

# The struggle to incorporate Greater Poland into Poland in history textbooks

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## Is Europe on the threshold of another transition?

- 7     *Piotr Swacha, Jacek Wojnicki*, MEPs of the Greens and Greens/European Free Alliance in 1989-2019 from a social networks perspective
- 27    *Anna Potyrała*, National interests as the determining factor in reform of the Common European Asylum System
- 43    *Norbert Honka*, German self-governance. Thirty years of constitutional and structural changes in reunified Germany
- 67    *Beata Molo*, Climate protection at the heart of the energy transition process in Germany
- 91    *Anna Sakson-Boulet*, The human right to a clean environment and air pollution in Poland
- 111   *Tomasz Klin*, Central and Eastern European prospects in the global international order
- 131   *Kamilla Dolińska, Julita Makaro*, On the emergence of multiculturalism in a borderland. The example of the covid-19 pandemic (and its results) in divided towns
- 151   *Magdalena Lorenc*, A skeleton in the closet – a critical view of the uncritical Stalin Museum in Gori
- 173   *Andrzej Podraza*, The birth and demise (?) of the American era. Wilsonianism and its legacy vs. the US international strategy
- 193   *Juliusz Jędrzejczak*, The work of Kazimierz Papée in the Free City of Danzig and his contacts with president Hermann Rauschning, in the light of previously unknown documents from 1933-1934
- 211   *Marek Białokur*, The political and military struggle to incorporate Greater Poland into Poland after World War I, in history textbooks. The case of Polish high school textbooks in use at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

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## **THE BIRTH AND DEMISE (?) OF THE AMERICAN ERA**

### **WILSONIANISM AND ITS LEGACY VS. THE US INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY**

#### INTRODUCTION

Having toured the United States for merely nine months in 1831 and 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that in the future the world would be divided between two great nations, i.e. Americans and Russians (De Tocqueville 2002: 343). He argued that all of the other nations had reached their natural potential and would only strive to maintain their own power. It was only Americans and Russians who had the prospect for further growth albeit their expansion was based on the utilisation of different tools. While Americans made their conquests with ploughshares and aimed to bring freedom, Russians used swords and strove to enslave the conquered peoples. De Tocqueville's views were prophetic in nature: not only did he predict the American era and the American strategy encouraging democracy promotion but he also anticipated that the world would be divided between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. De Tocqueville's opinions prove that he was an acute observer and researcher;<sup>1</sup> they also show that at the cornerstones of the United States was the ideology of liberal idealism that reflected American identity. It is this ideology that gave rise to a nation which, since its birth, has maintained a sense of its own uniqueness. However, some essential changes were required, if the United States was to become a superpower and begin to play a key role on the international stage.

These changes were possible due to two factors. Firstly, of profound significance was rapid economic growth, which by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had made the US an economic power. The United States was an economic colossus but at the

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<sup>1</sup> This approach reflected previously expressed opinions. In 1817, the then American Ambassador in London and later the Secretary of State and sixth President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, claimed that in Europe it was generally believed that America was experiencing enormous population growth and an increase in power. This was coupled with the fear that in case of internal unification, the US would become a very dangerous member of the international community (Kagan 2006: 3).

same a diplomatic and military dwarf (Preston 2019: 42). It was only a matter of time before it was possible to transfer economic power into political significance on a global scale. The second, and probably decisive, factor which had contributed to the rise of the US as a global power was the essential transformation of the American international strategy, launched by President Woodrow Wilson during World War I. As the eminent US political scientist and politician Henry Kissinger argued in the 1990s, “[i]t is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day” (Kissinger 1994: 30). That approach prevailed despite Wilson’s failure to convince the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. However, what remained and took root was the view that America has a mission to promote democracy, which could contribute to the establishment of a more peaceful policy in a global dimension. Drawing upon Wilson’s version of liberal internationalism, the future US presidents, starting with World War II, pursued various initiatives. This approach embraces, among other such efforts: the founding of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system, the democratisation of Germany and Japan, the Marshall Plan as a prerequisite for the economic and political stability of Western Europe, the establishment of NATO, John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress initiative to promote economic development in Latin America, Jimmy Carter’s human rights crusade, Ronald Reagan’s freedom crusade, George Bush’s and Bill Clinton’s support for new free-market democracies through the enlargement of NATO and the World Trade Organisation and Barack Obama’s doctrine of “just war” for human rights worldwide (Smith 2017: 150).

