



The **WILSONIAN**
MOMENT

Self-Determination and
the International Origins
of Anticolonial Nationalism

EREZ MANELA

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Self-Determination for Whom?

The USS *George Washington*, which carried President Woodrow Wilson across the Atlantic, steamed into the harbor of Brest on the coast of Brittany, France, at noon on Friday, December 13, 1918. It was the first time that a sitting American president had come to Europe and Wilson's decision to go had been controversial at home. But the president, who believed thirteen was his lucky number, saw the date of arrival as a good omen for his mission. And he seemed to have every reason to think so as the cheering throngs that gathered at the docks to meet him came into view. Everyone—high officials in formal suits, local peasants in Breton caps, groups of schoolchildren in their holiday best—had come to see the great man land, hoisting banners that welcomed the “Champion of the Rights of Man” and praised the “Founder of the Society of Nations.” The mayor of Brest, greeting the president as he disembarked, delivered a resounding speech hailing him as an apostle of liberty come to release the peoples of Europe from their suffering. The next morning, as the president drove down the Champs Élysées in an open-top automobile, girls in Alsatian costumes threw flowers on him and the cheering crowds called, “*Vive Wilson! Vive l'Amérique! Vive la liberté!*” The French press across the political spectrum sang his praises, and labor leaders hailed him as “the incarnation of the hope of the future.”¹ Over the next five weeks, Wilson met with similar receptions in England and Italy as he toured the continent before the peace conference opened in Paris on January 18.²

The prevailing sentiments across much of Europe were echoed by the French pacifist author and Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland, who in grand language depicted the president as a prophet, heir to a great line of American liberators destined to transform humanity, and called on him to fulfill his promise of a better, more just world:

You alone Mr. President are endowed with an [*sic*] universal moral authority. All have confidence in you. Respond to the appeal of these pathetic hopes! Take these outstretched hands, help them to clasp each other. Help these groping peoples to find their way, to establish the new Charter of enfranchisement and of union whose principles they are all passionately if confusingly seeking.



The hero's welcome that Woodrow Wilson received upon his arrival in Europe in December 1918 was widely reported across the colonial world and helped foster the impression that the U.S. president possessed the power to affect a lasting change in international affairs. *Princeton University Library, Woodrow Wilson Coll., Box 42, Folder 5.*

Descendant of Washington, of Abraham Lincoln! Take in hand the cause, not of a party, of a people, but of all! Summon to the Congress of Humanity the representatives of the peoples! Preside over it with all the authority which your lofty moral conscience and the powerful future of immense America assures to you! Speak! Speak to all!³

Great wars are transformative events; they destroy not only lives and property but also established orders—norms, institutions, ideas, perceptions—in short, the old ways of thought and practice. The Great War of 1914–1918 was an event unprecedented in the sheer scale of its destruction. It extinguished millions of lives and caused untold devastation; it also threatened the collapse of order and stability in international relations. In the wake of the war, many around the world hoped, and expected, the postwar world to be entirely different from what had come before it. In the aftermath of the First World War, moreover, such sentiments and expectations were unusually strong, even compared to the aftermaths of other cataclysmic conflicts such as the Napoleonic wars some hundred years earlier or the Second World War a quarter

century later. There were no messiahs on the horizon in the wakes of those wars, only hardheaded men of affairs working to refashion a semblance of order out of the chaos of war.⁴ In 1919, as H. G. Wells suggested, there did appear to be such a figure, a prophet of a new world order who, however briefly, came to symbolize to millions worldwide their own hopes and aspirations.

Such perceptions of Wilson as possessor of a “universal moral authority” backed by the “powerful future of immense America” emerged gradually as the shape of Wilson’s vision for the postwar world developed and disseminated from mid-1916 on, when he began to make more concerted and visible efforts to play a role in ending the war.⁵ His pronouncements came most often in the form of addresses before the U.S. Congress; from the beginning of his term in office Wilson had cast aside more than a century of precedent, opting to come speak before Congress in person rather than send messages to be read by an emissary, as previous presidents had done. From this pulpit, he issued his most important foreign policy declarations, uttering memorable, soaring phrases that echoed around the world. He called on the warring parties to make “peace without victory” when the United States was still neutral, and he vowed to make the world “safe for democracy” after he took his country into the war on the Allied side in April 1917. Though ostensibly addressed to Congress and the American public, Wilson often used these speeches as moves on the chessboard of open diplomacy, intended to mobilize support for his ideas among peoples abroad, sometimes against the positions of their own governments.

