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Review by **Karine Walther**, Georgetown University—Qatar

On the eve of the Spanish-American War, as Theodore Roosevelt was serving as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he wrote a childhood friend that "Spain and Turkey are the two powers I would rather smash than any in the world."¹ Within months, his hope for a Spanish defeat would become a reality. Almost two decades later, Roosevelt's animosity towards the Ottoman Empire had not subsided. After the United States entered the First World War, as Andrew Patrick notes in his excellent article, "Woodrow Wilson, the Ottomans, and World War I," President Woodrow Wilson's refusal to declare war against the Ottoman Empire drove Roosevelt to publicly castigate him in a widely-read editorial for his syndicated column in the *Kansas City Star* (896). According to Roosevelt, Wilson's assertion that "the world must be made safe for democracy" would remain an empty promise if the U.S. did not declare war against the Ottoman Empire and liberate the "subject nationalities" over which the "Turks" extended their uncivilized imperial oppression: "The world will not and cannot be safe for democracy," he wrote, "until the Armenians, the Syrian Christians, and the Arabs are freed from Turkish tyranny."² As one of the most vociferous advocates of imperialism during his own presidency, Roosevelt's support for these groups reflected a commonly held view that unlike the European and American empires, the Ottoman Empire had no legitimacy. Roosevelt, like many imperial subjects around the world who would later mold Wilson's rhetoric to advance their claims for independence, misunderstood the president's alleged 'promise.' Wilson never believed that democracy, or self-determination, were appropriate for all peoples.

As Patrick notes, during the war, dozens of senators, including Henry Cabot Lodge, who would later chair the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joined Roosevelt in expressing their support for an American declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire (899). Lodge's critiques that Wilson was behaving as a naïve idealist escalated after 1919, with great success. During the war itself, however, neither Lodge nor Roosevelt were able to change Wilson's stance towards the Ottoman Empire. But given such powerful and ongoing

¹ "Theodore Roosevelt to William Sewell," 4 May 1898, Morison, *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 2, 823.

² Theodore Roosevelt, "A Difficult Question to Answer," *Kansas City Star*, 18 October 1917.

challenges to Wilson's position, why did he maintain his commitment to remain at peace with the Ottoman Empire? This is the important question that Patrick addresses in this article.

Patrick argues that Wilson's ongoing commitment to neutrality rested on several overlapping reasons. The first drew on Wilson's reticence to enter the war in the first place, and his desire to limit American involvement. Secondly, Wilson believed that an American declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire would have brought few advantages to the Allied cause beyond improving the morale of the other powers. Finally, missionaries and their supporters back in the United States had mounted a strong lobbying campaign and succeeded in convincing Wilson that an American declaration would put their interests, and lives, at risk, while also potentially opening the door for an escalation of violence against Christian subjects of the Empire. The sources of this lobbying were equally significant. One of the strongest advocates pushing Wilson to remain at peace with the Ottoman Empire was Wilson's close personal friend and most important campaign contributor, the philanthropist Cleveland Dodge, who had close connections to American missionaries in the Ottoman Empire. He was the primary benefactor of several missionary schools, and during the war his two children served as missionaries there.

Despite Lodge's critiques of Wilson's alleged idealism, an interpretation that was later echoed by many historians, Patrick argues that the president's decision instead "reflected his complex 'synthesis' of liberal international idealism with a more realist and pragmatic conception of national interest" (910). In detailing the pragmatic reasons behind Wilson's decision, Patrick builds on the scholarly interpretations of John Milton Cooper to offer a more nuanced reading of Wilson's wartime strategies.³ Just as importantly, Patrick's article builds on a recently emerging scholarship that places the Middle East more centrally in scholars' analysis of the First World War, and, in doing so, addresses the understudied global aspects of the war that went beyond battles between European nation-states.⁴ Finally, Patrick's article contributes to existing scholarly work that questions the role self-determination played in Wilson's post-war aims.⁵

As Patrick demonstrates, there was little sympathy for the Ottoman Empire in the American public or in Congress itself. American hostility towards the Islamic faith merged with perceptions of the 'terrible Turk,' fomenting the desire of American politicians and some members of the public to declare war against the Ottoman Empire (900). Assertions about the inherent barbarity of the Turks were made repeatedly by members of Congress in both House and Senate debates over the U.S. declaration of war (899-900). Although Wilson and the missionaries who lobbied him shared similar views about Turkish Muslims, their

³ John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2009).

⁴ For recent examples, see Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Leila Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); T. G. Fraser, ed., *The First World War and Its Aftermath: The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (London: Gingko Library, 2015); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014). See also the special issue on the First World War in the Middle East, *First World War Studies* 7:1 (2016).

⁵ See for example Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Trygve Thrøntveit, "The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination," *Diplomatic History* 35:3 (June 2011): 445-481.

pragmatic concerns for American religious interests in the Ottoman Empire overruled the idealism of political elites clamoring for a war declaration.

Both Wilson and Roosevelt's rhetoric defending American entry into the war, however, would face challenges from international developments. On the 23rd of November 1917, six months after Wilson declared that U.S. entry into the war would make the world 'safe for democracy,' and less than a month after Roosevelt published his column, the newly empowered Bolshevik government in Russia released the Sykes-Picot Treaty, which exposed how the British and French had carved up Ottoman territories as their post-war imperial spoils. Roosevelt's assertion that a declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire would assure the self-determination of the subjects under its rule revealed his own naiveté in the face of British and French imperial ambitions. As Patrick notes, despite his public rhetoric about democracy, Wilson's post-war aims did not necessarily conflict with French and British aims in the Middle East, it was simply the means, not the ends, that he found objectionable: "His ultimate goal, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, was certainly on his mind at this point, yet he wanted to make sure it was not done through the 'secret diplomacy' that he so disdained" (896). Although Wilson released his Fourteen Points in part due to the public embarrassment caused by the release of the Sykes-Picot treaty, Wilson's alleged commitment to self-determination was not a principle he would defend equally for all peoples.

The decision on who would control Ottoman territories after the war was also an issue that concerned Lodge. As Patrick notes, "Henry Cabot Lodge lamented in a letter to Theodore Roosevelt just before the war's end that 'the worst of it all' was that 'through our refusal to make war on Turkey and Bulgaria,' the United States would now have to "sit outside" when the "vital questions" of the disposition of the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria were discussed at the post-war peace conference" (906). Given Wilson's lukewarm support for the independence of the peoples of the Middle East, this was undoubtedly a pragmatic risk the president was willing to accept. On their side, the British and the French also increasingly believed that keeping "President Wilson's fingers out of the Turkey pie," would best serve their desires to extend their future imperial control over the Middle East (906).

The irony of the matter would come to a head during the peace negotiations in Paris that followed the war. The same missionaries who had lobbied Wilson to prevent a war declaration against the Ottoman Empire now lobbied for the United States to assume a mandate over a portion of the former Ottoman territories, including, most notably, Armenia. As Patrick demonstrates in this important article, Wilson's idealism was always balanced by pragmatic concerns. After the war, Wilson's pragmatism seemingly disappeared, alongside that of his critics, as the Senate debate and Wilson's stance hardened into a battle that left little room for compromise. The Treaty of Versailles, alongside the proposal for an American mandate over Armenia, would both be rejected by Congress in 1920. But by refusing to project this final showdown backwards in time, Patrick offers us a more nuanced analysis of Wilson's policies during the war itself.

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