



AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter
Global Thought Leader
Real Insights & Authority



Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing and Catastrophe in the 21st Century

Robert S McNamara and James G Blight

New York: Public Affairs, 2001, 2003. 340 pp.

The 20th Century was the bloodiest century in human history, with over 160 million people killed in armed conflicts. The 21st Century has begun in an equally violent way. Is there another way of handling disputes? Is there a particular role for the United States? The authors think so.

McNamara was Secretary of Defence in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, and then he became President of the World Bank. More recently he has been writing admitting some of the errors of his previous career, not least in the involvement in the Vietnam War. Blight is a professor of international relations at Brown University and the author of several books on US foreign policy.

It seems that the basic framework was determined by McNamara, with "notes" from him interspersed in the text in which he recalls events from his eventful life (he was then aged 84). Blight provides the intellectual ballast, not least in the excellent end notes that make this book very useful for students who wish to follow up many of the book's interesting facets. Overall it is a very good book.



Wilson's Long Shadow

The book warns against the blindness and folly that led Europe's leaders into World War I and beware of the temptation to believe that sustainable peace will be maintained simply by aiming for a "balance of power" without a strong international organization to enforce it. It urges readers to learn from history, not least the work of Woodrow Wilson.

President Woodrow Wilson was the first American president whose administration was defined by its foreign policy. Before his time as president (1912-20), the United States had hardly any role on the international stage. He tried to maintain that tradition by keeping the United States out of World War I. This was the "isolationist" tradition in US foreign policy.

In 1916, Wilson successfully ran for re-election as president on the basis that he had kept his country out of Europe's messy and destructive war. But by April 1917, the Germans attacks on American shipping had made American involvement inevitable. The US had to go to war. Wilson took the US into the war on his own idealistic terms. The US was not an "Ally". Instead, the US was the leader of the "Associated Powers" (mainly Latin American countries which followed the US into the war). The European Allies were determined to use the war to grab German wealth and colonies.

Wilson opposed that traditional approach to warfare. Wilson was the first statesman to understand the self-destructive side of modern international politics and to formulate a comprehensive new approach.

He wanted the war to be fought for higher motives – to end all war, to create international machinery for maintaining peace (the League of Nations) and he wanted the Germans to be treated well in defeat so that they could be welcomed back into the community of nations. He wanted a "peace without victors". He hoped for a reconciliation between Germany and France because he feared that if such a reconciliation were not achieved then the Germans and French would have another war in the next generation (as they had had for several generations in the past). Wilson was appalled by his tour of the European battlefields. He said that if another war took place in Europe then it would destroy whole countries. He said that the modern form of warfare was so destructive that the Europeans had to learn new ways of settling their disputes. He wanted the US to take the leading role in the League of Nations. "America", he said, "was the only idealistic nation in the world". Only the US had the vision to set a good example to the rest of the world. Many ordinary European citizens were inspired by Wilson's idealism and nobility. It was a refreshing change from the tone of their own politicians. He received a hero's welcome at many public meetings in Europe. He was the first serving US president ever to visit Europe. They liked his phrase that the war had been fought "to make the world safe for democracy".

But Wilson failed to get government agreement for his ideas. In the end, Germany was humiliated and embittered by the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war. The treaty required Germany to surrender a large amount of territory, much of the German natural resource and industrial capacity, and to pay "reparations" to the Allies (to make good their financial damage from the war). Just as Wilson feared, the treaty provided the basis for Germans to call for a fresh war to seek revenge. Wilson was dead well before Hitler came to power in 1933 but he was just the sort of person that Wilson feared would come to power.

Wilson's League of Nations was made virtually irrelevant from the outset by America's absence from it because Wilson was unable to get the US Senate to join it. Wilson sent the League of Nations treaty to the Senate for ratification on July 10 1919. Wilson challenged the Senators: "Shall we or any other free people hesitate to accept this great duty? Dare we reject it and break the heart of the world?" On March 19 1920, the treaty fell seven votes short of the required two-thirds majority for ratification.

