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Woodrow Wilson's "New Diplomacy"

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U.S. fears of regional instability? Concern over humanitarian abuses? The need for regime change to curb "rogue" behavior while fostering democratization? Respect for the rule of law? Promoting self-determination? Does not all of this sound familiar? Ninety years ago, many of these very same issues were already on the table as Woodrow Wilson came to grips with the first serious foreign policy crisis of his presidency.

—*The Editors*

I

It is an old story that Woodrow Wilson came to office expecting to deal mainly with domestic affairs. There is his well-known remark to a friend during his presidential inauguration in March 1913: "It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs." The remark has often been taken as a candid, if unguarded, confession of inadequacy in the field of diplomacy. If so, it seems quite out of character for so self-confident a man. More likely, as the distinguished historian Arthur Link once observed, Wilson "was simply recognizing the obvious fact of his primary concern with domestic issues and his superior training for leadership in solving them."¹

The expectation of the president-elect did not appear unreasonable at that time. There were, it is true, the issues posed by the Mexican Revolution that the outgoing Taft administration had left to its successor. Even here, however, it was not unreasonable at the outset to see these issues yielding to

measures traditionally employed in dealing with political instability south of the border. Elsewhere in the hemisphere, events requiring a response from Washington did not appear to hold out an element of novelty or to necessitate special attention. In Asia, novel developments were evidently in the making; but there our interests were still quite modest. Toward Europe, a policy of detachment from what George Washington had characterized as the "ordinary vicissitudes of her politics" remained firmly in place. That this most hallowed of American diplomatic traditions would be challenged within a brief period by the outbreak of a general European war occurred only to a handful of observers.

In the event, Wilson's expectation was not fulfilled. In the course of his tenure in office, Wilson was confronted with a range of diplomatic issues, the novelty and complexity of which were without precedent in the nation's history. How prepared was he to deal with these issues? Considered from the vantage point of his academic training and teaching experience, the answer must be that he was not well prepared. Wilson's training had not emphasized the disciplines conventionally regarded as necessary for the diplomatist. Nor did his teaching experience compensate for his lack of academic preparation. This experience was by and large limited to the fields of American history and politics, and what we would term today political development. Occasionally, Wilson taught courses in comparative government. He once gave lectures in interna-

tional law. The sum of all this did not amount to much in the way of anything approaching an expertise in the diplomatic relations of the period. Wilson's real interests, as his considerable publications indicate, plainly lay elsewhere, in the history and workings of democratic—particularly American—political institutions and the dynamics of political leadership at a time when public opinion was widely considered the great emerging force in the world.

There is little in this record to suggest anything resembling the kind of background and interest in world politics that characterized a Theodore Roosevelt or Henry Cabot Lodge. Nor is this conclusion substantially qualified by pointing to Wilson's occasional comments on the emerging American role in the world. It is the case that at the turn of the century, along with others, he expressed the growing view that a policy of isolation no longer responded to the nation's interest, that America must henceforth play a greater role in the world, and that its economic interests alone required the abandonment of isolation and the assertion of a prominent position among the great colonial powers of the day.²

But what did these expressions of an evolving role and interest add up to? What did Wilson's view that the United States must abandon a traditional isolation mean in practice? How was it to find expression in foreign policy? It is doubtful that Wilson could have given a very clear answer, whether at the time or in subsequent years. There is no evidence that he had ever thought through the implications of abandoning isolation. After all, the men who were later to become his bitter political adversaries—Roosevelt, Lodge, Elihu Root—had not really done so, despite their keen interest in foreign policy and despite the major part they played in the expansion of the nation's interests and role in the world during these years. Wilson had merely raised the great issue that would later become his central preoccupation as president:

how was America to relate to the world now that it could no longer remain isolated from the world? He had not begun to answer it.

The world at the outset of the twentieth century, it is well to recall, was still very much a traditional world. The relations of the great powers remained what they had always been; the balance of power provided the central ordering principle of international society. Such stability and moderation as the balance brought rested ultimately on the threat or use of force. War remained the essential means to the maintenance of the balance of power. Despite a growing movement that looked to the amelioration of state relations through greater legal regulation, international law depended for its effectiveness, as it had always depended, upon the maintenance of a balance. Given this dependence, war remained the indispensable prerequisite for the realization of an effective legal order. At the same time, war undertaken for the maintenance of the balance was an insurmountable obstacle to the realization of an effective legal order. The customary liberty accorded states to resort to war in order to maintain the balance of power formed only the most notorious justification of their primordial right of self-help. In fact, it was scarcely necessary to place this liberty in a separate category, since it was readily encompassed by the more general "right" of self-preservation that states took for granted.

This was the world in which Wilson, along with others at the time, called for the abandonment of isolation. In doing so, he made no apparent effort to speculate what such abandonment might mean for the United States. There is no record of his having ever seriously considered the relationship an America that had once abandoned isolation might have to the European balance of power. Nor is there any indication that he ever gave serious consideration to the prospects the abandonment of isolation might have for the relationship between the

English-speaking peoples on the opposite shores of the Atlantic, and this despite the fact that Wilson had always been an ardent Anglophile.

In view of these considerations, the question arises whether Wilson's early call for the nation to abandon isolation had much significance. Clearly, the abandonment of isolation meant for him America's economic expansion. But the nation had never pursued a policy of economic self-sufficiency and showed little tendency to do so at the time. Belief in the desirability and, indeed, the necessity of America's foreign economic expansion had been taken largely for granted since well before the turn of the century. It was not in the economic but in the political sphere that the tradition and policy of isolation found expression. And it was not everywhere that isolation found political expression but primarily in Europe.

