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## **Wilson's Crusade and Bush's Crusade**

**by James Bovard**

George Bush's promise to "rid the world of evil" — which he made in the opening weeks of his war on terrorism — is reminiscent of the 1917 promises of President Woodrow Wilson to "make the world safe for democracy." Wilson, like Bush, was leading the nation into war and sought to push the hot buttons in Americans' idealism. Unfortunately, for both Bush and Wilson, the loftier their promises soared, the deeper the hooey became. Wilson portrayed World War I as a moral absolute. And because the United States was involved in a crusade to do absolute good, any criticism or opposition to government policies quickly became perceived as evil. In his superb new book, *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I*, historian Thomas Fleming recreates the political and moral atmosphere of the period when America entered World War I. The parallels to the current war on terrorism are breathtaking. Fleming concludes,

Worst of all was Wilson's tendency to utopianism — the truly fatal flaw in his dream of flexing America's idealized muscles in the name of peace.

Wilson twisted the facts to portray a U.S. war against Germany as a battle of good versus evil. In the same way that Bush portrays terrorists as the worst and most implacable enemies of freedom, Wilson denounced the German government as "the natural foe to liberty." Wilson portrayed submarine warfare as a crime against humanity — similar to Bush's portrayal of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Yet, the U.S. government soon changed its tune on submarines, relying on them as a key weapon against Japan in the Second World War. Wilson stirred anti-German sentiment by denouncing Germans as "imperialists." Fleming notes,

One is almost boggled by the way Wilson fastened this term of opprobrium on Germany, while England and France between them had several hundred million people in their colonial grip.

Wilson was correct that Germany had imperial ambitions — as did the United States. Many Americans had been harshly critical of abuses committed by U.S. forces after the United States seized the Philippines. Indeed,

John White, an Ohio farmer, received 21 months in the penitentiary for declaring that the murder of women and children by German soldiers [in Belgium] was no worse than the crimes that American soldiers committed in the Philippines during the 1900–1902 insurrection there.

At the time the U.S. government entered World War I, the Wilson administration possessed paltry information on the war's realities. The British government had deluged the United States with a propaganda campaign and also managed to censor almost all the news coming from Europe (including Germany) to America. As a result, Americans assumed that France, Britain, and Russia were likely to win the war and that the Germans were struggling badly. Many Americans expected that it would not even be necessary to send an American army to Europe after declaring war. In reality, by April 1917 Russia was on the verge of being completely knocked out of the war and the French army was mutinying, as soldiers had lost all patience after years of being sacrificed by half-wit generals who still could not grasp the importance of the machine gun in modern warfare. Wilson, like Bush, saw nearly boundless executive power as a key to winning the war. Fleming notes that in early 1918

Wilson sent the Senate a bill that gave him the power to reorganize the entire government; he wanted to be able to create, merge or abolish agencies and bureaus without so much as a by-your-leave from Congress, and generally operate as the autocrat to end all autocrats. One senator said the bill would make Wilson a king; all he needed to do was claim to rule by divine right and he and the kaiser would be twins.

This is similar to the response that Sen. Robert Byrd (D–W. Va.) had to Bush's Homeland Security Department bill. Similarly, some of the military and other appropriations bills that the Bush administration sent Congress aimed to greatly reduce legislative control and oversight of how the executive branch spends tax dollars. Dissent, and civil liberties Fleming drives home how the war hysteria and hatred of Germans that Wilson and his team whipped up quickly led to the suppression of free speech:

A Philadelphia socialist was sentenced to six months in jail for possession of an antiwar pamphlet, "Long Live the Constitution of the United States." The U.S. Supreme Court eventually upheld the sentence; liberal Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes affirmed the legality of the Espionage Act under the doctrine that in time of war, antigovernment critics can be "a clear and present danger" to victory.

