

JOAN HOFF, *A FAUSTIAN FOREIGN POLICY FROM WOODROW WILSON TO GEORGE W. BUSH: DREAMS OF PERFECTIBILITY*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 308 pp., ISBN 0521879051, 9780521879057

By Katharina Rietzler

Joan Hoff's searing critique of American foreign policy from World War I to the War on Terror comes at a time when the Wilsonian legacy is attracting renewed interest. Different historians have chosen to emphasise different aspects of this legacy. Erez Manela has explored how anti-imperialist intellectuals in Asia were empowered by the doctrine of self-determination during a global *Wilsonian Moment*, whereas David Kennedy has portrayed George W. Bush as Woodrow Wilson's natural successor. Hoff, who has published widely on U.S. foreign relations and the American presidency, admits that a true characterisation of Wilsonian foreign policy is problematic. She resorts to a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Wilsonianism: the former entails 'spreading self-determination and free trade capitalism to the world through collective security arrangements', while the latter indulges in unilateral interventionism. (10) In practice, this ambiguous inheritance has resulted in a unilateralist foreign policy tempered by occasional cooperation with other states.

According to Hoff, exceptionalism, the notion that the United States is uniquely ordained to serve as an example to other nations, lies at the origin of this general drift of U.S. foreign policy. During most of the twentieth century, American presidents – for it is the executive that Hoff's analysis rests on – have promoted democracy, capitalism and free trade around the globe. But to attain their goals they have also cut 'Faustian' deals, betraying the very values at the core of American national identity in return for power or political gain. Wilson himself struck the first of these bargains with the devil after World War I, ignoring the fate of oppressed populations. Subsequent presidents continued in the same vein, inflating the power of their office and creating a Cold War national security state which relied on covert operations and the cooperation of authoritarian regimes with dismal human rights records. Hoff subjects George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton to particularly harsh criticism because they, in her opinion, squandered the opportunities offered by the end of the Cold War. Instead of exorcising its ghosts through a critical re-assessment of American foreign policy, Bush and Clinton ignored not only the material but also the psychological challenges the United States faced after its decades-long conflict with the Soviet Union. This left the floor to the incoming neo-conservative Bush administration which took Wilsonianism's unilateralist heritage to new extremes after 9/11.

At the end of the book, which is clearly intended as an appeal to future policy makers, it remains unclear whether Hoff wants the United States to reject Wilson's legacy or to merely end America's 'Faustian' bargains. Indeed, of all the Wilsonian ideas, collective security seems to appeal most to Hoff as she advocates a 'truly cooperative foreign policy' in the form of an alliance of democracies (201). But it seems overly optimistic to assume that such an alliance could be forged smoothly, without any deals whatsoever. For a book so concerned with the negative impact of American exceptionalism, *A Faustian Foreign Policy* displays a curious blindness to the interests of other nations and the constraints they might put on American policy makers.

© Katharina Rietzler, 2009
Ph.D., Department of History