Congressional Southerners, perceiving in Wilson’s expansion of federal powers a potential threat to their states’ segregationist laws, effectively demanded the segregation of the federal civil service. To win their support, Wilson ac-



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quiesced. This son of the South “knew the segregation [of the civil service] was morally indefensible,” O’Toole insists, but he needed the Southern votes, and made the deal.

The Faustian bargain was Wilson’s modus operandi when it came to race. According to John Milton Cooper Jr., author of *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (1983), Wilson privately held “that blacks were not innately inferior to whites and would eventually, probably in two or three centuries, achieve a measure of economic and political, if not social, equality in America.” But he wasn’t moved to hasten that snail-like progress. As president of Princeton before he entered politics, “Wilson had maintained the university’s long-standing ban on admitting blacks,” Cooper noted. A century later we have seen the legacy of such decisions in the Wilson-related controversies that have roiled Princeton in recent years.

As a politician and as the nation’s president, Wilson was a great orator; but he was not a great debater, and not much of a negotiator either. He was little inclined to argue with his Republican critics, or to compromise with them. Yet he often compromised at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 in order to get his cherished League of Nations. “The president has been outplayed [by his British and French counterparts] and persuaded to do a lot of things he would six months ago have flatly refused to do,” Lansing wrote to an old friend on May 5, 1919. In the end, the League that Wilson got was hardly his imagined one of equal nations. “We have the great powers dictating a peace, a victor’s peace,” Lansing said, “[and] organizing a League ruled by them.”

When Wilson sought Senate ratification of the treaty (including the League), he could not seem to accept the political arithmetic involved. Three votes shy of the sixty-four needed for Senate ratification, he was told by both friends and foes that he had to accept a handful of reservations demanded by

Lodge and the Republicans. Wilson refused—and the Senate went on to reject the treaty, not once but three times. The public would add a resounding fourth rejection in 1920 by decisively electing Republican Warren Harding to the presidency. “Wilson’s refusal to bend,” O’Toole writes, “has been attributed to everything from his stubbornness and outsized pride in the League of Nations to his deteriorating health”—he would have a debilitating stroke in October 1919—“and a fear that accepting one reservation would trigger demands for more.”

Whatever the reason, the treaty’s rejection was a stunning defeat for Wilson, and deprived the United States of a seat and a voice in the League of Nations. Yet despite this defeat, O’Toole argues, Wilson’s idealistic sense of America’s proper role in the world—his emphasis on promoting freedom and democracy—would have a long-lasting influence on the making of U.S. foreign policy. “Despite the fact that Wilson’s fellow citizens rejected his idealistic internationalism,” she writes, “it remained at the heart of American debates on foreign policy for almost a hundred years.” Remained there, that is, until the elevation to the presidency in 2017 of a man who could hardly be more different from the moralist Wilson. As the nonpartisan Freedom House reported in 2018, “A long list of troubling developments around the world contributed to the global decline [in freedom] in 2017, but perhaps most striking was the accelerating withdrawal of the United States from its historical commitment to promoting and supporting democracy.”

Those are words, Patricia O’Toole’s biography makes clear, that would have made Woodrow Wilson shudder. ■

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