In view of the above, the main objective of this paper is to analyse continuity and change in American foreign policy, from the time of President Woodrow Wilson up to the present day, including US policy towards Europe. Doubtless Wilson’s internationalisation of that strategy had an essential impact on the rise of the American era in foreign policy during World War II, with the US achieving the status of superpower. It was mainly thanks to Wilson that the process of redefining the US international strategy was launched, putting an end to the era that had lasted since President George Washington’s farewell speech of 19 September 1796. As a result of the two world wars and the declining status of Europe on the global stage, the United States became a hegemon in the liberal world order it had created. The transatlantic context was of paramount importance not only to the US decision to enter the war in 1917 but also to the formation of the ideological foundations and development of American foreign policy.

A hundred years later, views that the American era had come to an end became increasingly common. They grew in popularity under Donald Trump’s presidency in 2017–2021 as he fundamentally questioned the foundations of American foreign policy laid by Woodrow Wilson. How was Wilson’s approach related to the American foreign policy formulated by the founding fathers and pursued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What was Wilson’s contribution to defining the intellectual foundations of global US foreign policy? How was Wilson’s legacy interpreted and implemented by his succes-

sors? Are we currently witnessing the demise of the American era and the emergence of a new world order in which the US could become an ordinary country?<sup>2</sup> These are not the only questions that the present paper seeks to address.

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF US FOREIGN POLICY VS. ITS INTERNATIONALISATION – WOODROW WILSON'S REVOLUTION

President Woodrow Wilson's decision in April 1917 that the US must enter World War I significantly altered US foreign policy. It was largely revolutionary in nature as it marked a departure from the traditional foreign policy adopted with the emergence of the United States in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and developed throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the messianic rationale for Wilson's decision was not created in a vacuum. For this reason, it would be legitimate to view Wilson's approach in terms of both significant change as well as continuity<sup>3</sup> in foreign policy. Wilson follows the tradition of thinking about the American people and its mission; however, he abandoned a more isolationist approach in favour of one that was designed to enhance the security and economic growth of the United States. Wilsonian idealism was firmly rooted in the sense of exceptionalism and destiny of the American people, which was developed with the emergence of the United States and the War of Independence. Together with unilateralism and expansionism, exceptionalism was one of the three core principles of US foreign policy adopted in the period spanning the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1775 and the end of the war with Britain in 1815 (Preston 2019: 6). It was the idea of exceptionalism, which defined American national identity<sup>4</sup>, that had been employed to pursue a more internationalist approach to foreign policy since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Restad 2012: 55). What distinguishes Wilson from most of his predecessors was his emphasis on the internationalisation of US efforts.

Unilateralism was the second principle of US foreign policy. It was defined in George Washington's farewell address of 19 September 1796. In it, Washington called for America not to interweave its destiny with any part of Europe, not to entangle its peace and prosperity in European ambitions and conflicts, and to avoid permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world (*Washington's Farewell Address... 1796*: 22). Even though this approach was typically regarded as isolationistic, Washington himself was not an isolationist and his appeal was unilateral in nature, which largely resulted from the US geopolitical position and the outgoing president's convic-

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term ordinary country may even at present appear quite provocative. However, that term was used as early as 1976 by Richard Rosecrance, who defined the United States as a superpower which was heading towards the model of an ordinary country (Rosecrance 1976).