The classic statement of America's historic policy of isolation is to be found in Washington's Farewell Address of 1796. "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations," the Republic's first president declared, "is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have one or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course." The different course Washington advised was "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world so far...as we are now at liberty to do it" and to "safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies."³

Washington's advice was cast in qualified and tentative terms. It prescribed a pol-

icy for consolidating a newly won independence and a still precarious security. At the time more an aspiration than a reality, it became a reality only with the territorial expansion marking the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The Monroe Doctrine appeared at the close of this early period of continental expansion and, in proclaiming the separation of the "two spheres," sought to give the policy of isolation hemispheric significance. In doing so, a course of territorial expansion over the remaining continent was not only seen as compatible with a policy of isolation from Europe, such expansion had as one of its principal justifications to ensure political isolation from the old continent. By the close of the century, a policy of isolation was no longer even given consistent expression outside the Western Hemisphere. Through acquisition of the Philippine Islands from Spain (1898) and a commitment to the Open Door in China (1900), America became a party to the politics of East Asia. What remained of the policy when Wilson first called for its abandonment was its original meaning, though now given a rigidity Washington had not expressed. The injunction against "implicating ourselves" in the "ordinary vicissitudes" of Europe's politics had been transformed into the admonition against entertaining any political relationship. The warning against forming "permanent alliances" had become a dogma that rejected any and all alliances regardless of circumstance.

Despite his conviction that isolation must be abandoned, Wilson apparently shared the prevailing view at the turn of the century that continued to support America's political separation from Europe. Indeed, more than a trace of this view found later expression in his neutrality policy. Wilson's insistence on the moral equivalence of the belligerents was little more than a replay of Jefferson's theme during the Napoleonic wars. In both instances, an emphasis on the moral equivalence of the belligerents served to distinguish the higher moral standing of

America and to point to the undesirability of compromising that standing by abandoning a position of isolation from Europe's politics. So, too, Wilson's refusal during the period of neutrality to participate in drawing up terms of a European peace settlement was reminiscent of Washington's injunction against implicating ourselves in Europe's politics. Significantly, this refusal persisted even after Wilson committed the United States to join a universal organization for maintaining peace and security. While declaring that "the interests of all nations are our own also" and that "we are partners with the rest," our interest and partnership was still not seen to require—or permit—more than the most modest degree of political intimacy with Europe.⁴

It is reasonably clear that before coming to office, at any rate, Wilson had not given serious thought to what abandoning isolation concretely implied, that he had not considered the strategic consequences of a new and expanding American role. When this is taken together with his academic background and writings, the conclusion that when assuming the presidency he was not well prepared in foreign policy seems unavoidable. Yet how much did this lack of preparation matter? Wilson was not only very intelligent but also very quick in grasping difficult issues of public policy. Considered in terms of his native abilities, he was an ideal candidate for on-the-job training in foreign affairs, a course that he was neither the first nor the last among holders of presidential office to take. Then, too, given both Wilson's desire to reform the international system and the novelty of the diplomatic issues he had to deal with, it might be argued that a conventional preparation in diplomatic affairs could even be viewed as much a liability as an asset. This certainly seems to have been Wilson's view. Much of the old diplomacy was precisely what he soon decided he wanted to abandon in favor of a new diplomacy. A lack of thorough preparation in the institutions and

ways of the former, was, from his perspective, nothing to regret.

It may be argued that had Wilson been more familiar with the world of diplomacy than he was, he would have been less intent on changing that world. But this seems doubtful. In any event, we must take him as he was, and as he was first became apparent in his Mexican diplomacy.

II

Wilson once remarked that he "learned the truth about Mexico by hearing a multitude of liars talk about it."⁵ The liars were mainly representatives of, or sympathizers with, the old diplomacy. As such, the remark was revealing about more than simply Mexican truths. Wilson appeared to learn the truths about diplomacy in similar fashion. Many of these truths were learned in the course of dealing with Mexico. Wilson's Mexican diplomacy is a preview of greater things to come; it is a prism through which his subsequent foreign policies of neutrality, war, and peace may be foreseen. Virtually all of the distinguishing features of the new diplomacy are manifest in his initial encounter with the Mexican Revolution.

At the time Wilson came to office, Mexico was in the third year of a revolutionary upheaval that before it had run its course would go on for almost a decade and take upward of one million lives.⁶ The revolution had begun in 1910. In 1911, the government of Porfirio Díaz was overthrown by the revolutionary leader Francisco Madero, a liberal from the landed elite of Mexico's northeast. Thirty-four years in power, the Díaz government had been a thinly disguised dictatorship. Retaining the forms of constitutional government, Díaz manipulated these forms with remarkable success. A careful balancing of domestic interests was paralleled by following essentially the same strategy toward foreign investors and their governments. During the long period of the *Porfiriato*, Mexico acquired the reputation of being a haven for foreign invest-

ment and Díaz was viewed by those benefiting from such investment as the ideal ruler of a state at Mexico's stage of development. Chief among the beneficiaries were Americans, whose investments exceeded the sum of all other foreign investments, just as the number of Americans residing in Mexico exceeded the number of all other foreign nationals. By 1910, American interests had come to play a dominant role in Mexico's economic life.

The protection of nationals and their property did not exhaust the American interest in seeing that Mexico remained peaceful and stable. The security of the long border was also equated with Mexico's pacification. Disorder south of the border normally impinged in some manner on the American communities along the border. For this reason alone, it created a political problem for an administration in Washington. The desire to avoid a Cuba-type situation in Mexico, a bleeding sore on the U.S. doorstep, was deep-rooted for other reasons as well. Not only would prolonged disorder have an unsettling effect domestically, it might call in question the American interest embodied in the Monroe Doctrine. Disorder in Mexico could lead to a challenge to the Monroe Doctrine by a power whose nationals were mistreated or whose rights were otherwise violated and in response to which adequate redress was not forthcoming. The United States could insist upon the more expansive claims of that historic policy only if prepared in the last resort to take those measures in Mexico it denied to others. This is why it was considered almost as axiomatic that prolonged disorder in Mexico must lead to American intervention.

