

Chapter 1

THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST AS HISTORIAN: REFLECTIONS ON THE LINK BETWEEN CULTURE, 'STATUS ANXIETY' AND THE AMERICAN DECISION FOR WAR, APRIL 1917

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence in scholarly inquiries into the relationship between the cultural construct of 'emotion' and foreign policy decision-making, with much of this attention being accorded to choices of states to go to war. One emotion in particular is often said to occupy pride of analytical place: 'status anxiety'. This chapter draws upon recent scholarly research into the postulated

the 'third image'. This chapter will be no exception to the tendency to situate status anxiety within the third image.

Waltz introduced this and two other analytical images in his first and in some ways most influential book of the late 1950s, *Man, the State, and War*, which had been based upon his Columbia University doctoral dissertation from earlier in the decade. His objective was to contribute to the systematic study of the causes of war, by disaggregating the numerous explanations of war's origins into 'three levels of analysis', which he called the first, second and third images. Respectively, those images anchored the main cause(s) of war in the quality of individual leaders,

I pursue my inquiry in two subsequent sections, each staying within the confines of the third image. One examines an aspect of the debate over intervention that leaves little if any room for the insertion of status anxiety into the analysis; it is the contention that the 1917 decision represented the first instance in which America chose to act as an 'offshore balancer'. The other continues the third-image

To say the least, Kazin's is a powerful normative indictment of Wilson's decision to take his country into the war, and it is surely possible that in the absence of that decision, European and global security affairs would indeed have progressed on a far more happy and irenic course during the remaining decades of the twentieth century. But maybe they would not have, because resorting to counterfactuals necessitates a decision

impact of economic forces upon the choice for intervention. The same can

realist cohort was Robert Endicott Osgood, the very same Harvard graduate student whom Richard Leopold recalled as having spent an entire semester looking in vain for evidence that security rationales had prompted Wilson's decision for war. After receiving his doctorate from Harvard, Osgood took up a teaching position in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, whose press brought out his first book, based on the Harvard dissertation. That book, focused as it was upon a keen debate in IR theory circles during the 1950s about the ethical basis of American foreign policy – should it be predicated upon the country's ideals, or upon its interests? – set the standard for much of the early Cold War discussion of Wilson's intervention decision.

Wilson's policymaking was faulted because it betrayed far too much idealism and hardly enough self-interest for it to have served as an adequate safeguard for America in the international anarchy at a particularly momentous time. 'Wilson's conception of foreign relations', wrote Osgood, 'was remarkable not so much for its neglect of the problems of power as for its conscious subordination of national expediency to ideal goals.' Wilson was too much of a dreamer and do-gooder to ensure that America's legitimate physical security interests could be protected. Worst of all, Wilson 'coveted for America the distinction of a nation transcending its own selfish interests and dedicated in altruistic service to humanity'.

For Osgood and other classical realists, the Wilson who emerges from their research is unrecognizable to latter-day cousins such as Mearsheimer. Far from seeking to balance power from 'this shore', the classical realists' Wilson wanted to abolish the balance of power completely, replacing it with a novel arrangement known as collective security. It is for this reason that so many of them consider Wilson to have been such a disaster for American foreign policy. They think that had he been more attentive to global power realities during the war itself, he would have intervened sooner than he did, and for the right reasons instead of intervening later, and for the wrong reasons. Even more, had he been attentive to global power realities of the early post-war period, he would have realized that at the Paris peace conference in early 1919 he should have been prioritizing the promotion of a healthier European balance by committing America to an ongoing alliance with Britain (and France), rather than propagating the misguided idea that stable peace required replacing that balance with collective security. He gambled on the will-o'-the-wisp of collective security, they say, and in the bargain ended up losing American 'internationalism' for another generation. He was, therefore, a victim of his own preening ambition for an impossible world order, a tragic figure in a Shakespearian sense, of having been responsible for his own undoing.

The charge that Wilson ignored security interests in favour of altruism is

diplomacy²⁸

Notes

- 1 See Dennis Kavanagh, 'Why Political Science Needs History', *Political Studies* 39 (September 1991): 479–95; and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).
- 2 See Manfred J. J. Wilson, *Isolationism in America, 1935–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); and Charles A. Kupchick, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959). Also see J. David Singer, 'The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations', *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 77–92.
- 4 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). 'Less properly', because neorealism is a marvellous example, in IR, of the application of what economists call Gresham's Law, save that in the case of the political scientists it is a good word rather than good money that ends up being

peace would have provided the base for a permanent settlement admit that Wilson's hand was forced and that the Germans left him no alternative but to enter the war'. Seymour, 'Woodrow Wilson in Perspective', *Foreign Affairs* 34 (January 1956): 175–86, quote at p. 179.

25 See John W. Coogan, *End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

26 Robert W. Tucker, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914–1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 204. Also see Justus Drew Doenecke,