As the next chapter will show in detail, the American wartime propaganda machine, of unprecedented scope and efficiency, facilitated the dissemination of his words, amplifying and often exaggerating their import. The salesmen of the American creed who managed U.S. propaganda saw Wilson’s idealistic language and image as a defender of right against might as a major asset in convincing the world of the righteousness of America’s war effort and its vision for the peace. By the time of the armistice, Wilson’s name and image were recognizable, and his principles for the peace settlement known to a broad array of people across the world, often to individuals and groups who had not before paid close attention to the words of a foreign leader nor been attuned to international issues. As one study of the U.S. wartime propaganda effort concluded, by the time of the armistice, “the name Woodrow Wilson, and a general idea that he was a friend of peace, liberty, and democracy, were . . . familiar in some of the remote places of the earth.”⁶ An American president had never before spoken, as Wilson did during the war, on such a grand stage, to such a broad audience, and with such a widespread effect. Arguably, none has done so since.⁷

First, however, we must explore in more detail how the central principles of Wilson’s rhetoric, those that oppressed peoples found most appealing, developed in the course of the war. Wilson’s plans for the peace changed and

evolved considerably during the war and its aftermath, but a number of consistent elements appeared especially important to colonized or marginalized peoples.⁸ Those elements included Wilson's oft-repeated emphasis on the "equality of nations": the idea that small, weak nations were entitled to the same treatment and rights in international society as the major powers. A related principle, summarized by its proponents at the time as "right over might," was that international disputes should be resolved through peaceful means, relying on international law, voluntary mechanisms such as arbitration, and institutional arrangements eventually embodied in the League of Nations, rather than through resort to armed conflict. And third, perhaps the best known and most celebrated of the Wilsonian mantras, was the rejection of any international arrangements that would not receive the consent of the populations concerned. This was the principle of the "consent of the governed," a term for which, for reasons explained below, Wilson began after February 1918 to substitute what would become his most famous and memorable phrase: the right of peoples to "self-determination."

The Wilson administration adhered to a policy of neutrality for almost three years after the war in Europe began—"He Kept Us Out of War" was the slogan of Wilson's successful reelection campaign in 1916.¹⁰ From early on, however, the president sought a way to play a central role in the postwar negotiations and in the new international order that would emerge from them. Wilson delivered the first major public address in which he detailed a plan for the postwar settlement on May 27, 1916, almost a year before U.S. entry into the war, and in it there were already present the main elements of the vision for the postwar world that would become identified with him. He called for the establishment of a mechanism for international cooperation among sovereign states based on two related principles: one was that political arrangements, whether national or international, should be based on popular legitimacy or, in the phrase Wilson favored, "the consent of the governed." The second was that all political units constituted through such arrangements of consent should relate to each other as equals. "We believe," he declared then before a gathering of William Howard Taft's League to Enforce Peace, "that every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live" and that "the small states of the world shall enjoy the same respect for their sovereignty and for their territorial integrity."¹¹

Several weeks later, Wilson also inserted these same phrases into a plank of the Democratic party platform for the 1916 elections to highlight his determination to stand for a just peace in Europe.¹² Then, on January 22, 1917, shortly after his reelection, Wilson came before the Senate to elaborate further on his plan for peace. Calling for a "peace without victory," he urged European leaders to work toward a negotiated settlement. At the same time, he

emphasized that the United States, though it was not then a belligerent, would have to play a central role in shaping and guaranteeing the peace settlement and that the peace must therefore conform to American values and principles. Law and morality, he said, must replace brute force in governing international relations, and the “balance of power” must make way for a “community of power.” The United States would be a pivotal member of that community and would uphold and guarantee the peace, but the arrangement could only work if postwar international relations adhered to and defended the twin principles of equality among nations and popular government.¹³ The new international society must be constituted on the basis of “an equality of rights” that would “neither recognize nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those who are powerful and those that are weak.” Equality of rights, however, would not mean equality of circumstances, since “equality of territory or of resources there of course cannot be,” nor would there be enforced equality “not gained in the ordinary peaceful and legitimate development of the peoples themselves.” International equality, then, could not be absolute nor imposed by violent or revolutionary means. But that, he said, would be fine. No one who adhered to American principles as he saw them expected or asked for “anything more than an equality of rights.”¹⁴