Given these interests, no American government could view with indifference the prospect of serious and prolonged political instability in Mexico. At the same time, given the size of Mexico, no American government could contemplate with anything approaching equanimity the prospect of directly intervening in that country in order

to protect its interests. The potential policy dilemma Mexico raised for any administration resulted from these two altogether simple, yet critical, considerations. However determined the effort to escape the horns of this dilemma, events were to demonstrate that there was no escape. Although American interests could not simply be abandoned, neither could they be secured if securing them could not be effected by means that stopped short of military intervention. To intervene in order to put an end to serious political instability necessitated the effective occupation of large areas of Mexico. But if this task of pacification did not exceed the limits of American power, it did exceed the limits of the nation's willingness to use that power on behalf of interest. If the means of diplomacy that fell short of armed intervention could not accomplish the desired result, the dilemma was complete.

Wilson's predecessor, William Howard Taft, was acutely aware of the dilemma constraining U.S. policy toward Mexico. His own experience in the Philippines and Cuba, together with the several studies made by military planners, pointed to one conclusion: intervention in and occupation of Mexico would require a very large force and constitute a very difficult undertaking.⁷ Taft was confronted with disorder in Mexico well before the end of his term. Although internal developments determined the collapse of the Díaz regime, Taft came to see in the ease with which arms could be exported across the southern border a source of instability in Mexico. The revolution that had coalesced under the leadership of Madero had enjoyed unrestricted access to the arms and munitions sold in the United States. Only in the spring of 1912, when the new Madero government was itself threatened by widespread insurrection along the border, did the administration secure from Congress authority to prohibit arms exports to any country of the Western Hemisphere suffering "conditions of domestic violence which are pro-

moted by the use of arms or munitions of war purchased from the United States.”⁸ Soon after this restriction on exports to Mexico, Taft nevertheless acted to authorize shipments to the Madero government. The action accorded with his policy of supporting virtually any government in Mexico City able to establish and maintain order. In supporting Madero, Taft pursued the one course that, in his judgment, might permit him if not to escape at least to moderate the dilemma Mexico otherwise raised. To secure American interests in Mexico, however modestly they might be defined, and to quiet the advocates of intervention, some approximation of order was necessary in that country. Only indigenous authority could guarantee order, however, for the limits to American power in Mexico were apparent to Taft.

While rejecting armed intervention, Taft was not averse to threatening force, a diplomatic tactic enthusiastically subscribed to by the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson. Ambassador Wilson was utterly persuaded that only an unflinching insistence on the proper respect for American power and privilege in Latin America could guarantee the security of U.S. interests. His hard line toward the Madero government was accepted by Taft and Secretary of State Philander C. Knox as a means of safeguarding the lives of American citizens in Mexico and thus avoiding the occasion for intervention. But Wilson was not content with merely taking a firm position on the protection of American interests. He was obsessive in his conviction that the Madero government was incapable of protecting these interests. In time, this obsession became indistinguishable from a personal hatred of Madero and led Ambassador Wilson to implicate himself, and indirectly his government, in a palace coup fatal to Madero. After the coup, he failed to act on the State Department’s expressed concern over Madero’s safety. On February 22, 1913, four days after the coup that drove him from

power, Madero was murdered while being transferred from one prison to another.

When the Taft administration came to an end, it had not yet accorded formal diplomatic recognition to the new government of Victoriano Huerta, the ruthless yet efficient general to whom Madero had reluctantly entrusted the critical army of the north. But the unmistakable drift of U.S. policy was toward recognition of what Woodrow Wilson was later to call “a government of butchers.”⁹

III

This, in brief, was the background of Woodrow Wilson’s major diplomatic problem prior to World War I. It was also the setting in which the principal features of the new diplomacy first made their appearance. These features were not apparent at the outset. In the beginning, there was only a general disposition. It may be seen in Wilson’s 1912 presidential campaign statements calling for a foreign policy that put human rights above property rights. The target of these statements was the dollar diplomacy of the Taft administration. The distinction Wilson drew between his views and those of his Republican opponents was largely a moral one. Little of a specific nature may be gleaned from it. The same must be said of the Wilson administration’s initial statement of March 11, 1913, on relations with Latin America. The cooperation and understanding the new administration sought between “the peoples and leaders of America,” the statement read, “is possible only when supported at every turn by the orderly processes of just government based upon law, not upon arbitrary and irregular force.” The principles henceforth to be made the bases of mutual intercourse were “that just government rests always upon the consent of the governed, and that there can be no freedom without order based upon law and upon the public conscience and approval.” The statement concluded by warning: “We can have no sympathy with those

who seek to seize the power of government to advance their own personal interests or ambition.¹⁰

Although the March 1913 declaration may be read as an early indictment of Huerta, the statement was plainly issued to deter would-be revolutionists.¹¹ It was the prospect of disorder in Central America that the new administration hoped to forestall. As such, the statement did not break new ground, but placed the Wilson administration, despite its rejection of dollar diplomacy, firmly in the diplomatic tradition of its Republican predecessors. American governments had long seen in the forcible overthrow of Latin American regimes the principal threat to hemispheric stability, insisting that order and freedom could only come through the observance of constitutional processes. Indicative more of continuity than of change, in its emphasis on order and its disapproval of the military instrument as a means of changing governments, the March declaration had a distinctly Taft-like quality.