<sup>3</sup> The claim regarding continuity is obviously debatable albeit it is not uncommon. It is made, for example, by a well-known political analyst with neoconservative views, Robert Kagan (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The idea of exceptionalism is defined in various ways; however, it is assumed that it was instrumental in the development of American identity. Nevertheless, it is controversial among historians, who are often critical of this idea (for more see Onuf 2012).

tion concerning the weaknesses of the new state (Mansbach, Taylor 2017:33, Ruggie 2006: 2). Although Washington's farewell speech was ideological in nature, it was at the same time a manifestation of pragmatism and focus on American interests, which were defined as divergent from those of European powers (Quinn 2010: 51-52). That US foreign policy should not be labelled isolationist is confirmed by the words of the third US president, Thomas Jefferson, who in his inaugural address of 4 March 1801 very strongly emphasised the need for the growth of peace, trade and honest friendship with all nations, yet without entering into any alliances (*Thomas Jefferson First Inaugural Address* 1801). Unilateralism meant a lack of engagement, that is neutrality towards European affairs in a political sense as the United States wanted to maintain autonomy and shunned any involvement in European conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Neutrality was also a prerequisite for the growth of trade with all European power states. As argued already in 1776 by Thomas Paine<sup>6</sup> in his work *Common Sense*, neutrality was to serve not only American prosperity but also its security (Ruger 2018: 138-139). As a result, George Washington, defining the so-called great rule of conduct, claimed that commercial relations should have as little political connection as possible.

The unilateral approach in American foreign policy was confirmed in 1823 by then President James Monroe's declaration of the doctrine that bears his name<sup>7</sup>, which in many ways was a response to the threat of European recolonization of the Latin American states. The Monroe Doctrine confirmed America's distance from disputes and conflicts in Europe while establishing the western hemisphere as the US sphere of influence, that is the area no longer subject to European interference (Kissinger 1994: 35-36). As argued by the influential US historian William Appleman Williams, the United States pursued a policy of "imperial anti-colonialism", both internally and externally (Sexton 2011: 5-8). Anti-colonialism was opposed to the expansion of European powers in the western hemisphere, which allowed for the establishment of 19<sup>th</sup> century American empire.<sup>8</sup> "Imperial anti-colonialism" was reflected in US expansionism on the American continent, which was conducive to the US's rise to the status of a world power.

It was expansionism that constituted the third principle of American foreign policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It led to the rightful (in the view of Americans) conquest and

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<sup>5</sup> In general, 19<sup>th</sup> century US politics is described as isolationist. This term is quite commonly employed albeit it is not especially adequate as the United States did not assume complete social, economic and cultural self-sufficiency. The term unilateralism can also arouse doubts. Another concept used to describe US foreign policy is restraint. Regardless of the terms employed, foreign policy grounded in the ideas of America's founding fathers is based on two pillars: (1) strategic independence (i.e. neutrality or not entering into alliances); (2) military non-interventionism abroad (Ruger 2018: 135-136).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Paine (1737-1809) is considered to be one of the partly forgotten founding fathers of the United States.

<sup>7</sup> The draft doctrine is credited to the then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, who urged the president to proclaim it. In 1825, Adams went on to become the sixth president of the United States.

<sup>8</sup> "This imperialist process entailed not only voluntary white settlement and migration, but also the removal of native populations, the expansion of slavery (until 1861), and the conquest of territory held by other nations, particularly during the Mexican War in the 1840s" (Sexton 2011: 6).

annexation of new territories on the American continent to the south and west of the newly established country (Preston 2019: 25). Expansionism largely resulted from the exceptionalism of the American people and was part of what was called Manifest Destiny. The phrase itself did not appear until 1845 but the conquest of new territories was deemed to be the destiny of the emerging nation prior to the establishment of the United States. At the core of Manifest Destiny lay the belief that the American people and institutions had special virtues, that America had a mission to redeem the world and remake it in its image, and that there was a divine destiny to accomplish this magnificent aim (Miller 2006: 120).

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was significant for the later radical transformation of the global balance of power. While in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States did not play a key political or military role on a global scale, it was undeniably becoming an economic power, a process achieved through rapid industrialisation and the growth of agricultural and industrial production. As emphasised by Fareed Zakaria, it was domestic pressures generated by industrialisation that led to the beginnings of the modern American state in the 1880s and 1890s (Zakaria 1998: 11). This resulted in the strengthened authority of the president at the expense of Congress, which also brought a more explicit and active foreign policy.

