A. Scott Berg. 2013. *Wilson*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Son, pp. 818.

Scholarly surveys taken over the past 60 years consistently report that presidential historians rank Woodrow Wilson among the country's ten best presidents. A cursory appraisal of his life would leave one wondering at such appraisals. Wilson was an academic and scholar throughout his adult life until at age 53 when he was elected governor of New Jersey. Two years later he was being sworn in as the twenty-eighth President of the United States.

A. Scott Berg, the author of *Wilson*, focuses on his subject's taut, steadfast morality. The titles of the book's chapters—such as Ascension, Advent, Paul, Disciples—are drawn from his Presbyterian beliefs. Following each chapter title is a selection of verse from the Bible. Yet we also find in the biography a man who coached football when on the faculty at Wesleyan, enjoyed motion picture screenings in the White House, loved baseball, played tennis and billiards, and coached a college football team. He was also a man who preached throughout his academic career that the purpose of college "was to teach young men to think as differently from their fathers as possible."

Wilson's academic career began in 1886 and continued until he ran for governor of New Jersey in 1910. All but five of his 25 years in the academic community were at Princeton, where for eight years he served as president. It was while at Princeton that Wilson's moralism and progressivism were first put on public display. His guiding belief was to invest in students "who care more for principles than for money, for the right adjustments of life than for the gross accumulations of profit." In pursuance of that ideal, Wilson vigorously initiated reforms to

counter Princeton's image as a rich man's college and its slipping academic standards. His most exceptional proposal was to radically reform how Princeton structured its degree programs. Wilson's plan became the "model for most liberal arts curricula across the country for the next century."

Princeton was the base from which Wilson built his reputation as a transformational university president and a prolific scholar who often wrote about politics and government. He was also an extraordinary speaker, who Berg reports could bring crowds to their feet in a tumult of applause or, at other times, leave many weeping with emotion. His gifts for writing and speaking and his achievements at Princeton brought him national attention.

Woodrow Wilson had not served in government and was not well known in political circles. Yet as Berg notes, "At a time when greedy business interests and corrupt political machines were under attack, nobody could more articulately advocate against special privilege than this politically untarnished moralist." The New Jersey kingmakers figured if Wilson could win the governorship, then after the election he could stand for propriety while the bosses ran the government. They could not have been more wrong. First, Wilson's political stumping built enormous popular support for the candidate. Upon concluding his campaign with a speech in Trenton, one newspaper reported, "No mortal man ever won the hearts of an awakened people like this man did." But the real turnaround for the Old Gang came after the landslide election. Instead of a puppet governor, they had a straight-arrow reformer on their hands. Wilson did more than kick the shins of the state machine, which has been described as "one of the last strongholds of the industrial-feudal order"; rather he stripped the bosses of power at every opportunity. Similarly, his legislative accomplishments were right down the line of mainstream progressivism, such as establishing a worker's compensation program, launching commissions to set utility rates, reforming municipal governments, and enacting anti-trust legislation.

His positive and popular reforms in New Jersey set in motion his presidential bid. As Berg says, Wilson's presidential campaign "began at the very moment that the groundswell of progressive thought directed the mainstream of American politics." He adds that "isolated trickles" of support for Wilson soon became a "flash flood, the likes of which had seldom been seen in American history." The three-way race for president garnered Wilson 42 percent of the vote, besting the incumbent William Howard Taft and the independent Bull Moose candidate, Theodore Roosevelt.

In his inaugural address, Wilson did not mention foreign affairs. As one would expect, and as Berg confirms, the speech was "equal parts lesson, sermon, and mission statement." The rhetoric, according to many present, was magnificent. He naturally specified the progressive agenda he intended to pursue, but no passage better encapsulated the progressive spirit than his characterization of the Gilded Age:

> Their thought has been to "let every man look out for himself, let every generation look out for itself," while we reared giant machinery which made it impossible that any but those who stood at the levers of control should have a chance to look out for themselves.

Nearing his conclusion, Wilson acknowledged the presence of God "where justice and mercy are reconciled and the judge and the brother are one."

Under the slogan of a New Freedom, Wilson set out to fulfill the progressive agenda by extending and expanding the reforms of his immediate predecessors, Taft and Roosevelt. He attacked what he called the Triple Wall of Privilege—the banks, the trusts, the tariffs. Among his domestic accomplishments were signing the national income tax into law, creating the Federal Reserve System, instituting the eight-hour workday and additional pay for overtime, lowering tariffs, creating the Federal Trade Commission, setting up loan banks for farmers, improving the environment, supporting anti-trust legislation and prosecuting violators.

Wilson's foreign policy was articulated early if informally. Upon receiving congratulations on his inauguration from the president of Mexico, whose regime Wilson regarded as illegitimate, the President read aloud to his Cabinet:

> We hold . . . that just government rests always upon the consent of the governed, and that there can be no freedom without order based upon law and upon the public conscience and approval . . . We can have no sympathy with those who seek to seize the power of government to advance their own personal interest or ambition . . .We shall prefer those who act in the interest of peace and honor, who protect private rights and respect the restraints of constitutional provision.

As Berg points out, these early words about Mexico "would become the cornerstone of his foreign policy for as long as he held office." The policy, however, was by no means a new position for Wilson. He had expressed similar sentiments when writing about the Spanish-American War. Once hostilities end, regardless of their original cause, he believed the victor's duty to its new acquisitions is to act in their best interest and prepare them to care for themselves. He never wavered from this policy, and it accurately reflects the foundation of his Fourteen Points and the convictions he took with him to Versailles after World War One.

Berg's account of Wilson's long-suffering work with the Allies—principally France, Italy and Great Britain—is not reading for the faint of heart. It can, however, be distilled to this: Wilson idealistically believed the world could be remade based on the general prescriptions of his Fourteen Points. The other principal Allies were ignobly motivated by unrealistic demands for reparations and restitution. It can also be argued that if Wilson had been more politically astute and less obstinate, then he would have worked as assiduously with the opposition in the U.S. Senate as he did with the Allies, and perhaps it would have made an important difference in the outcome.

Herbert Hoover, who served at Versailles under Wilson, wrote about the president's efforts to craft a durable peace for all time. Hoover quoted the late president:

> A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor…

Hoover concluded by writing, "With his death ended a Greek tragedy, not on the stage of imagination, but in the lives of nations. And as in the tragedies of old the inspiring words and deeds of men who failed still live."

So why is Woodrow Wilson consistently ranked by historians as being among the ten best presidents? Most likely because he cemented the foundational legacy of progressivism, which institutionalized good government reforms, thus putting the brakes on the excesses of the Gilded Age. Or, as suggested by Herbert Hoover, the reason also may be due to Wilson's lofty principles, which were enunciated and acted upon throughout his public life.

Steve Housel
Rogers State University