The temptation to read into these early Wilsonian statements a new diplomatic design must be resisted. Woodrow Wilson's Mexican diplomacy emerged quite as much by accident as by design. That diplomacy is the story of the attempt to give "good government" to another people. It is also the story of the difficulties in reconciling this attempt with the principle of self-determination. Eventually, it was self-determination that Wilson came to champion above all. "I hold it as a fundamental principle," he declared after two years of dealing with the Mexican Revolution, "that every people has a right to determine its own form of government."¹² It was not the business of the United States to concern itself with the nature or duration of Mexico's struggle for self-determination. "If the Mexicans want to raise hell," he insisted on another occasion, "let them raise hell. We have got nothing to do with it. It is their government, it is their hell."¹³

In the beginning, however, it was good government that Wilson avowedly sought, the minimum prerequisites of which he defined for the Mexicans. In pursuit of this end, he not only opposed the government of the usurper, Victoriano Huerta, he opposed as well the course of armed resistance Huerta's revolutionary opponents had taken. The accession of a revolutionary movement to power through force of arms was a prospect Wilson sought to prevent. That in the Mexico of 1913 this course represented a truer test of self-determination than did Wilson's position either did not occur to the new president or, if it did, was simply brushed aside. Although Wilson saw in the rising tide of revolutionary resistance to Huerta proof of his belief that Huerta lacked legitimacy and must fail, he refused to see in the revolution the source of Huerta's replacement.

A policy of nonrecognition was undertaken in the expectation that it would soon force Huerta from power. On Huerta's possible successor, Wilson apparently had no fixed views. So long as the minimum requirements of constitutional legitimacy were met, so long as there was a reasonable semblance of free elections, and so long as Huerta was not a candidate, Wilson was prepared to endorse the result. The president was not intent on securing a government in Mexico City that would bring about social and economic change. It was political change, narrowly defined, that he was after. At the outset, he might well have been satisfied had he been able to get a Huertista order without Huerta.

In its initial phases, then, the policy of nonrecognition was given only limited significance. It was a modest means for achieving modest ends. But Huerta's defiance of Wilson in succeeding months resulted in a dramatic change. The longer Huerta managed to remain in power, the more determined the president became that he be removed. The greater this determination and the deeper the commitment to its realiza-

tion, the greater the significance that was in turn read into Huerta's removal. In time, the president's standing was also increasingly placed in question: a failure to unseat Huerta might damage Wilson's credibility in the hemisphere and, perhaps, in the world. Acutely sensitive to this consideration—and, of course, to the domestic political fallout his policy could have—Wilson's attitude toward Huerta soon changed from that of mere disdain to one of deep hostility. To be rid of this usurper became within little over half a year of taking office a matter of critical concern to the president.

What could account for Huerta's continued defiance of the American government? For a brief period, Wilson found in Europe, and particularly in Great Britain, the source of his difficulties. Material avarice, he concluded in early October 1913, was dictating a British policy in direct opposition to the American. Pressure was brought to bear on London with the aim of depriving Huerta of his means of support. The result was the assertion of an American right to pass judgment on the legitimacy of European relations with governments in the Western Hemisphere. To justify this striking assertion of prerogative within a deepening American sphere of influence, Wilson evoked past claims to hemispheric leadership and to a special role in guaranteeing the hemisphere against the old world.¹⁴ Our right to assume such a protective role did not derive simply from the magnitude of American material interests in the hemisphere or even from the neighborhood we shared with the Latin American states. The crucial distinction was that drawn between the moral foundations of American diplomacy and the material motivations of the Europeans. So certain was Wilson of this fundamental distinction and of the universal appeal of his moral position that he contemplated taking his case directly to the people of Great Britain.

But the London government was little disposed to risk good relations with the

United States over the interests at stake in Mexico. It was not inclined to interfere with Wilson's resolve, as expressed to Sir William Tyrell, Edward Grey's private secretary, "to teach the South American Republics to elect good men."¹⁵ The growing possibility of war in Europe was obviously one deterrent to such a challenge, but more fundamentally the slight prospect of succeeding against the United States in Mexico militated against the attempt. Moreover, British policy toward Mexico turned on a desire to see order restored and maintained there, not on the intention of undercutting American enterprise to the benefit of British interests. Signals of British acquiescence in American policy were soon forthcoming.¹⁶

By the late fall of 1913, Wilson had clearly broken from the bounds of policy that had been set by Taft. In doing so, he markedly enlarged the scope of American interests in Mexico and, more generally, in the states bordering on the Caribbean. One has only to compare the statement of March 11 with the note sent to foreign governments on November 24 to appreciate the extent of the change that took place. Titled "Our Purposes in Mexico," the November note committed the government of the United States "to secure peace and order in Central America by seeing to it that the processes of self-government there are not interrupted or set aside." To this end, the United States would "discredit and defeat such usurpations," as General Huerta's "whenever they occur." The policy of the American government toward Huerta was to isolate him entirely—"to cut him off from foreign sympathy and aid and from domestic credit" and so to force him out. If this course proved ineffective, the note continued, "it will become the duty of the United States to use less peaceful means to put him out." In any event, the "fixed resolve" of the United States was "that no such interruptions of civil order [as Huerta's] shall be tolerated so far as it is concerned." With each prevention of a Huerta-like usurpation, its

recurrence would be less likely. The prospect was held out of a future state of affairs upon this continent “which will assure the peace of America and the untrammelled development of its economic and social relations with the rest of the world.”¹⁷

Not surprisingly, British commentators saw in the November 24 statement the assertion of an American protectorate over the region.¹⁸ Certainly, the note amounted to a dramatic expansion of interest and commitment. It was one thing to undertake to “lend our influence” to the realization of “just government based upon law” and to “have no sympathy” with those who seized power merely to advance their own personal interests or ambitions. It was quite another to declare it the purpose of the United States “to discredit and defeat” such usurpations as that of General Huerta. What had before been no more than a marked disposition or preference that had left the means entirely open, had been transformed into a fixed purpose that entailed a firm commitment to the use of any and all means.

The November statement sharpened the dilemma that had long characterized America’s Mexican policy. At the same time, the dilemma was left unresolved so long as there remained no acceptable way to be rid of Huerta. Although Wilson came to realize by the early fall of 1913 that a solution that ignored Huerta’s Constitutionalist opponents would not produce order in Mexico, he remained determined to impose his particular solution. The Constitutionlists were intent on a very different solution. They were determined to achieve power through the military defeat of their adversary. Elections would eventually follow victory, though only after an interim period during which the victors would effect by decree social and economic change. This was a far cry from Wilson’s position.