A radical change in the approach to defining the international strategy as well as to the need for establishing a strong army occurred as a result of the Spanish-American War, which was fought in both Cuba and the Philippines in 1898. The war is regarded, by historians and political scientists, as a starting point for the emergence of the US as a great power (Hodge, Nolan 2007: 192). In the wake of the American victory over Spain, Cuba became a protectorate of the United States, which at the same time took control of the Philippines. President William McKinley's (1897-1901) decision, made under public pressure, strengthened the faction of expansionists, who included, among others, future President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), and the most important American strategist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (as he is regarded) and naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan. In the context of transatlantic relations, the war with Spain initiated a closer partnership with America's earlier rival Great Britain, which openly supported the United States. The subordination of the Philippines was undeniably a starting point for America's century in Asia (Preston 2019: 48).

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of the noticeable internationalisation of US activity on the global stage, with Theodore Roosevelt playing a key role in this process.<sup>9</sup> The basic goals of his foreign policy were to considerably strengthen the US international position, significantly develop its maritime power, and consolidate partnership with Great Britain (Hodge, Nolan 2007: 192). While the president's international efforts were conspicuous primarily in Eastern Asia and Latin America,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore Roosevelt assumed the US presidency on 14 September 1901 because, as the sitting vice president, he took office following the death of William McKinley a few days after the attempt on his life.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Roosevelt gave the Monroe Doctrine its most interventionist interpretation by proclaiming, on 6 December 1904, a corollary, under which the United States could exercise internation-



they were closely connected with his way of thinking about European countries and the international system (Krabbendam, Thompson 2012: 4-8). Hence, it can be argued that the origins of modern transatlantic relations can be traced back to the Theodore Roosevelt presidency since Europe was a key point of reference in the development of the American international strategy. It was Roosevelt who established the general principle that Great Britain was to be an irreplaceable partner. Germany, in turn, which he regarded as a rival, was to be a barometer of transatlantic relations: good relations with Germany were to provide reassurance to the entire transatlantic area. Roosevelt was strongly inclined towards the realist paradigm of international relations, viewing America as potentially the greatest world power, which could not, however, preserve the peace through the practice of civic virtues alone (Kissinger 1994: 39-40). For America should take action in accordance with its national interests, which Roosevelt completely identified as the balance of power theory.

A completely different approach (from that of Roosevelt) to the role of the United States on the international stage was taken by Woodrow Wilson, who served as president from 1913 to 1921. While his ideas were very deeply rooted in the American tradition because it referred to the sense of the exceptionalism and destiny of the American people, due to the departure from unilateralism, it was doomed to failure once put into practice. This is because Wilson failed to win the Senate's approval for US membership in the League of Nations. However, he managed to develop a long-term US international strategy for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Under this approach, Wilsonianism can be placed, according to David Clinton, in a transatlantic historical framework spanning the period from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Ambrosius 2018: 358-360). Wilsonianism is thus part of transatlantic history which is considerably longer than its links with the president's ideas and his legacy alone. The events which had had an impact on the development of liberal internationalism as a permanent component of US foreign policy were the founding of the first permanent British settlement in Jamestown in 1607; the Declaration of Independence in 1776; the adoption of the Constitution in 1787; Wilson's addresses to the Senate of 22 January 1917 and to Congress of 2 April 1917, when he requested a declaration of war against Germany; the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928; and the Truman Doctrine of 12 March 1947.

Even before the decision about the need for US military engagement in World War I, Wilson laid down the outline of America's global approach, which had nothing to do with isolationist sentiments, an accusation made by his critic Theodore Roosevelt. Wilson's plan led to a crusading ideology that came to be known as Wilsonianism (Kissinger 1994: 44-47). This new American strategy was largely formulated in Woodrow Wilson's two addresses to Congress: the first one of 2 April 1917, when the president requested a declaration of war against Germany, the other one of 8 January 1918, when he proposed a peace programme for the world, known as the Fourteen

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al police powers in the Western Hemisphere to restore internal stability to the nations in the region (Kissinger 1994: 39).