The source of these concepts in traditional republican notions about the status and rights of individuals in society is clear, and the president projected both the extent and the limits on individual equality within society that were inherent in his progressive political creed onto states in the international order he envisioned.¹⁵ The ideals on which American society was founded, he had no doubt, would appeal to all peoples. Their implementation would respond to the popular will of the world’s people and was therefore necessary for the achievement of lasting peace. Any arrangement that contravened them was bound to fail since it would not muster popular consent and would spark resistance among “whole populations” that “will fight subtly and constantly against it, and all the world will sympathize.” These principles were quintessentially American—the United States, he said, “could stand for no others”—but at the same time could and should be applied universally, since they held “the affections and convictions of mankind” and were shared by “forward looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community.”¹⁶ But what of those nations that were not deemed sufficiently “modern,” those communities not sufficiently enlightened? And who would be the judge? Wilson did not say. For now, he and most of his audiences simply ignored the question.

This second central principle, the consent of the governed, was also drawn directly from the core ideas of the Anglo-American liberal tradition and Progressive Era conventional wisdom and was therefore no less fundamental in Wilson’s scheme. Ruling by popular consent rather than fiat, he

insisted, must serve as a basis for the international legitimacy of governments and for the legitimacy of the international system as a whole. “No peace can last, or ought to last,” he intoned in January 1917, in a phrase that representatives of colonized peoples later repeated often, “which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property.” International peace required that no one nation seek to dominate another, but that every people should be left to determine their own form of government, their own path of development, “unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful.”¹⁷ This principle, Wilson believed, had been at the heart of the foreign policy of the United States since the promulgation in 1823 of the Monroe Doctrine, which he, like most U.S. leaders at the time, saw as the guarantor of self-government in the Americas. His own project was, he said, to extend the reach of that doctrine over the entire globe.

The “Peace without Victory” address, the most complete and detailed plan for the postwar world articulated by any major statesman up until that time, was widely disseminated and discussed around the world and established Wilson’s stature in the popular mind as a leading figure in the international arena.¹⁸ The logic of Wilson’s argument, that a durable peace required government rule by popular consent, appeared to pose a direct challenge to the imperial arrangements that spanned much of the world at the time. The historian Thomas J. Knock has concluded that the address constituted “the first time that any statesman of stature” had launched what amounted to a “penetrating critique of European imperialism.”¹⁹ But Wilson, though he articulated his vision in terms of universal maxims—no right *anywhere* exists—was primarily referring to the situation in Europe, with little thought of dependent territories elsewhere. In the address, he gave the restoration of an independent Poland as an example of the principle of consent. Imperialists could still take comfort in Wilson’s words if they parsed them carefully enough. If certain groups were not sufficiently “modern,” certain communities not fully “enlightened,” they could be excluded, at least for the time being, from the brave new world that the president envisioned.

Wilson’s own secretary of state, Robert Lansing, wrote later that the principle of self-determination clearly did not apply to “races, peoples, or communities whose state of barbarism or ignorance deprive them of the capacity to choose intelligently their political affiliations.” Lansing was convinced of the “danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races,” which was bound to “create trouble in many lands” and to “breed discontent, disorder and rebellion.”²⁰ Wilson himself in his wartime utterances did not explicitly exclude non-European peoples from the right to be governed by consent. At the same time, he did not elaborate at any length his views on

colonial questions nor explain how and to what extent that principle applied in colonial situations. Some historians, following the principle that actions speak louder than words, have taken the failure of the great powers, including the United States, to apply the principle of self-determination meaningfully outside Europe in the peace settlement as evidence that Wilson “believed that national self-determination applied almost exclusively to Europeans.”²¹ In this view, colonial peoples who expected any support from the American president were simply naive.