Yet it soon became apparent that the Constitutionalist leadership would not be moved, however much they needed Ameri-

can support. Wilson thus got his first taste of the man, Venustiano Carranza, the “first chief,” who would prove to be such a cross for him. If Huerta was a brute and a traitor, Carranza was a “pedantic ass,” a man Wilson found almost “impossible to deal with on human principles.”¹⁹

The alternatives to aiding the Constitutionlists were either armed intervention or inaction. On several occasions between August and December 1913, Wilson threatened military intervention. In each instance, Huerta was not persuaded. A president unwilling even to permit the open sale of arms to Huerta’s enemies was unlikely to undertake the hazardous course of military intervention. Although Wilson had proclaimed in his note of late November to the great powers that Huerta must go, if not peaceably, then by forcible means, he shrank from the prospect of military intervention, given the difficulties attending such a course in the case of a country as large as Mexico.

Only inaction remained. But a policy of “watchful waiting,” a Wilsonian euphemism for inaction, was viable only if a successful end to it could be seen and if that end were not far removed. In the absence of a clear and proximate end, the erosion of presidential credibility and prestige could only continue. In January 1914, Wilson decided to recognize the belligerent status of the Constitutionlists so that they might openly buy arms. The policy of refusing to recognize a government that gained power through revolution was abandoned.

Whatever the conscious or unconscious considerations of expediency that had led Wilson to embrace the cause of the Constitutionlists, one cannot mistake the tone of moral certainty with which he did so. As he explained to the British ambassador, it was a better understanding of the sources of unrest in Mexico and not the failure of his attempts to engineer a change in Mexico City that led him to a new policy. The “real cause of trouble in Mexico was not political but

economic,” he now found: “The real cause was in fact the land question. So long as the present system under which whole provinces were owned by one man continued to exist, so long there would be perpetual trouble in the political world.”²⁰ Although Wilson recognized that the Constitutionalists had faults, he believed they most nearly represented the desperate needs of the agrarian population.

Henceforth, Wilson was to see himself as the protector of Mexico’s right of self-determination. Having before insisted on elections as the indispensable step to a viable and legitimate order in Mexico, he now discovered that in the circumstances guns rather than votes would best register the moral and political legitimacy of the rival leaders. The guns were expected to be Constitutionalist guns. Self-determination had been embraced with a specific notion of what its outcome would be. Even so, Wilson had only accepted the principle in the case of Mexico because the alternative—armed intervention—appeared prohibitively costly. Thus, Wilson had come to embrace self-determination more from necessity than choice. Not for the last time would necessity be the mother of virtue.

IV

Although the commitment to self-determination was thereafter to become the lodestar of Wilson’s policy, it did not prevent him from attempting to influence the course of the Mexican Revolution. Not long after he recognized the belligerent status of the Constitutionalists, he intervened militarily at the Mexican port of Veracruz. A minor incident at Tampico provided the immediate occasion for the intervention. A small crew aboard a whaleboat from the USS *Dolphin* had landed to take on fuel near a point where Huerta troops were awaiting an expected attack by revolutionary forces. The crew had been removed from the whaleboat at gunpoint by a federal officer. Almost immediately, the local commander of the feder-

al forces repudiated his subordinate, ordered the release of the Americans, and issued apologies to the American consul and the American naval commander at Tampico, Adm. Henry T. Mayo. Unsatisfied, the admiral demanded a more formal display, a salute of 21 guns offered to the American flag, which salute was to be duly returned by the Americans. Wilson was quick to support Mayo’s demands. But Huerta would not submit.

The day before American troops landed at Veracruz, the president was asked about the purpose of the prospective action. Denying that the landing was aimed at the elimination of Victoriano Huerta, Wilson instead justified the resort to force as an act of deterrence, a necessary confirmation of the credibility of American power in the face of escalating provocations. “If these incidents went on,” the president explained, “they might go from bad to worse and lead to something which would bring about a state of conflict; and I thought it wise, in the interest of peace, to cut the series of such incidents off at an early stage.”²¹

Tampico apart, the “incidents” were neither significant nor sufficient as causes for intervention.²² The Huerta government, in fact, had exerted itself to protect Americans and their property located in areas controlled by federal forces; toward a U.S. government hostile to its very existence, the regime in Mexico City had followed closely the generally recognized requirements of international practice. Toward non-Mexicans, Huerta’s record was remarkably clean. His real affront was his unwillingness to follow the dictates of Woodrow Wilson. For almost a year, Wilson had sought to order Mexican affairs. During this period, Huerta had managed to block the president’s efforts. The result was that what had begun as something quite modest, had progressively grown to proportions that threatened the standing of the president and his administration. A minor irritant to the new president in the spring and early summer of 1913, Huerta

had become a major challenge to Wilson by the winter of 1913–14. The longer the public contest of wills between the two men went on, the more Wilson stood to lose.

The intervention at Veracruz on April 21, 1914, was a means to the end of ridding the Wilson administration of what had become a threat to its prestige and credibility. That Wilson was largely responsible for having created this threat in the first place did not alter the consideration that, once created, it had to be removed. Wilson might have chosen simply to wait Huerta out, in the expectation that time would be on the president's side. But this course required patience as well as the running of some political risk, since Huerta might manage to hang on for some time. Against these considerations, there were the risks of resorting to force. Wilson was certainly sensitive to these risks. Still, a strong disinclination to draw the sword might be overcome if drawing it did not appear to entail the consequences that normally followed its use. In the weeks before Veracruz, an increasingly frustrated Wilson became persuaded that such would be the case. Having once persuaded himself, all that was needed was the proper occasion.