The fans of Justice Holmes — who like to portray him as a hero of civil liberties — usually choose to ignore his role in sanctifying the Wilson administration's crushing of dissent. Vice President Marshall said every American “not heartily of the government’ should have his citizenship revoked and his property confiscated,” Fleming notes. The Bush administration has not gone so far as to urge boundless government power over anyone who dissents. However, some conservatives these days are openly portraying any opposition to the war on terrorism as traitorous. Wilson massively exploited the war to throttle his political opponents. On May 27, 1918, in the prelude to the congressional elections later that year, he announced,

Politics is adjourned. The elections will go to those who think least of it; to those who go to their constituents without explanations or excuses, with a plain record of duty faithfully and disinterestedly performed.

Yet, shortly before the November elections, “Wilson released a public letter ... crushing the enemy with the accusation of disloyalty in wartime.” The Germany army largely collapsed in October 1918. Wilson's Democratic Party very likely expected to receive huge rewards at the polling booths from voters for this achievement. However, the year and a half of war fever — of demagoguery — of repression — of economic dislocation — thwarted Wilson's ambitions. The Republican Party picked up the vast majority of competitive House seats and also scored major gains in the Senate. Thus, just when Wilson thought military victories would make him invincible, he lost control of Congress. The war to end all wars At the start of the war, Wilson sought to assure Americans (including millions of German-Americans),

We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship.

But such warm feelings quickly dissipated as the war dragged on — and as Wilson became terrified at the prospect of a German victory in 1918. After the Armistice on November 11, 1918, the British perpetuated a naval blockade on Germany that starved tens of thousands of Germans. One justification Wilson offered for U.S. entry into World War I was that it would ensure that the United States would have a “seat at the peace table” and could thereby play a key role in reshaping the world. Yet the fighting had barely stopped before a series of new wars broke out throughout central and eastern Europe. Fleming notes,

The French, still obsessed by their fear of Germany, were unilaterally turning the states born of the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires into military satellites on Germany's borders.

French officers and weaponry poured into Poland, Czechoslovakia and Rumania. Poland had raised an army of 600,000 and the Czechs 250,000; the Rumanians were industriously imitating them. All these armies began shooting at each other over disputed slices of territory. Ray Stannard Baker, Wilson's press secretary, glumly informed the president that there were no less than 14 small wars in progress in supposedly pacified Europe.

Wilson saw the League of Nations as his legacy to America and humanity. During the 1920 presidential election, Wilson urged voters to judge every candidate by one simple standard: "Shall we or shall we not redeem the great moral obligations of the United States?" After all the bogus moralizing of the war years, Americans rejected Wilson's scheme for world salvation. The League of Nations also went down to defeat because of all the tawdry deals that preceded the final signing. While Wilson constantly portrayed American sacrifices as key to making the world safe for democracy, the British and French exploited the war to forcibly expand their empires and place millions more people under their thumbs. Henry White, one of Wilson's aides at the Paris peace talks, bemoaned,

We had such high hopes of this adventure; we believed God called us and now we are doing hell's dirtiest work.

One surprise in Fleming's book is the role of Irish-Americans in the political destruction of Woodrow Wilson and his League of Nations. The Irish were bitter over brutal British repressions in their homeland. The Irish immigrants in America strongly opposed provisions in the League of Nations that would have sanctified the existing power structure around the world — thereby helping perpetuate British colonial rule in Ireland, India, and many other places. Wilson largely scorned Irish-Americans as troublesome low-lives. They paid him back with massive rallies, superbly organized information campaigns, and other efforts to whip up opposition. Many Americans feared that, if the U.S. Senate ratified Wilson's League of Nations without amendments, the U.S. army could be forced to fight abroad in defense of the British colonial empire. World War I also resulted in the rise of an American Taliban on the home front. Prohibition probably never could have been put on the statute books or in the Constitution if not for the exploitation of war fever. Banning alcohol was portrayed as a means to protect troops and to avoid wasting grain and other ingredients for alcohol. Destroying freedom on the home front thus supposedly became vital to helping create freedom abroad. One of the gravest lessons of World War I is that "idealism is not synonymous with sainthood or virtue. It only sounds that way," as Fleming notes. We should not judge politicians' intentions by the breadth and dazzle of their promises. Lies are lies, regardless of whether the liar promises to save humanity.

James Bovard is author of *Lost Rights* (1994) and [\*\*Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom\*\*](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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