Wilson’s view, however, was somewhat more complicated than this approach suggests. Though there is little evidence that Wilson considered the impact that his rhetoric on self-determination would have on colonial peoples or expected the peace conference to deal with colonial questions beyond those arising directly from the war, he also did not exclude non-European peoples from the right to self-determination as a matter of principle. Rather, he envisioned them achieving it through an evolutionary process under the benevolent tutelage of a “civilized” power that would prepare them for self-government. Wilson, historian N. Gordon Levin has written, envisioned an international order that would transcend traditional imperialism and in which “the human, political, and territorial rights of underdeveloped peoples would be respected,” and in which their self-determination would obtain through a “careful and orderly” process of liberal reform. “Unlike Lenin, Wilson was not prepared in the immediate postwar period to challenge the entire imperialist system with a call for the instantaneous and universal establishment of self-determination for all colonial peoples.”²² Non-European populations would eventually practice self-determination, but they would get there through gradual reforms and international institutional and legal processes, not violent revolutions. This was the logic behind Wilson’s struggle in Paris to establish League of Nations “mandates” over colonial territories, in which “advanced” powers, supervised by the League, would serve as “trustees” of populations deemed not yet ready to govern themselves.²³

Beyond the establishment of the mandate principle, however, Wilson did not give much thought during his time in Europe to colonial questions. Britain and France, the main colonial powers among the Allies, were naturally unwilling to entertain discussion of their own colonial possessions and policies at the peace table. The conference dealt only with colonial issues that arose directly from the war, largely those related to former German and Ottoman possessions outside Europe, and in any case, Wilson spent most of his energy and attention in Paris on the complex issues of the European settlement.²⁴ A broader perspective on the development of his thinking on colonial issues, one that goes beyond his wartime rhetoric, would therefore help reconstruct the conceptual world behind Wilson’s advocacy of self-determination and reveal how and to what extent he might have seen his principles of self-determination

and equality as applicable to non-Europeans. Two aspects of Wilson's prewar thinking and policies are especially relevant in this regard. First, his attitude toward the United States' own imperial possessions, initially as a prominent academic and then as a rising political leader, and second, Wilson's views on race relations and his attitude toward African Americans in the domestic American context.

Perhaps the most glaring contradiction to the universalist message of Wilson's wartime pronouncements on self-determination was his record on race relations in the domestic American context. Woodrow Wilson was a son of the American South. He was born in 1856 in antebellum Virginia and raised in Augusta, Georgia, where he lived through the Civil War as a boy, and later in Columbia, South Carolina. He was raised with racial assumptions typical of that time and place, and he appears never to have seriously challenged them, viewing blacks as his inferiors and generally disapproving of social mixing between the races. Throughout his academic career, he never made any efforts to advance minority rights. As president of Princeton University, he did nothing to open the college to black enrollment, writing in 1903 that though "there is nothing in the law of the University to prevent a negro's entering, the whole temper and tradition of the place are such that no negro has ever applied for admission." The same year, Wilson voiced his opposition to a suggestion that students at the University of Virginia, where he had once studied law, take part-time work as waiters in campus dining rooms. Such work, he explained, was "ordinarily rendered by negroes" and would therefore cause white students "an inevitable loss of self-respect."²⁵ In his public orations, Wilson was wont to display his prejudices, entertaining white audiences with jokes and anecdotes that featured uneducated, simple-minded "darkies."²⁶ Even a biographer as sympathetic to Wilson as Arthur Link concluded that although Wilson "never shared the extreme anti-Negro sentiments of many of his contemporaries," he "remained throughout his life largely a southerner on the race question."²⁷

As president of the United States, too, Wilson's record on race issues was bleak. Early in his first administration, he allowed several members of his cabinet, most notably Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson and Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, Wilson's close adviser and son-in-law, to introduce racial segregation among employees in their departments.²⁸ Wilson still nominated a black man, Adam Edward Patterson, for register of the treasury, a position traditionally reserved for an African American. The move, however, outraged many southerners in Congress and elsewhere, who saw Wilson's election victory, the first by a southern Democrat since the Civil War, as an opportunity to promote segregation in the federal government. White-supremacist author Thomas Dixon, who had known Wilson at Johns

Hopkins University in the 1880s, wrote him an angry letter to protest the appointment of a “Negro to boss white girls.” The South, he warned darkly, would never forgive this “serious offense against the cleanness of our social life.” Wilson’s reply was carefully hedged and ambivalent. On the one hand, he emphasized his commitment to segregation in the federal bureaucracy and explained that his administration was implementing “a plan of concentration” which would put black employees “all together and will not in any one bureau mix the two races.” At the same time, he distanced himself from Dixon’s virulent rhetoric, noting that he was trying to handle the issue “in the spirit of the whole country.”²⁹ In any event, Patterson soon withdrew his own candidacy in the face of congressional opposition.