In seizing on the incident at Tampico as a pretext for escalating the pressure on Huerta, Wilson attempted to draw a distinction between the Mexican nation and its illegitimate ruler. Wilson may or may not have expected this distinction to be effective and the occupation of Veracruz to go unopposed, but the actuality of 19 American and over 200 Mexican dead clearly disturbed him. Among the considerations that led the president to defer further offensive action in Mexico, this bloodshed was undoubtedly a significant one. Moreover, the casualties at Veracruz had occurred without the formal opposition of Mexican forces. Any move beyond the environs of Veracruz entailed the probability of armed conflict with the armies of Huerta and the

strong possibility of clashes with elements of the Constitutional insurrection. The toll of American casualties could only mount.

The threatened opposition of the Constitutionalists, expressed openly by Venustiano Carranza in the days following Veracruz, should not have come as a surprise to Wilson. That it nevertheless did so was further evidence of an obtuseness respecting Mexican sensitivities that had been apparent from the outset. Revolutionary spokesmen had frequently made known their opposition to U.S. military activities in Mexico, and the talks of November 1913 had collapsed due in part to this issue. Five months later, Carranza remained unwilling to divest himself of the mantle of Mexican nationalism, so crucial to his own political legitimacy. In his belligerent posturing he was in line with the general sentiments of the rank and file and the caudillos, though Pancho Villa, the most powerful as well as the most independent of Carranza's chieftains, distinguished himself in American eyes by praising the occupation of Veracruz.²³ Even Villa, however, had confined his expression to the singular American action at the Huertista port; his attitude toward more extensive intervention would certainly have been less benign.

Considering the heavy weight of Villa in the military scales of revolution, Carranza's eventual acquiescence to the American presence at Veracruz was assured. Huerta as well showed no intention of challenging the U.S. occupation, opening to Wilson a viable third alternative between withdrawal and wider conflict in Mexico. If an honorable means could be discovered for ending the hostilities, the president might even parlay the occupation into influence. Such a means was rapidly made available through the offer of mediation put forward by Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, an offer that had been covertly solicited by the United States. Thus Wilson was able to accept the good offices of the South American governments, returning, after a brief transgression, to the principle of mediation.

V

On July 15, 1914, with Constitutionalist armies at the gates of the Federal District, Victoriano Huerta abdicated and went into exile. Deprived of his principal source of revenue by the U.S. occupation of Veracruz and finding it increasingly difficult to obtain arms, Huerta's fate had been apparent for some time. His downfall marked the end of the first period of Wilson's Mexican diplomacy. The second period extended from the summer of 1914 to the winter of 1916–17, and thus roughly coincided with the period of American neutrality in the Great War of the European powers.

Once the European war began, Mexico was never again to receive the attention from Wilson it received in the period of Huerta's rule. In some measure, this was because Wilson never again had an adversary in Mexico City whose removal so evoked his determination and commitment. Although Carranza, too, was to prove exasperating by his resistance to Wilson's desires, the president did not make of him the embodiment of evil that he had made of Huerta. Nor did Pancho Villa, for a season Wilson's favorite among Mexican leaders, ever quite achieve the status in the president's eyes that Huerta had held. Whereas Huerta had been made to appear as the great impediment to a constitutional order of sorts in Mexico, Villa, once he had fallen from grace, was seen as no more than a common outlaw, although one that was capable of sparking dangerous conflicts between the United States and Mexico.

In the main, however, Mexico's diminished significance for Wilson after the summer of 1914 must be attributed to the outbreak of World War I. The conflict in Europe increasingly absorbed the president's attention and energy, and for this reason alone led him increasingly to view policy toward Mexico from a different perspective. Considerable as America interests in Mexico were, they were not of the same magnitude as the interests affected by the war. A grow-

ing awareness that the United States might be forced, sooner or later, to intervene in the European conflict meant that Mexico could not be allowed to divert the nation's power from whatever course interest might dictate with respect to the war.²⁴ The imposing dilemma that Mexican political instability presented even in a period of international tranquility was thus compounded in a period of international conflict that affected vital American interests. Wilson could not, and did not, fail to recognize this. Whatever the other reasons accounting for his reluctance to intervene in Mexico, and particularly in the spring and summer of 1916 when the risk of war appeared greatest, the prospect of pacifying Mexico while becoming a belligerent in the European conflict undoubtedly served to constrain his actions.

At the same time, the European war also had the opposite effect on U.S. policy in this hemisphere. The preoccupation of the European powers with their deadly contest left the United States at liberty to deal with Mexico as it saw fit. To be sure, even in the absence of war the European powers had acknowledged the primacy of American interests in Mexico and had deferred to American wishes. Still, there were limits to this deference—as American governments appreciated. With the advent of war, though, these limits markedly receded, even if they did not quite disappear. In consequence, the Wilson administration enjoyed a freedom of action in its Mexican policy that it had not before experienced. Nor was the administration slow in seeing the new opportunities the war presented for American policy. Already, on the eve of the outbreak of war, the Constitutionlists were being warned by the administration that once hostilities in Europe began it would be “impossible to obtain assistance anywhere on the other side of the water.”²⁵ In this circumstance, the unmistakable implication ran, they would have little alternative but to behave as the American government considered it appropriate that they behave.

The point is often made that in the post-Huerta period, Wilson's Mexican diplomacy became more moderate and showed greater maturity.²⁶ Wilson is seen as less strident and demanding than in the initial period. His diplomacy is found to be less erratic. He is considered to manifest a deeper understanding of the Mexican Revolution, an understanding that leads him to ever greater sympathy with its objectives. Above all, it is in this period that Wilson presumably emerges as the clear champion of the Mexican people's unimpeded right to self-determination.

