Woodrow Wilson’s failures of commission probably had the most dire consequences of any U.S. president. His great flaw was his sanctimonious nature, more stark and distilled than that of any other president, even John Quincy Adams (who was no piker in the sanctimony department). He thought he always knew best, because he thought he knew more than anybody else. Combine that with a powerful humanitarian sensibility, and you get a president who wants to change the world for the betterment of mankind. Watch out for such leaders.

 

Even during his first term, with war raging in Europe, he sought to get the United States involved as a neutral mediator, fostering a peace agreement to break the tragic stalemate that had the nations of Europe in its grip. When that effort was rebuffed, he ran for reelection by hailing himself as the man who kept the United States out of the war.

But, immediately upon entering his second term, he sought to get his country into the war by manipulating neutrality policy. While proclaiming U.S. neutrality, he favored Britain by observing the British blockade of Germany (imposed, said a young Winston Churchill, to starve Germans, including German infants, into submission) and by allowing armed British merchant ships entry to U.S. ports, which in turn fostered a flow of U.S. munitions to the Allied powers. At the same time, Wilson declared that Germany would be held to a “strict accountability” for any American loss of life or property from Germany’s submarine attacks. This policy applied, said Wilson, even if affected Americans traveling or working on British or French ships. He declined to curtail what he considered Americans’ “right” to travel on vessels tied to France or Britain (but not Germany).

Wilson was warned, most notably by his secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, that these lopsided policies inevitably would pull America into the war. When he ignored those warnings, Bryan resigned from the Wilson cabinet on a stand of principle.

As Bryan predicted, America did get pulled into the conflict, and it certainly appears that that was Wilson’s intention all along. Then three things happened.

First, Wilson conducted the war in ways that devastated the home front. Prices shot up into double digits, and then came a potent economic recession that lasted three years. He accepted the suppression of civil liberties by his notorious attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer. His government nationalized many private industries, including the telegraph, telephone and railroad industries, along with the distribution of coal. Race riots erupted in numerous cities that claimed nearly 150 lives in two years.

Second, America’s entry into the war broke the stalemate, allowing the Allied powers to impose upon Germany devastating armistice terms. Third, when Wilson went to the Versailles peace conference bent on bringing to bear his humanitarian outlook and making the world safe for democracy, he promptly got outmaneuvered by the canny nationalist leaders of Britain and France, whose agenda had nothing to do with Wilson’s dreamy notions about a harmonious world born of his humanitarian vision.

The result was a humiliation of Germany that rendered another war nearly inevitable and created in that country a sump of civic resentment and venom that would poison its politics for a generation. We can’t say with certainty that Adolf Hitler wouldn’t have emerged in Germany if the stalemate of World War I had been settled through negotiations rather than diktat. But we can say that the world spawned by Wilson’s naïve war policies certainly created a political climate in Germany that paved the way for Hitler.

That’s a big load for Wilson to carry through history, though the academic polls consistently rank him quite favorably. That’s probably because most academics are progressives who like Wilson for his own progressive sentiments. But the two Roosevelts also were progressives and left the country better off when they left office. Such a case can’t be made for Wilson, who left the country in shambles. The 1920 Republican victories in the presidential and congressional elections constituted of the greatest political repudiations in U.S. history. Thus, Wilson’s failures of commission render him, arguably, the worst president in American history.

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