Points. The January address is one of the most important speeches in the history of American diplomacy and, with just a few exceptions, it laid the foundations for US global activity to date (Preston 2019: 55-56). Wilson viewed the mission to change the world order as a messianic task given to America by God (Shipoli 2018: 54). No other US president has developed such an influential foreign policy approach that would merit its own proper name.

Wilsonianism was based on several key components. It boiled down to the belief that America should provide a path for the rest of the population, that democracies in their foreign policies strive for peace, and that state morality should not be different from individual morality. Wilson endeavoured to establish a universal international organisation, a League of Nations, based on a model of collective security. This was an expression of liberal internationalism, which meant forfeiting traditional unilateralism. "Wilson had two transformational objectives: to change American foreign policy and to change the very nature of world politics; and he linked the two together" (Nye 2019: 66).

There are several direct reasons why the United States joined the war effort on the side of Great Britain and France.<sup>11</sup> The decision to enter the war was supported by an overwhelming majority in both houses of Congress; yet the call was eventually made, however reluctantly, by Wilson himself. "Entering the war was the best if not only way to pursue Wilson's goals of democracy, self-determination, and collective security" (Gompert, Binnendijk, Lin 2014: 75). In his 2 April 1917 address Wilson emphasised that the United States had to wage war for the world to be safe for democracy while peace had to be based on the tested foundations of political liberty (Wilson 1917). He spoke of the United States as a country that defended humanity, had no selfish goals, and did not seek conquest, dominion or material compensation for its losses. Wilson very strongly outlined his liberal vision of the world order and, as he emphasised himself, he adopted a more moral approach to US foreign policy (Nye 2019: 64-66). This is what distinguished him from Theodore Roosevelt, who in his pursuit of a different political philosophy, interpreted international relations in realistic terms of the balance of power. Roosevelt was highly critical of Wilson's efforts for what he called unrealistic idealism since, unlike Wilson, he did not shun violence or war.

However, the term 'unrealistic idealism' can raise doubts. Historian and leading Wilson expert Arthur Link did consider the president to be an idealist, who subordinated goals and material interests to superior ethical standards and moral purposes. Moreover, his thinking about international relations resulted from his aversion to war. Yet in many ways Wilson was a realist as he used military forces to achieve diplomatic goals, understood the concept of the balance of power and appreciated the signifi-

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<sup>11</sup> Of greatest significance was the German U-boat campaign in the Atlantic against American merchant and passenger ships as well as the Zimmerman Telegram dispatched on 16 January 1917 by the German State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who proposed an alliance between Germany and Mexico against the Allied Powers and the United States. In return, Mexico was to recover former territories in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona (Gompert, Binnendijk, Lin 2014: 75-76).

cance of material interests. He believed that sometimes there is no other alternative and the people need to use force; however, war should be fought to achieve some higher goals, and not out of fascination with it (Link 1998: 155-156). Similar views about Wilson are shared by Tony Smith, who highlights that reducing Wilson to being “messianic” or “a crusader” is tantamount to caricaturing the man whose record was far more realistic in analysis and efforts than it seems to be (Smith 2017: 22). With regard to Roosevelt, who was critical of Wilson, he was accused of an imperialist approach. However, in some ways he was inspired by the same ideas that contributed to the Wilsonian vision of a new world order. As emphasised by Adam Quinn, it is difficult to regard Roosevelt as “an evangelist” of democracy, but he made a significant contribution to democracy promotion, broadening the horizons of American foreign policy (Quinn 2013: 38). Thus, he initiated a process that made the United States an assertive global power, which keenly made interventions (based on democratic values) in the internal affairs of other countries. This kind of approach was based on the belief that the US had a civilisational mission to carry out, which resulted from Roosevelt’s acceptance of American exceptionalism, which was also shared by Wilson (Nye 2019: 64). Roosevelt thought that America could serve humanity but, unlike Wilson, he believed that this goal could also be achieved by force.