If this view cannot simply be dismissed, neither can it be accepted without serious qualification. Wilson did come in time to deepen his understanding of the Mexican Revolution, just as he did learn more about the diplomatic art from his first great experience in foreign policy. Yet what is also startling is how little this deepened understanding and greater experience is reflected in policy. For the pattern of Wilson's diplomacy during this second period changed only marginally when compared with the period of Huerta. Once again there is the resort to threats of force that having no sooner been made are backed away from. Once again recognition is used to elicit desired behavior, though with indifferent results. And once again the Mexicans are repeatedly told that the policy of the United States is informed solely by the wish to be of service to this nation's nearest neighbor and friend.

This continuity was apparent even before Huerta had disappeared from the scene. Throughout the spring's long march on Mexico City, American agents had been active in admonishing the revolutionary chieftains on their duties and obligations toward foreign citizens and toward each other.²⁷ With Huerta's resignation, the tone of U.S. representations would reach a crescendo. Washington raised three crucial matters: the treatment of foreigners and their property, the treatment of political and military opponents, and the treatment of the Church and

its officers. The legitimate financial obligations of the superseded government toward foreigners were to be given fair and careful consideration. Domestically, punitive or vindictive treatment of Mexicans could not be tolerated lest the sympathies of the American people and the world "be hopelessly alienated and the situation become impossible." It was, said Wilson, the critical time, when choices made by the Constitutionalist leadership "will practically determine the success or failure of the government they mean to set up and the reforms they hope to effect."²⁸

Venustiano Carranza, contending at once with a fractious military coalition and with a caretaker government in Mexico City throwing up obstacles to the peaceful transfer of the capital, remained sensitive to Wilson's continuing interest in Mexico's internal affairs. Still, perhaps because of his multiple distractions, he replied courteously. The lives and properties of foreigners would of course be protected, wrote his foreign minister, Isidro Fabela, though the promise to honor contracts and obligations "assumed by a *legitimate government in Mexico*" raised the prospect of future contention. Considering the first chief's well-known aversion to American infringements on Mexican sovereignty, his promise to consider and study the other points raised in the U.S. note might have been deemed satisfactory had Fabela's reply not concluded that American demands would "be decided according to the best interests of justice and our national interests."²⁹

Wilson, however, was quite unwilling to accept this implicit claim to self-determination. The success or failure of the Constitutionalist cause "is to be determined now, at the outset," Carranza was to be told, and the outcome would depend upon the general behavior of the revolutionaries as they gained full power:

Excesses of any kind, even towards their own people, and especially extreme

measures against political opponents or representatives of the Church, if such things should occur in connection with their assumption of power at Mexico City, might make it morally impossible for the United States to recognize a new government. If we did not recognize, it could obtain no loans and must speedily break down. The existence of war in Europe would make it impossible to obtain assistance anywhere on the other side of the water even if such excesses as we have alluded to did not themselves make it impossible.³⁰

It was against the background of this admonitory message that Wilson made one of his better known statements rejecting intervention in Mexican affairs. He did so in response to advice from his secretary of war, Lindley M. Garrison. Fearing bloodshed at Mexico City due to Francisco Carbajal's reluctance to surrender the capital and to growing strife between the revolutionary factions, Garrison had urged Wilson to dispatch to Veracruz forces and equipment sufficient to move into the interior if necessary. Preparation was particularly essential, Garrison noted, given "the implication of responsibility that rests upon us." The secretary of war concluded that the forces need not imply any interference in the settlement among the revolutionary factions, though he observed that the reinforcements might induce them to a more rapid composition of their differences.³¹ In reply, Wilson rejected Garrison's proposal and declared:

We shall have no right at any time to intervene in Mexico to determine the way in which the Mexicans are to settle their own affairs. I feel sufficiently assured that the property and lives of foreigners will not suffer in the process of the settlement. The rest is political and Mexican. Many things may happen of which we do not approve and which could not happen in the United States,

but I say very solemnly that, that is no affair of ours.... There are in my judgment no conceivable circumstances which would make it right for us to direct by force or by threat of force the internal processes of what is a profound revolution, a revolution as profound as that which occurred in France.³²

A period of eight days separated Wilson's warning to the Constitutionals and his rejection of Garrison's proposal. In the former, the Mexican aspirants to power are put on notice that they must behave in a certain manner toward their adversaries, else the American government would make their continued rule impossible. In the latter, an American secretary of war is told that the safety of foreign lives and property apart, we had no right to intervene by force or threats of force in Mexican affairs. Wilson had, of course, already violated the principle he set out to Garrison by intervening at Veracruz. To defeat Victoriano Huerta, he had forcibly intervened in Mexican internal affairs. Moreover, at the moment he made his solemn statement to Garrison, American military forces remained in control of Mexico's principal port. Among the circumstances Wilson could not conceive of were those in which he had acted and continued to act.

VI

The juxtaposition of a diplomatic determination to interfere in Mexico's domestic affairs and a commitment to self-determination thus formed a characteristic feature—perhaps *the* characteristic feature—of Wilson's Mexican diplomacy in the period that extended to the American entrance in the European conflict. Even in retrospect, this joining of a commitment to self-determination with a dogged insistence that the revolutionaries' behavior stay within certain limits baffles the observer. Not infrequently, it has invited the charge of deception. But if deception it was, Wilson was its first vic-

tim. For the record shows unmistakably that it was he, above all others, who believed that America's Mexican policy was nothing if not the vindication of the right of a people to determine its destiny free from outside interference.

The record also shows, however, the shallowness of Wilson's commitment to self-determination when that commitment was found to jeopardize the nation's historic interests in this hemisphere. This was only too apparent with respect to the small states of the Caribbean and Central America. In these cases, the subordination by military means of self-determination to the interests laid down in the Monroe Doctrine was consistent and without precedent. In the case of Mexico, the record was more complicated. Given Mexico's size and population, the claims of interest could not be acted on with the consistency they could elsewhere. Action depended on circumstances, which were seldom, if ever, favorable to the solutions regularly practiced elsewhere in the region. It was the familiar dilemma attending policy toward Mexico that not only counseled restraint but also almost compelled it.