It was the end of the line. The US, on the verge of becoming a global super power, had decided that it did not want to work through the League of Nations and, in fact, did not want to get involved very much in international affairs. The US decided to return to its “isolationist” tradition in foreign policy.

Wilson was too idealistic for both the European politicians and the American ones. They had regarded the war as simply one of defeating Germany. That had been accomplished and now it was back to business as usual. Wilson’s successor, Warren Harding, campaigned on the return to “normalcy”. They had no time for grand schemes to settle international disputes by new machinery. He died in 1924 a bitter and broken man.

✓ **Wilson Today**

But the various issues raised by Wilson have not gone away. Hence the “Wilson’s ghost” of the book’s evocative title.

The authors provide a moral imperative: “Establish as a major goal of US foreign policy and defense policy, and foreign policies of countries across the globe, the avoidance in the 21st Century of the carnage – 160 million dead – caused by conflict in the 20th Century”.

They also provide a multilateral imperative: “Recognize that while the United States must provide leadership to the world to achieve the objective of reducing the risk of conflict, it will not apply its power – economic, political or military – other than in a multilateral context, subject to multilateral decision making processes”.

Wilson’s problem, according to the authors, is that he failed to stick to his own moral and multilateral imperatives. He should have avoided moralistic self-righteousness and he should have been open to the counsel of others. Instead, he followed an insensitive unilateralism. It seems that in trying to end one American foreign policy tradition – “isolationism” – he created another: telling foreigners how to behave and then forging a separate path for US foreign policy.

The book’s second edition appeared before the US-led attack on Iraq. The authors have been careful not to be seen to be part of the anti-war movement. “We are not endorsing either the official US foreign and defense policy or the views of its many European critics. What we are endorsing, unequivocally, is greater effort by the United States to empathize with the Europeans, at all levels, to explore the reasons for their reluctance to see things the American way. Their reasons, coming from their experience, might be worth some serious consideration” (pp 269-70).

✓ Preventing Great Power Conflict

The authors call for the United States (and others) to deploy “realistic empathy”. This is not “sympathy” (a form of support) for a country. Instead, they recommend that the US have a better understanding of the point of the view of the other side, to look at the world through the other person’s eyes. We do not all look at the world in the same way. The authors acknowledge the work in political science of Ralph White who examined how countries slipped, almost accidentally into wars, without really understanding what the other side was about.

If only McNamara had had a better understanding of this technique during his time in the Pentagon! I was in Vietnam during the War (1974) and I was struck by the great difference between the reality on the ground and what the US officials believed in Washington DC. McNamara in one of his notes in the book (pp 66-70) pretty well admits that he was deficient in this respect during the War. McNamara then viewed the War as part of the grand Soviet and Chinese crusade against capitalism, whereas the North Vietnamese were fighting for a nationalistic cause. I was struck in Vietnam by the way that so many Vietnamese heroes for two thousand years had been people who had fought the Chinese: history is more important than politics. But few Americans had any grasp of Vietnamese history.

Therefore, the authors call for the avoidance of inadvertent great power conflict. They warn that the greatest risk of conflict comes now from accidental warfare. For example, the expansion of NATO is underway, with former members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization now members. But from a Russian point of view, this seems like an additional encirclement of Russia and so adds to Russian fears of the outside world. It will only add to the upsurge in post-Cold War, chauvinistic, Russian nationalism.

✓ Reducing Communal Killing

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Wilson naively put forth a proposal that appeared to promise national “self-determination” to all those who wished to claim it. According to the authors, this “has proven to be a prescription for disaster. In fact, the modern origins of recent communal conflicts in the Balkans, including Bosnia and Kosovo, lay in the misguided, uninformed idealism of Wilson” (p 113). Self-determination has been “Wilson’s dream and our nightmare” (p 114).

