



The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made

Patricia O'Toole

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By the author of acclaimed biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Adams, a penetrating biography of one of the most high-minded, consequential, and controversial US presidents, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924). *The Moralist* is a cautionary tale about the perils of moral vanity and American overreach in foreign affairs.

In domestic affairs, Wilson was a progressive who enjoyed unprecedented success in leveling the economic playing field, but he was behind the times on racial equality and women's suffrage. As a Southern boy during the Civil War, he knew the ravages of war, and as president he refused to lead the country into World War I until he was convinced that Germany posed a direct threat to the United States.

Once committed, he was an admirable commander-in-chief, yet he also presided over the harshest suppression of political dissent in American history.

After the war Wilson became the world's most ardent champion of liberal internationalism—a democratic new world order committed to peace, collective security, and free trade. With Wilson's leadership, the governments at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 founded the League of Nations, a federation of the world's democracies. The creation of the League, Wilson's last great triumph, was quickly followed by two crushing blows: a paralyzing stroke and the rejection of the treaty that would have allowed the United States to join the League.

After a backlash against internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, Wilson's liberal internationalism was revived by Franklin D. Roosevelt and it has shaped American foreign relations—for better and worse—ever since.

The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made Details

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From Reader Review The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made for online ebook

Anthony Cleveland says

Interesting but rather slow moving. I think the author at times gets "lost" in the details. The work is unnecessarily long but I did learn a number of things about Wilson I did not know. If you have the time, it's worth the effort.

Gerry Connolly says

In The Moralist Patricia O'Toole revisits the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. His inability to deal with critics and those who did not share his vision of world peace crippled him literally and metaphorically. He remains an enigma: a successful progressive, a Dove who turned the fortune of war, a reactionary southerner on race, a reluctant but ultimately passionate champion of women's suffrage. Wilson is an iconic but ultimately tragic figure whose influence continues in our nation today.

Casey Wheeler says

I received a free Kindle copy of The Moralist by Patricia O'Toole courtesy of Net Galley and Simon and Schuster the publisher. It was with the understanding that I would post a review on Net Galley, Goodreads, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and my fiction book review blog. I also posted it to my Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google Plus pages.

I requested this book as I have read a number of Presidential biographies including a few on Woodrow Wilson. I was interested in seeing if this author came up with anything different from the previous ones I had read. It is the first book by Patricia O'Toole that I have read.

This is a well written and researched book. The author does a very good job of detailing how Wilson's upbringing led to his steadfast character and beliefs. This book did devle more into the development of his character than other biographies that I have read.

Like most individuals who aspire to a powerful position, he was a man of contradicitons. While considered by some to be one of our best presidents, his beliefs made him much less successful than he could have been. These beliefs hindered him in his dealings with Congress, social progression in the United States and with other world leaders.

I recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in Presidential biographies and in Woodrow Wilson in particular.

Melissa says

I think I have been spoiled by Ron Chernow in that any presidential biography pales in comparison. Wilson is fascinating though and O'Toole did a good job covering the bases.

Lynn says

This is a very well written and fairly concise story of the life and presidency of Woodrow Wilson. The author makes it clear that while he was in some ways a great man, he was severely limited by his own weaknesses, including a moralistic sense that he was always right and a fiery temper that made it hard for him to compromise. My only real problem with the book is that the author isn't always clear about dates. She uses too many, "after a few days" and "a few months later" references, making it hard to tell when exactly things are occurring.

David Stewart says

Wonderfully written treatment of a challenging subject -- it can be hard to read about some of the blunders that were part of the WWI peace process. Wilson was a very flawed figure, with serious health issues, and I'll never think positively about Colonel House again. O'Toole's a wizard.

Dan says

For me, this is a hard book to rate. As a well researched biography, I would rate it at 5 stars. As a description of a moralist, I would rate it as something less than 3 stars. It might have been better to switch the title with chapter 19 "Stumbling in the Dark." That being said the parallels to today are scary. I would recommend this to all students of international politics and policy wonks. The message is that it is more costly in human lives to ignore reality for the sake of 'moral' beliefs

Matthew Dudley says

Couldn't finish it though I suspect that it has more to do with my political leanings and what is going on in other parts of my life. Couldn't agree with the premise that "Wilson did some things that he knew was wrong but felt justified in doing so because he was one of the most moral people he knew." Well researched, but lacks the pace of Amity Shlaes' Coolidge...