Still, the result was a diplomacy that in a number of respects pointed to a marked departure from the past. The ostensible emphasis on moral principle rather than material interest, the distinction drawn between a people and its (illegitimate) rulers, the belief that public opinion might be effectively appealed to over the heads of recalcitrant governments, the propensity to find in almost every conflict of interest a conflict of principle that could not be readily compromised, the disposition to threaten force only to later back away from the threat—these distinguishing features of the new diplomacy had come to the fore. That behind the new diplomacy was still an old diplomacy, in that the determination to remain dominant within a traditional sphere of influence was as strong as ever, does not discredit the significance of the change. In its hemispheric pretensions, the new diplomacy was in

part hypocritical. In part, however, it was not simply self-serving. And even its hypocrisy eventually went beyond that, confirming the wisdom that hypocrisy is often the advance wave of a new truth. ●

Notes

I would like to thank Theodore Craig for the help he gave me in preparing this essay.

1. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), p. 11.

2. "Democracy and Efficiency," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1901), pp. 289–99; and "The Ideals of America," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1902), pp. 721–34, reprinted in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols., ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966–1994), vol. 12, pp. 6–20, 208–27. Hereafter cited as *PWW*.

3. "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, in *The Writings of George Washington, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C., 1931–44), vol. 35, pp. 233–35.

4. Address to the League to Enforce Peace, Washington, D.C., May 27, 1916, *PWW*, vol. 37, pp. 113–16.

5. White House Talk with Democratic National Committee, December 8, 1915, *PWW*, vol. 35, pp. 314–15.

6. The literature on the genesis and development of the Mexican Revolution is vast. The following general works have been used: Charles C. Cumberland, *Mexican Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1959, 1972), 2 vols.; John Womack, Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1970); James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion, Mexico 1905–1924* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2 vols.; and John Mason Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

7. After years of reconnaissance and study, military estimates of the force required to pacify Mexico ran consistently at or above 300,000 men. See for example "War Plan—A and B—Mexico," January 27, 1911, *War College Document*, 6474-4, National Archives.

8. Joint Resolution of Congress, March 14, 1912, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1919), p. 745. Hereafter cited as *FRUS*.

9. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 11.

10. *PWW*, vol. 27, pp. 172–73.

11. *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913–1921*, ed. E. David Cronon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 6–7. The continuity between the statement and Taft policies was immediately perceived.

12. Jackson Day Address, January 8, 1915, *PWW*, vol. 32, pp. 38–39.

13. White House Talk with Democratic National Committee, December 8, 1915.

14. Draft Circular Note to the Powers, October 24, 1913, *PWW*, vol. 28, pp. 431–32.

15. Burton J. Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1922), vol. 1, p. 204.

16. W. H. Page to W. J. Bryan and E. Grey to L. Carden, November 11, 1913, *PWW*, vol. 28, pp. 525–26.

17. *PWW*, vol. 28, pp. 585–86.

18. Sir William Tyrell had recorded such an impression of American policy after conversations with Wilson (British Embassy to Grey, November 14, 1913, *PWW*, vol. 28, p. 544).

19. Wilson to R. L. Lansing, July 2, 1915, *PWW*, vol. 33, p. 466.

20. C. Spring Rice to Grey, *PWW*, vol. 29, p. 229.

21. Press Conference, April 20, 1914, *PWW*, vol. 29, pp. 469–71.

22. On Huerta's generally satisfactory treatment of U.S. interests, see Robert E. Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Veracruz* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), pp. 54–56; Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 96–97; Kenneth Grieb, *The United States and Huerta* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), pp. 148–49.

23. Carranza, on April 22, 1914, urged the United States to cease its military actions and withdraw from Veracruz “before two friendly powers sever the pacific relations that still unite them” (Carothers

to Bryan, April 22, 1914, *FRUS 1914*, pp. 483–84). Villa, concerned about the supply of American arms for his swelling Division of the North and perhaps looking toward U.S. support in a struggle with Carranza, was quick to disavow the first chief. The United States, he said, “could keep Veracruz and hold it so tight that not even water could get into Huerta” (Carothers to Bryan, April 23, 1914, *FRUS, 1914*, p. 485).

24. In a confidential memorandum written not long after becoming secretary of state, Lansing concluded: “Our possible relations with Germany must be our first consideration; and all our intercourse with Mexico must be regulated accordingly” (“The Conference in Regard to Mexico,” October 10, 1915, Confidential Memoranda and Notes, Library of Congress).

25. Bryan to Silliman, July 31, 1914, *FRUS 1914*, pp. 576–77.

26. See, for example, P. Edward Haley, *Revolution and Intervention: The Diplomacy of Taft and Wilson with Mexico, 1910–1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 186; Lloyd C. Gardner, “Woodrow Wilson and the Mexican Revolution,” in *Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 3–41.

27. The necessity of protecting Americans and other foreigners runs consistently throughout the correspondence. See, for example, Bryan to Hamm and to Carothers, May 14, to Carothers, May 16, to Daniels, May 19, and to Carothers, May 20, *FRUS 1914*, pp. 775–815. See also Spring Rice to Grey, May 15, 1914, *PWW*, vol. 30, p. 33; and Bryan to von Bernstorff, June 2, 1914, *FRUS 1914*, p. 889.

28. Bryan to Carothers and Silliman, July 23, 1914, *PWW*, vol. 30, pp. 297–98, from a Wilson draft.

29. Fabela's response to July 27 included in Silliman to Bryan, July 31, 1914, *FRUS 1914*, p. 575.

30. Bryan to Silliman, July 31, 1914, *FRUS 1914*, pp. 576–77, from a Wilson draft, *PWW*, vol. 30, p. 322, n. 1.

31. Garrison to Wilson, August 8, 1914, *PWW*, vol. 30, pp. 360–61.

32. Wilson to Garrison, August 8, 1914, *PWW*, vol. 30, p. 362.