The tensions between Wilson’s progressive principles and his racist attitudes were on stark display during his White House confrontation, in November 1914, with prominent black journalist William Monroe Trotter, chair of the National Equal Rights League and editor of the *Boston Guardian*. Trotter led a group of black activists who had supported Wilson in the 1912 election as a progressive reformer and had now come to the White House to express their disappointment with his policies toward African Americans. Confronted with Trotter’s pointed criticisms of the administration’s segregation plans, Wilson replied with a patronizing lecture about his desire “to help colored people” and defended segregation as a form of preferential treatment that would allow blacks to develop their skills without the pressures of direct competition with whites. Straining to reconcile his principles with his policies, he admitted that both whites and blacks had “human souls” and were “absolutely equal in that respect” but added that the question was one of “economic equality—whether the Negro can do the same things with equal efficiency.” Things, he assured his visitors, would “solve themselves” once blacks proved that they could do so, though it would “take generations to work this thing out.”³⁰ By reiterating the principle of equality but relegating its attainment to some distant, indeterminate future, Wilson tried to resolve the dissonance between his ideals and his prejudices. When Trotter suggested that this policy would cost him the support of black voters, the president took violent offense and abruptly showed him the door.³¹

Wilson’s racism was a matter of intellectual and social habit. He never seems to have questioned this legacy nor rebelled against it, and his conduct with Trotter leaves little doubt that he felt instinctively superior to blacks and most likely to nonwhites more generally. Wilson biographer Kendrick Clements reckoned that although Wilson “undoubtedly wished blacks well” and his record in the White House was “marked more by indifference to racial discrimination than by its active promotion,” his “conservative paternalism was an inadequate response to the need” of the era and he showed “no commitment . . . to solving racial problems.” John Milton Cooper, a leading and

sympathetic biographer, notes Wilson's belief that blacks were "inferior" to whites but adds that he thought that they would eventually achieve parity, and evaluates Wilson's racial views as "surprisingly mild" for someone of his background.³² Like most educated whites of his era, Wilson saw nonwhite peoples generally as "backward," but he also believed that, with "proper instruction," they could eventually learn the habits of "civilization," including self-government.

This was Wilson's general framework for thinking about questions related to nonwhite peoples, and he employed it during the debate over the U.S. conquest and rule over the Philippine Islands. Prior to the Spanish-American War of 1898, Wilson, though an avid student of American history and politics and of comparative politics, had written very little about international affairs or the question of imperialism. It was only when the issue of overseas expansion moved to the forefront of the American political debate with the acquisition of the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam that Wilson, then a prominent faculty member at Princeton University and a popular essayist and public speaker, set his mind to that question. Though not initially an ardent expansionist, once the annexation of the Spanish possessions by the United States was settled in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, Wilson spoke in its favor. America's new role as a colonial power, he asserted, would profit both the United States and the native populations of its new possessions. In the United States, an imperial mission would help to overcome domestic divisions and to "restore the unity of national purpose to the American people and government." The duties of empire would also offer an outlet for the energies of American youth, affording the "impetuous, hot-blooded young men of the country" an opportunity to make their mark on the world. To the native populations, U.S. rule would bring progress, both material and political. Indeed, it could be justified only if it pursued this purpose.³³