Joseph J. says

This excellent book by the fine historian/writer Patricia O'Toole hits shelves as Woodrow Wilson endures a rough patch in the American conscience. I'm from South Carolina where WW spent his formative years in post Civil War reconstruction Columbia. It has long fascinated me that idealist, pacifist, and Ivy League educator he was, Wilson could not overcome segregationist attitudes which favored a wall between blacks and whites even into his Presidency. O'Toole's book is not a standard biography, but a chronicle of Wilson's

Presidency and the world he shaped by his vision and his failure. She deals with Wilson's racial attitudes and policies. Initially Wilson's New Freedom was embraced by blacks at the 1912 polling booths, but Departmental segregation championed by Southern members of the cabinet eradicated those expectations. Wilson, like F.D.R and J.F.K. later saw his domestic policies in the hands of Southern segregationist Democrats on the Hill. A selective New Freedom was the price for Wilson's impressive domestic legislative tally in his first term. The Federal Reserve, anti-trust legislation, and a progressive income tax are accomplishments still in the U.S. Wilson made. Wilson's soaring rhetoric against selfish monopolies and wealth held in absence of morality are inspiring and uplifting today. But while he did not see himself as a foreign policy President, events propelled WW toward World War I and the ultimate tragedy of Versailles. In questionable physical health even before his Presidency, the Wilson who reluctantly entered WWI and oversaw Allied victory was a man in physical and psychological decline by war's end as the delicate work of post-war Peace began. Reminded of pacifism's strength in his time-his first Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels and War Secretary Newton Baker were pacifists-Wilson joined the Allied victors at Versailles determined to establish a just peace and to end all wars. His idealism fell victim to political aims of the allied leaders and his own increasing single mindedness that his way was the only way. In a valuable lesson for today, even his intimate advisors feared Wilson entering tense negotiations as his concentration and ability to hold facts were suspect. He ignored the political advice of longtime administration allies and ignored those in the Republican Party-even personalizing political opposition. O'Toole concludes that while we cannot know if a U.S. in the League of Nations could have prevented World War II, the failure of Versailles was Wilson's personal and political failure; it was Wilson who "broke the heart of the world." As England's Lloyd George observed after a visit with the ill Wilson in retirement, Wilson with "personal hatreds unquenched (was an) extraordinary mixture of real greatness thwarted by much littleness." Still, we are left with a man who, hours after Congress cheered his speech calling for a declaration of war, asked what were they thinking? His words doomed young Americans to their death. In domestic vision and approach to war, Wilson still has much to teach us.

Michael Samerdyke says

"Real greatness thwarted by much littleness." So said Lloyd George about Wilson.

In some ways, the Wilson Administration's legacy is always with us: The Federal Reserve, the IRS, women having the right to vote, America's status as a great power. All these things come from the Wilson era.

And yet, Wilson seems banished from the American memory.

"The Moralist" helps explain why, and the Lloyd George quote sums things up very nicely.

You know, when you read this book, that things will end badly. Yet it is stunning to see how much Wilson contributed to his own frustration. (If one President comes out of this book looking good, it is William Howard Taft, of all people. Taft is capable of recognizing good ideas, and when he walks away from Wilson during the fight to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, it seems as devastating a blow as the stroke that shut Wilson down.)

O'Toole writes well and keeps the reader involved despite Wilson's off-putting character. She explains why he got to be President, and she is fair to pretty much everybody, Lansing, Lodge, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, etc. She writes with the end in mind, but this allows her to foreshadow Wilson's bad health and horrible relations with the Senate.

A key book for understanding the early 20th Century in America.

Sandi says

A very detailed book about President Woodrow Wilson

Margaret Sankey says

O'Toole draws on Wilson's background in religion and personal ethics to attempt an explanation for what seem like deep contradictions--champion of the liberal international order and fierce anti-corruption crusader in New Jersey, but racist to the tune of Birth of the Nation and convinced that women belonged far away from the voting booth (despite his warm support of his daughters in professions like art and social work), and willing to use the power of government to squash dissent during WWI.

Joseph says

The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made by Patricia O'Toole is a detailed history of Wilson's political career. O'Toole is the author of five books, including When Trumpets Call: Theodore Roosevelt after the White House, and The Five of Hearts: An Intimate Portrait of Henry Adams and His Friends, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She is a former professor in the School of the Arts at Columbia University and a fellow of the Society of American Historians.

The young me would have, and did say, Wilson was one of America's greatest presidents. In my youth, he was the American Commander and Chief in the first World War, a war I read a great deal about. He also opened the Panama Canal. That image of a leader continued when I was a Marine. The Marines had some of their greatest moments in that war and also were instrumental in shaping American policy in Central America. Later in graduate school working on my Masters in International Relations, Wilson played a major role in the formation of the liberal theory of international relations. Wilson was also the subject of my thesis research on Huerta and America's intervention in Mexico. Recently, Wilson has come under fire for his lagging behind on racial equality, women's rights, and political dissent.