But, then, “self-determination in the US’s own history is equally confused. George Washington fought a war to affirm it, while Abraham Lincoln fought the Civil War to deny it (p 167).

The risk of being caught by surprise by failing to look at looming changes is now the basis of the business technique “scenario planning”; see:

Peter Schwartz [The Art of The Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World](#), New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Wilson was mistaken in believing that the right to national self-determination can be exercised widely, freely and peacefully. The break up of the European empires after World War II (such as in Africa and the Indian sub-continent) and the more recent conflicts in the Balkans have all shown that Wilson was wrong.

But, given that the “self-determination” horse has now bolted from the stable, what are we to do? There are no easy answers. The authors recommend that the US act multilaterally with other countries – and not unilaterally. McNamara, reflecting on his Vietnam errors, notes that the US should have listened more to its European allies which were urging caution.

This “safety in numbers” approach has much to commend it. But how many countries need to support the US to make a proposed US operation “multilateral”? President Bush argued that his 2003 attack on Iraq was not a unilateral action because two other countries supplied forces (the UK and Australia) and the “coalition of the willing” eventually totalled 41. Was this a “multilateral” action?

The authors argue that without significant reform of the UN Security Council, little can be done to stop communal killing. They call for the expansion of the Security Council to make it more representative, with the phasing out of the veto power of the current Permanent Five (US, Russia, UK, France and China). They also want a standing UN force under UN Secretary-General control ready to intervene. Massive human rights violations and widespread ethnic or religious conflict must be accepted as a “threat to the peace”, justifying international intervention under the UN Charter. This is certainly an ambitious list of ideas worthy of further study.

✓ **Avoiding Nuclear Catastrophe**

Robert McNamara in retirement from public office has not only criticized his former views on Vietnam but also criticized his former views on nuclear weapons – or at least sought to reassure the general public that his original views were never as extreme as was thought at the time. Now freed from the constraints of public office, he has been able to explain his concerns about nuclear weapons. For example, “Very soon after becoming secretary of defense in 1961, I concluded that nuclear weapons were militarily useless, other than to deter one’s opponents from their use. Although I believe Presidents Kennedy and Johnson agreed with my conclusion, it was impossible for any one of us to state such views publicly because they were totally contrary to established US and NATO policy”. (p 201)

He has championed bilateral and multilateral moves to reduce the current stock of nuclear weapons and sought ways to restrict the expansion of the arms race, such as the 1972 treaty to ban anti-ballistic missile systems (which has now been rejected by President Bush). He recommends the implementation of the recommendations of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (in which McNamara was a member), such as the continued reduction in US and Russian nuclear weapons.

✓ **Executive Summary**

The authors summarize the book in three slogans (p 217): (i) on bringing Russia and China in from the cold: “empathy now” (ii) on reducing communal killing:

The authors then go on to look at ideas for ending the arms race. They do not explore the stunning implication of this comment:

if the President and Secretary of Defense of the day cannot feel able to provide leadership in educating people about the uselessness of nuclear weapons, who can?

The President and Secretary just left it to the peace movement to do so. No wonder there is such cynicism among voters about the lack of leadership in politics.

“resolve conflict without violence now” and (iii) on reducing the nuclear danger: “radical reductions - and ultimate elimination – beginning now”



✓ September 11

The first edition of this book was published before September 11 2001. In an “afterword” to the second edition, the authors state that nothing in the tragedy negates the arguments in the first edition. Additionally, the attacks emphasized the need for Americans to learn more about the outside world and the motives behind the attacks: “empathy”.

The authors recall the surprise with which the Americans reacted to the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. US intelligence agencies had information on the impending attack but this was ignored because the attack was “unthinkable”. “The US officials simply could not imagine the Japanese taking a risk of that magnitude. They could not think like their enemy, because they lacked the requisite empathy” (p 243).

Keith Suter