Despite his subsequent reputation in the popular mind as a zealous advocate of spreading democracy, Wilson's position was actually quite circumspect. In his earliest pronouncements on U.S. rule in the Philippines, at the turn of the twentieth century, Wilson emphasized that its ultimate goal must be to prepare the islanders for self-government, but that attaining that goal would require time and training and hence a significant period of direct rule. It would not be enough, he warned, for the United States merely to institute the forms and documents of constitutional government in the Philippines and then leave. Free institutions could not be "spread by manuscripts," and the United States would have to install and then nurture them for a considerable period.³⁴ The Filipinos, Wilson found, were not yet ready to exercise responsibly the rights that come with a full-fledged democracy and should not therefore have those rights: "Freedom is not giving the same government to all people, but wisely discriminating and dispensing laws according to the advancement of a

people.” The United States should not attempt to implement the American system of government in the Philippines prematurely, and would “have to learn colonial administration, perhaps painfully.” At the same time, Wilson spoke against the colonial authorities’ early efforts to suppress Filipino criticisms of America’s imperial policies. The United States should “do everything openly and encourage those in our new possessions to express freely their opinions,” in order to prove to Filipinos that it had “only their welfare at heart.”³⁵ Americans should teach by example and work to earn the goodwill of the native population.

On the other hand, Wilson also criticized American anti-imperialists, who opposed the annexation of the islands, as irresponsible. Their argument that the United States was constitutionally ill suited for colonial rule and should leave the Philippines to another power reminded him, he told one audience, of a vain woman who had recently found religion. Asked about her newly plain appearance, she replied: “When I found that my jewelry was dragging me down to hell, I gave it to my sister.”³⁶ It was America’s duty to govern the Philippines for the advancement of the native population, and it could not shirk it. He ridiculed the anti-imperialists who compared Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Filipino resistance to the American occupation, to George Washington as ignorant of the true nature of liberty. Liberty, Wilson said, quoting his intellectual hero, Edmund Burke, in his assessment of the French Revolution, must be “combined with government; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with social and civil manners.” Aguinaldo offered the Philippines liberty without order, which was not true liberty at all.³⁷ Filipinos could have liberty eventually—they were not inherently incapable of it—but it would come in a process of gradual, measured progress, supervised by the United States.

Wilson summarized the task of the United States in the Philippines, as well as in Puerto Rico, as the establishment of self-government “if they be fit to receive it,—so soon as they can be made fit.” A long-time admirer of the British political system and especially of the reformist tradition epitomized by one of his early heroes, the liberal Victorian statesman William Ewart Gladstone, Wilson held British colonial administration in high regard. The United States, he thought, should follow in that tradition in order to instruct “less civilized” peoples in “order and self-control in the midst of change” and in the “habit of law and obedience.” The ultimate goal was to lift the colonized to the level of the colonizers and make them “at least equal members of the family of nations.”³⁸ But it would be a gradual process, which might take as long as three or four generations and would require conceptual flexibility and sensitivity to cultural difference. The Anglo-American form of self-government, Wilson

often reminded audiences, emerged out of historically specific social and political circumstances, and so self-government in the Philippines, even when attained, could well look quite different from that in the United States.³⁹

But how could colonial rule be reconciled with the principle of government by consent, which Wilson always saw as the bedrock of legitimate government? At the time, Wilson was unsure. In a revealing reply in 1900 to a former student who had inquired how that principle might apply to the new American possessions in the Philippines, Wilson wrote somewhat evasively that he had not studied the question in depth and so he could not give a firm opinion. Nevertheless, he ventured to suggest that the principle could not possibly mean the same thing, nor apply in the same manner, to Americans and to Filipinos:

“The Consent of the Governed” is a part of constitutional theory which has, so far, been developed only or chiefly with regard to the adjustment or amendment of established systems of government. Its treatment with regard to the affairs of politically undeveloped races, which have not yet learned the rudiments of order and self-control, has, I believe, received next to no attention. The “consent” of the Filipinos and the “consent” of the American colonists to government, for example, are two radically different things,—not in theory, perhaps, but in practice.

That difference, however, had “never been fully or adequately explained.” You should work on this question on your own, the professor suggested, and “I shall be very much interested to know where your thinking lands you. I shall have to tackle the problem myself more formally than I have yet tackled it.”⁴⁰

Soon after this exchange, Wilson became president of Princeton University, and he apparently never found the time to tackle the problem “more formally.” But the view that many if not all of the nonwhite “races” were unfit for self-government was a common one in American public discourse, as it was in Europe, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Both supporters and opponents of imperialism invoked it, with the former using it to justify colonial rule while the latter argued that backward, racially different populations could not be “developed” and should therefore be left alone.⁴¹ For Wilson, the lack of fitness of many nonwhite populations for self-government reflected their lower levels of development and could therefore be remedied by time and training. But the process, he usually stressed, would take many years. U.S. colonial rule would eventually allow such underdeveloped populations to exercise self-government. In the meantime, however, they were students to be taught, or children to be raised, by their American masters. Independence would come only after a lengthy period of tutelage and cultural and institutional development.