O'Toole traces much of Wilson's adult life and shows the evolution of his role in history. Wilson was, and remains, the only president with a Ph.D. Furthermore, his Ph.D. was in history and political science with a dissertation entitled: Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics. Wilson knew more about government than any other president previously and arguably still. He changed the role of the president. Previously, Congress held the lion's share of power. Wilson made the president the central point in American politics and that position is still enjoyed by the executive branch. The American people get excited about voting for president and not much excitement goes into voting for representatives aside from voting the party line. Wilson transformed the country and the world with his ideas.

The Moralist is an appropriate title for a Wilson biography. It does entail a sense of hubris and also a sense

of uncompromising ideals, both of which fit Wilson. His Fourteen Points was mocked Cleameaceu -- "God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see." Wilson held the world to high ideals yet seemed to miss the mark closer to home. Racial equality was the law so Wilson saw it not as a government problem, but as a people problem. When he took a position he maintained that position and did not waiver. He based his positions on morality, which meant there could not be any compromise; his world was black and white.

Wilson made foreign policy a key point for his presidency. Outside of free trade and freedom of the seas, America cared little about what happened outside her borders or sphere of influence. Under Wilson, America played an active role in Mexico, invading twice, and in several other countries in Central America. In 1913 he said of the region "I am going to teach the South American republics to elect good men."

Wilson played an important domestic role also. He called his domestic program New Freedom. He implemented the Federal reserve, changed the tariff system and moved to an income tax. The Underwood Act reduced tariffs by 25% and eliminated tariffs on essential goods. He joined the progressives in fighting the trusts. Wilson also fought to limit child labor and to aid farmers with low-cost loans.

World War I would overshadow most of Wilson's legacy. He was "too proud to fight," but eventually committed the US to the side of the Allies. Although many take that decision as a given, after war broke out much of the US was divided on which side deserved support. Even in Wilson's cabinet, Britain was creating as many problems for US trade as Germany. Britain had an extensive list of what they considered contraband and did their best to limit any products getting into Germany through neutral ports. Furthermore, with cotton being declared contraband the US stood to lose a substantial amount of trade. Britain was a threat to freedom of the seas and free trade to neutrals.

O'Toole writes a detailed biography of Wilson and the world that he lived and governed in. It is not an apology for his failures or flaws, which are obvious today. It shows how a person was shaped by the world around him and how that became the stage he performed on. Idealism carries with it much hubris. The lack of compromise creates stress and a feeling of standing against the world. Wilson's role in history and foreign policy still remains large despite his flaws and failures. In many ways he was ahead of his time; in many other ways, he was trapped in the past. An outstanding biography.

Susan says

I loved this book. I loved the way the author told the story of Woodrow Wilson, the moralist. The author wove that theme throughout the book and, at the end, you are convinced of it. I feel that this president was so firm in his beliefs, so determined to do things the way he wanted that in some ways he should be admired and in other ways blamed for many of the nation's wrongs.

Jeff Francis says

One of the many rewards of reading history is that it tends to place current events into a larger context, i.e., the old adage about studying history: that when we look back, we also look forward.

While reading Patricia O'Toole's "The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made," there was a

chapter that for me illustrated the above concept with alarming immediacy: “One White-Hot Mass Instinct.” After Wilson delayed entering World War I as long as he could, he pivoted toward putting the country into a war mood—an endeavor that while not altogether unprecedented was at least unprecedented on such a scale. As patriotism surged, the ugly flipside inevitably emerged: free speech and civil liberties receded, while violence and even murder expanded.

“The drive to fuse Americans into a white-hot mass instinct of war-will had perverted a wholesome love of country into hatred of everything deemed un-American.” (p. 298)

To me the aforementioned Chapter 26 (for a presidential biography, this book has a nearly DaVinci-Code chapter structure) is pretty much worth a star of its own.

As for the rest of “The Moralist,” a perfectly adequate prez bio, and one that deftly handles a complicated legacy. Wilson was an intellectual whose wife died shortly after he took office. He remarried a younger woman amid the backdrop of a World War he wanted to stay out of, until the issue was forced. O’Toole’s narrative doesn’t delve too much into the actual war, but is more occupied with its aftermath: the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Treaty of Versailles and the troubled formation of the League of Nations. The book ends with Wilson’s striking physical deterioration... along the way big themes are addressed, such as the eternal debate of nationalism-vs-internationalism.

Although the lead-up-to and the aftermath of WWI are given longer treatments than the war itself, it’s still interesting to see how leaders and peoples grappled with an event that defied imagination, at the time. It’s that concept that manages to hold the reader’s attention even through some of the later, minutiae-laden sections.

4/5 stars
