The President as Statesman

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The President as Statesman: Woodrow Wilson and the Constitution.

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By the late 1980s, many political scientists were bringing a new sense of urgency to their discipline’s perennial concern about problems of govern­ance in the United States. They had their reasons. The 1970s had witnessed Watergate, the Vietnam debacle, stagflation, and the Iranian hostage crisis; the 1980s, ballooning budget deficits, the Iran-Contra scandal, and nearly a de­cade of sniping and gridlock between Republican chief executives and Democratic legislators. The extent and variety of the problems suggested that something was fundamentally wrong with the political system. Leading scholars contributed essays to volumes published by Washington think tanks whose titles asked blunt questions such as Separation of Powers—Does It Still Work? (American Enterprise Institute, 1986) and even Can the Government Govern? (Brookings Institution, 1989). To explore these questions and de­velop the systemic reforms that seemed necessary, James MacGregor Burns and several other political scientists banded together with J. William Ful­bright, Robert McNamara, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and other prominent citizens to form the Committee on the Constitutional System. Even Time magazine got into the act. The cover of its October 23, 1989, issue depicted George Washington shedding a fat tear and asked, “Is Government Dead?”

Whether or not the nation is undergoing a crisis of governability is the kind of big, messy question that beginning graduate students love to take up, much to the chagrin of their teachers. I was no exception to this pattern. Fortunately, my adviser, Paul Peterson, was. With his encouragement, I set out to get some historical perspective on the issue by doing a seminar paper on Woodrow Wilson. Reformers usually cited Wilson’s writings as the start­ting point for concerns about governance in the United States, and I reasoned that since Wilson, unlike most reform-minded political scientists, came to hold real power, his teachings and experience would make a useful contri­bution to the contemporary debate about governance.

I soon discovered, however, that it would take more than a quick study to bring the lessons of Wilson’s theory and practice to bear on the debate, as scholars disagreed sharply about the nature and effects of his program. Many of his biographers and an earlier generation of political scientists who fo-
cused on his travails and accomplishments as president saw him as an innov­
ative and effective leader. But more recent work by political scientists con­
centrated on Wilson’s political theory and led to the conclusion that he had established an unstable form of democratic leadership. This scholarly impasse raised a number of intriguing questions. What was Wilson attempting to do with his theoretical program and how well did he do it? Should he be cast as a constructive master or a destructive idealist in the drama of American political development—or, as increasingly seemed likely to me, in another role entirely? I concluded that the way to resolve these questions was to pursue them in an interdisciplinary fashion—fully exploring the logic and importance of Wilson’s ideas about leadership and governance but in the appropriate historical context and with an eye to how he developed and applied them.

I had one other goal in undertaking this book that deserves mention. Early on, I believed that Woodrow Wilson’s attempt to establish responsible government in the United States would be highly useful in determining the potential influence of ideas and leadership on the American polity. If ever a statesman was in position to bring about the sort of fundamental change that reformers in the 1980s were claiming was necessary to solve the nation’s quandaries, it was Woodrow Wilson, not simply because of the power of his ideas and his office, but also because he led the nation at a time when its politics and government were, in a sense, up for grabs. To determine the methods and extent of his influence amid the tumult of the Progressive Era was indeed an exciting prospect. I was thus somewhat taken aback when the evidence increasingly suggested that while Wilson’s program had reshaped some of the basic features of the U.S. polity, those features had far greater impact on the shape of his program. This idea seemed a depressing com­mentary on the power of democratic statesmanship, but two lines of thought led me to conclude otherwise.

One was elaborated in James March and Johan Olsen’s seminal essay “The New Institutionalism” (American Political Science Review 78 [March 1984]), in which they observed that leadership, even in its most compelling form, consists of an interplay. Leaders seek to transform the institutional and political circumstances in which they operate—and are transformed in the process. “Leaders interact with other leaders and are co-opted into new beliefs and commitments. The leadership role is that of an educator, stimulating and accepting changing world views, redefining meanings, stimulating commitments” (p. 739). This discussion led me to appreciate that Wilson’s adaptations were just as much a part of his statesmanship as his innovations,
not simply because he deemed them necessary, but also because, once made, they were integral to his program and shaped his thought and actions.