In the decade from 1902 to 1912, Wilson said little, and apparently thought little, about colonial issues as he rose quickly in the world, first becoming president of Princeton University, then governor of New Jersey, and finally the Democratic candidate for president in 1912. Despite the earlier paeans for empire of Wilson the public intellectual, Wilson the politician showed his flexibility during the campaign when he adopted the traditional anti-imperialist position of the Democratic party, and upon taking office his administration moved quickly to implement it. He appointed Francis Burton Harrison, a liberal-minded Democrat, as governor of the islands with instructions to give native Filipinos majorities in both houses of the Philippine legislature and to respect the decisions of that legislature.⁴² Wilson explained this move as part of the developmental progression toward self-government, since it would allow the Filipinos to prove their “sense of responsibility in the exercise of political power” and, if successful, would allow them to proceed toward full independence. The United States, he said, would gradually extend and perfect the system of self-government on the islands, testing and modifying it as experience required, giving more control to the indigenous population, and increasingly relying on their counsel and experience in order to learn how best to help them establish their independence.⁴³

The United States’ success in this task, Wilson added, was more than just an issue of domestic interest. It was also a practical test of American ideals and principles, conducted before a global audience. The eyes of the world, Wilson told Congress, were on the American experiment in the Philippines, and the United States had the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to instruct the whole world on how to manage the benevolent transformation of a backward people.⁴⁴ Reflecting the view that he would later attempt to implement in the League of Nations’ mandate system, Wilson declared that America was a “trustee” of its overseas possessions. It was not there to do as it pleased nor to further its own narrow interests, but rather to carry out a duty. A new era had dawned in relations between the advanced powers and developing regions: “Such territories, once regarded as mere possessions, are no longer to be selfishly exploited; they are part of the domain of public conscience and of serviceable and enlightened statesmanship.” The aim of U.S. policy in the Philippines must be the country’s ultimate independence, and the transition to independence must move forward “as steadily as the way can be cleared and the foundations thoughtfully and permanently laid.”⁴⁵ This view no doubt appeared perfectly logical to Wilson, as it did to many of his contemporaries, but it had inherent tensions. The “civilizing” power had to stay in order to allow it, eventually, to leave; colonial populations had a right to self-government, but the implementation of that right could be deferred, perhaps indefinitely, until the colonial power judged them ready to exercise it.

Other aspects of Wilson's prewar foreign policy also illustrated both his ambivalence toward independence as practiced by peoples outside "Anglo-Saxon civilization" and the difficulty he had, oft noted by later scholars, of reconciling goals with means, ideals with policy instruments. When Wilson came into office, the Mexican Revolution, launched in 1910, was already under way, and he declared his wish to assist the people of Mexico in determining their own future. But the means he tried to use to advance that aim often undermined it instead. In response to a minor incident in April 1914 between Mexican soldiers and a group of U.S. sailors that had come ashore in the Mexican port of Tampico, Wilson authorized the occupation of the major port city of Veracruz, hoping to destabilize the autocratic regime of General Victoriano Huerta and help his more liberal opponents. Wilson, however, underestimated the force of Mexican nationalist sentiment. His ham-handed intervention antagonized Mexicans of all stripes and did little to endear the United States, and Wilson himself, to Mexican liberals. Less than two years later, Wilson authorized a military invasion of Haiti in the name of restoring order, precipitating an American occupation of the country that lasted until 1934. In both cases, Wilson imagined and tried to present himself as a friend of the common people of these nations, defending them, as well as U.S. interests, against unscrupulous leaders and chaotic conditions; but his policies aroused local anger and resistance and left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust.⁴⁶

