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Robert W. Tucker. *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America's Neutrality, 1914-1917.* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007. 272 pp. \$39.50. ISBN: 978-0-8139-2629-2 (cloth).

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Review by John Milton Cooper, Jr., University of Wisconsin-Madison

This is a work of traditional diplomatic history, and I mean that as a compliment. In this book, Tucker amply displays the virtues of the careful historian of diplomacy. He has done copious research, relying especially and correctly on Arthur Link's edition of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, together with other important sources, particularly the papers of Robert Lansing in the Library of Congress and the diary and letters of Edward M. House at Yale. What is more, he has mastered those sources, not just delved into them to support points that he wishes to make. Best of all, Tucker draws on his several decades of teaching about diplomatic practice at Johns Hopkins's SAIS. He takes complicated issues surrounding the concepts and practices of neutrality seriously and clarifies them nicely. In those ways, this volume covers much of the same ground as Ernest May's *World War and American Isolation* (1958) and the three volumes about World War I in Link's massive biography of Wilson, but Tucker also brings a fresh eye to exploring that ground and looks at major issues with new insight.

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In his interpretation of the two and a half years between the outbreak of the "Great War" (the British name that has never really caught on here), Tucker draws a welcome and useful distinction between "neutrality" and "isolation." This is critical to understanding these years because it is usually not recognized how those were fundamentally in conflict. Neutrality called for assertion and defense of national rights to conduct trade and engage in travel with belligerent countries and not to submit unduly to restrictions imposed by belligerents. Isolation called for separation from overseas power politics and, in this

instance, avoidance of involvement in the war. William Jennings Bryan at the time and the authors of the Neutrality Acts in the 1930s were willing to sacrifice neutral rights in order to avoid intervention in the war or entanglements that might lead to such intervention. Bryan stood alone among Wilson's advisors in this choice, and he resigned rather than risk war. Lansing and House made the opposite choice and worked, sometimes overtly, more often covertly, to push neutral rights to the point where isolation gave way to war. Wilson himself, as is well known, tried to have things both ways, and as a result he often engaged in what Tucker calls "a diplomacy that even now seems baffling." (127) This strikes me as an accurate portrayal of Wilson, in line with the point that Link made in one of his volumes, that Wilson had not one neutrality policy but several shifting ones.

This is a fine book and one to be recommended to anyone interested in this subject of overweening significance. What this book lacks is what has dissatisfied many people with traditional diplomatic history -- namely, much of a sense of the context in which the actors operated. This is particularly striking at three points that Tucker dwells upon at length. The first point covers the early months of the war, when Britain began imposing a blockade in which the Wilson administration acquiesced. Tucker agrees up to a point with 1930s "revisionists" that there was pro-Allied bias in that response, but he reaches that judgment thoughtfully and dispassionately, with some attention to other influences. What he misses is the sense of removal from the war on the part of the American public and most of its leaders. For them, this was a terrible calamity that was happening to other people, far away. The notion that America might be drawn in just did not register in many minds. British dominance on the seas meant that America was largely cut off from Germany and the other Central Powers, so that dealing with the blockade seemed to be a strictly bilateral problem between Britain and the United States. As well as I have been able to read the acquiescence in the blockade, it seems to have arisen from a desire to avoid unnecessary and perhaps costly trouble, with no offsetting benefits. Moreover, Bryan was a full and willing participant in these decisions, not just Wilson and his pro-Allied advisors.

That acquiescence did have wider consequences, and Tucker notes that submarine warfare was Germany's way of trying to counteract the Allied blockade. That is true, but it does not mean that retaliation was the main reason for unleashing the u-boats (all thirty or so of them in 1915, of which only a dozen or so were operational at any one time). As Tucker acknowledges, the blockade was not causing much immediate harm to Germany, and it seems likely that the submarines would have gone hunting even if the blockade had done even less harm. The submarine was an offensive, not a defensive weapon. Moreover, in using those weapons, they were doing the only thing that might cause meaningful trouble with the United States---the only thing that carried with it the risk of war. Tucker is correct, as was May, in noting that the frictions with Britain never carried this risk. But he appears to agree (it is not completely clear whether he does or not) with John Coogan's dismissal of the distinction between the blockade affecting property and the submarines taking lives. That distinction did lend an emotional edge to the disputes with Germany that was lacking in the ones with the Allies.

The second point where Tucker misses the context, or at least an important part of it, is the reaction to the sinking of the Lusitania. From this account, the reader would not grasp that

this was the great turning point in America's stance toward the war. This was that era's 9/11---the "shock of recognition," when people suddenly, painfully found themselves facing the war as something that touched them. In one of the few matters that he gets dead wrong in this book, Tucker asserts that Wilson could easily have taken the country into war over the Lusitania. A cursory reading of Link and other works could have shown him how strongly anti-war the public reaction was and was supported by most leaders apart from Theodore Roosevelt and his cabal of thinly disguised interventionists. Out of one thousand newspaper editors who telegraphed their views to New York papers---the closest thing to a modern public opinion poll at the time---the number calling for war was six. Wilson captured the public mood and his policy dilemma best when he told Bryan, "I wish with all my heart I saw a way to carry out the double wish of our people, to maintain a firm front in respect of what we demand of Germany and yet do nothing that might by any possibility involve us in the war." (Wilson to Bryan, June 7, 1919, Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 33:359) Wilson's diplomacy seemed baffling not only because he was trying to square circles of conflicting ideas, as Tucker emphasizes, but also because he now had an aroused public that wanted contradictory things and overwhelmingly recoiled from intervention.

The third point where Tucker misses the context is in the year following the Lusitania. He dwells on how much tougher Wilson was toward the Germans than he was toward the Allies, although he also shows how flexible that toughness could sometimes be. True enough, but what is missing here is a sense of scale in the context. The submarine controversy with Germany, with its recurring crises, threatened war. It was the front-burner issue. The British gladly availed themselves of this cover in order to continue to tighten the screws of the blockade. A few people, such as their ambassador in Washington, Spring Rice, warned that if the submarine menace should ever be lifted the Americans have a bevy of diplomatic bones to pick with the Allies. Tucker emphasizes Wilson's disappointment over the failure of mediation after the House-Grey Memorandum as the reason for deteriorating Anglo-American relations during the second half of 1916. What about Ireland, which he relegates to a footnote? Equally, what about the greater attention that such things as the British blacklist of American firms now got, thanks to the relaxation of tensions with Germany following the Sussex affair?

I do not intend these comments to be overly negative. I have always disliked critics who berate authors for not writing different books from the ones they do write. Tucker has written a fine, thoughtful, most enlightening book about the diplomacy of neutrality from 1914 to 1917. It is an important book that anyone interested in this time should read. I only wish that he had occasionally tipped his hat in the direction of the political context in which his actors performed. His diplomatists, especially Wilson, also had other things on their minds when they dealt with these issues and events.

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