The second line of thought was that Wilson’s difficulty in remaking key features of the Founders’ regime, and his substantial accommodation of their constitutional logic in his own program, did not mean that human agency was losing out to impersonal structure or that statesmanship did not matter. For the Founders were statesmen too. They had sought to create a constitutional system that would be resistant to the changes Wilson wanted to bring about, and as Wilson struggled to transform the separation of powers and the diversity of the extended republic, he was struggling with the legacies of their statesmanship. Insofar as it was not Wilson’s program but rather the constitutional legacies that prevailed, it was because history and the wisdom those legacies embodied, whatever their shortcomings, had given them the advantage.

I had invaluable help in completing this book. Generous financial assistance came at key points from the Government Department at Harvard University, the Mellon Foundation, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Faculty Development Committee at Wabash College.

It was my good fortune to be a graduate student in the Government Department at the same time as several thoughtful and good-natured colleagues who shared and enlightened my interest in American political thought and history: Gordon Silverstein, Matthew Dickinson, Robert Lieberman, Patrick Wolf, and Jessica Korn. I was lucky to catch up with Jessica several years later, during the year of our congressional fellowships, when we solved many of the problems I had in writing this book during lunchtime walks on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Many teachers, colleagues, and friends have kindly read papers, chapters, and drafts of this book over the years and offered much help in the way of constructive criticism. In this regard, I want to thank Sidney Milkis, Michael Nelson, James Ceaser, Stephen Skowronek, Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., Richard Ellis, Mark Peterson, Shep Melnick, Jeffrey Sedgwick, Jeffrey Tulis, Terri Bimes, Lauren Osborne, Jerry Mileur, and the late H. Douglas Price. My greatest intellectual debt is to Paul Peterson. From the outset, he combined enthusiastic support for this project with incisive criticism, bolstering me and improving the work at the same time. I could not have asked for more in an adviser.

I received generous support in other ways as well. Jerry Mileur was so
kind as to present me with a signed first edition of Wilson's *Congressional Government*, which I took special pleasure in using while writing this book. Arthur Link extended another wonderful gift when, as he was closing up shop in Princeton, having edited the last volume of the monumental *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, he hosted me for a day, answered a whole notebook full of questions, and took me to lunch at Prospect House, Wilson's home while he was president at the university. I would be remiss if I did not thank Christine, Teddy, John, and the rest of the early morning crew at Bella's Diner in Tarrytown, New York. The hearty ambiance they provided nurtured many an insight at a critical stage in this study, while the bad coffee they served made certain that, sooner or later each morning, I would return home and get to work.

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The Congressional Fellowship Program of the American Political Science Association and its administrator, Kay Sterling, gave me the great opportunity to serve as a participant-observer for a year on Capitol Hill. I will always appreciate the welcome extended to me by the Honorable Richard Armey, his chief of staff, Kerry Knott, and the other staff members in the Office of the Majority Leader. Spending a year working alongside them in the 104th Congress gave me a real Ph.D. in politics and, in the process, improved many of the arguments in this book.

Fred Woodward, director of the University Press of Kansas, is the kind of publisher everyone should wish for: patient but persistent, insightful as a critic, and quick with a joke for an anxious author. I also appreciate the careful readings that Wilson Carey McWilliams and Lance Banning, coeditors of the American Political Thought series, gave the manuscript. I am proud indeed to have my book deemed worthy of inclusion in their series. I am especially indebted for the thoroughgoing review of the manuscript that Kendrick Clements did for the press; he saved me from many problems of historical interpretation.

The book you are about to read has been improved dramatically because of the critical readings provided by the colleagues noted above. Insofar as faults remain, I alone am responsible for them.

One final note: my family has contributed much—no doubt too much—to the completion of this work. I am grateful to my father, Peter Stid, for
teaching me the meaning of workmanship, and to my mother, Sara, for her benevolent overestimation of my potential. My in-laws, Alain and Rosemary Enthoven, gave me the downstairs study and a Stanford Library card and their house over to my family for several summers in a row. The twins, Noah and Sophia, have endured far too many weekends with me at the office—although, given my mood when writing, they might well have been better off. As for my wife, Martha, she has been wonderful, in this and so many other things.
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