The lessons of these failed interventions were not entirely lost on Wilson. Moreover, as the world war itself gradually prompted him to adopt and articulate an expanded conception of America's world role, it also influenced his stand on U.S. colonial policy. By 1916, as the administration launched its preparedness program and the president began to contemplate the possibility of joining the conflict, colonial policy became even more directly linked in his mind to the larger context and goals of the United States' growing world role. In its actions and policies in the Philippines, Wilson declared in February 1916, the United States had to prove its disinterested and benevolent attitude toward peoples of all races and in all regions of the globe. What America had to give the world was of universal value, transcending differences of geography, ancestry, or race. The American flag, he said, "stands for the rights of mankind, no matter where they be, no matter what their antecedents, no matter what the race involved; it stands for the absolute right to political liberty and free self-government, and wherever it stands for the contrary American traditions have begun to be forgotten."⁴⁷ Self-government, then, was a universal right, not a privilege limited to specific geographical regions or racial groups.

The war increasingly led Wilson to imagine American society as a model for the world, one whose internal conflicts and contradictions were being performed before a global audience. This new context prompted Wilson to

begin to voice more forceful opposition than he had previously to domestic practices that were in clear breach of the exalted principles for which, he was trying to convince the world, the United States stood. If the United States was to be a light unto the world, the antithesis of the militarism and barbarity that Wilson attributed to the Central Powers, then the stakes involved in American race relations were higher than ever before. No longer were they crucial only for the future of American society, but for the future of the world. Thus, in July 1918, the president delivered a sharp if shamefully belated public denunciation of acts of lynching directed both at African Americans and, as happened repeatedly during the war, at those deemed "German sympathizers." The perpetrators of such acts, he charged, were emulating the "disgraceful example" of Germany and harming the war effort by sullyng the image of the United States abroad:

We proudly claim to be the champions of democracy [but] every American who takes part in the actions of a mob [is] its betrayer, and does more to discredit her by that single disloyalty to her standards of law and of right than the words of her statesmen or the sacrifices of her heroic boys in the trenches can do to make suffering people believe her to be their savior. How shall we commend democracy to the acceptance of other peoples, if we disgrace our own by proving that it is, after all, no protection to the weak?⁴⁸

On the long-standing issue of female suffrage, too, Wilson's wartime conception of America's global responsibilities seemed to have helped to change his attitude. Initially reluctant to support a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the vote, he changed his position by 1918, telling the Senate in September that passing the amendment would help the United States to retain the faith and trust of the common people of the world. "The plain, struggling, workaday folk . . . are looking to the great, powerful, famous Democracy of the West to lead them to the new day for which they have so long waited; and they think, in their logical simplicity, that democracy means that women shall play their part in affairs alongside men."⁴⁹ The next day, the amendment came up for a vote in the Senate and fell only two votes short of achieving the requisite two-thirds majority. It finally passed the following summer and was ratified in August 1920.

By mid-1918, then, Wilson had come to view the major social and political issues within American society as intimately connected to the global role he envisioned for it in the postwar world, as a model for the new international society he wanted to build. In the end, however, the reception of Wilson's rhetoric among nationalists in the colonial world was not defined by the intentions of its author but by the perceptions, goals, and contexts of its

often-unintended audiences. The interpretations and import that colonial nationalists gave to Wilson's words often went far beyond his views or intentions. The message stood independently of the man, and it could be used without regard, sometimes in conscious disregard, of his intent. Perhaps no one knew better the limits of Wilson's faith in equality than William Monroe Trotter, the black leader whom Wilson had thrown out of his White House office several years earlier for urging him to fulfill his election promises to African Americans. But despite that experience, in 1919 Trotter was quick to adopt the language of self-determination to make the case for black liberation, within the United States and elsewhere. The peace conference, he wrote, "with its talk of democracy and self-determination," could "provide a stage from which to tell the world about the plight of blacks in the United States." Circumventing State Department objections, Trotter arrived in Paris in April 1919 to launch a campaign for black self-determination, inundating the assembled press and conference delegates—including Wilson—with letters and memoranda aimed at "letting the world know that the Negro race wants full liberty and equality of rights." Black Americans, Trotter argued, were "an ethnical minority denied equal rights," and they demanded the same rights as everyone else.⁵⁰ Like Egyptians, Indians, Chinese, and Koreans, as well as many others, Trotter enlisted Wilsonian language on self-determination for purposes far different and more radical than Wilson himself had intended.