Wilsonianism can be associated with the Americanisation of Europe and the world when it comes to the export of liberal values (including, above all, democracy promotion) even if Wilson’s approach to democracy as the source of the international world order was never complete (Thompson 2013: 53-68). Wilsonianism is not an explicit ideology,<sup>12</sup> and Wilson himself during the Paris Peace Conference, of which he was one of the main architects, had to make various compromises over the core principles of his ideology to achieve his primary goal, which was the establishment of a League of Nations as an integral part of the peace treaty (Thompson 2010: 35-37).<sup>13</sup>

Wilson, however, finally suffered defeat as he failed to persuade the US Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The isolationist option prevailed; its main proponent was the influential Republican senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a close associate of Theodore Roosevelt. The Republican senator did not believe that the League of Nations could contribute to establishing an international order of peace. He also thought that the new organisation could break the diplomatic tradition established by George Washington and that it could interfere in the affairs of the western hemisphere, which under the Monroe Doctrine, was America’s primary sphere of influence. Even though the League of

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<sup>12</sup> For example, even though Wilson was associated with liberal ideas, he was also a proponent of race politics and white supremacy both domestically and overseas. The principle of self-determination was linked with the need for promoting a Western imperialist civilising mission in the primitive East while the mandate system in the League of Nations was in fact colonialism by another name. It should be remembered though that the racist approach was highly influential in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Acharya, Buzan 2019:93).

<sup>13</sup> Woodrow Wilson’s attitude during the Versailles negotiations could have been affected by illness brought about by the Spanish flu, which the president suffered from while in Paris (Barry 2005: 384-388).

Nations was considered to be a mechanism for the prevention of future wars, it was feared that US membership in this organisation of collective security would lead to unwanted entanglement in conflicts worldwide and would limit America's freedom to act (Thompson 2010: 37). Moreover, Americans were not convinced of the need to promote democracy and implement the principle of self-determination. This is what led to Wilson's defeat as president; however, his ideas had a profound impact on his successors, including even Richard Nixon, as Henry Kissinger admits, who considered himself a disciple of Wilson's internationalism even though in his foreign policy he followed a number of Theodore Roosevelt's guidelines (Kissinger 1994: 54).

#### THE IMPACT OF WILSONIANISM ON US FOREIGN POLICY DURING WORLD WAR II AND AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE COLD WAR

Due to President Woodrow Wilson's defeat in the US Senate, the interwar period is often described in terms of a return to isolationism. However, this approach can be disputed because the United States was engaged on the global stage both politically and economically. Not only did the United States develop its diplomatic activity, for example, by initiating the Kellog-Briand Pact,<sup>14</sup> which tried to eliminate war as an instrument of foreign policy, but it was also becoming a global financial power as the US dollar was gradually replacing the pound sterling as the main international reserve currency (Mabee 2013: 27-28). However, the US did not implement Wilsonianism as the American version of liberal internationalism, which embraces such elements as: economic openness, multilateralism, US leadership and democracy promotion (Smith 2017: 11-22). These developments occurred only as a result of another tragic world war, which broke out twenty years after World War I, a military conflict that was not fully settled from the perspective of establishing a new stable world order.<sup>15</sup> Doubtless the events of World War II led to the start of the American era, which was based primarily on Woodrow Wilson's ideas. They became the foundation of foreign policy pursued not only by Democratic but also Republican presidents, which proves the universal nature of Wilson's legacy.

Doubtless an important link between Wilson's legacy and the US assumption of an active global role in the Cold War period was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who served as president from 1933 to 1945. Both Roosevelt and his vice president and successor Harry Truman (1945-1953) considered themselves Wilsonians, establishing the liberal world order that prevailed after 1945 (Nye 2020: 5). During his first term, Roosevelt was not too actively engaged in foreign policy besides the official recognition of the

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<sup>14</sup> The Kellog-Briand Pact was signed on 27 August 1928 in Paris by 15 states, with another 47 joining at a later time. It was a joint initiative of the French foreign minister Aristide Briand and United States Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg.

<sup>15</sup> Assessing the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Marshal of France Ferdinand Foch remarked: "This is not peace; it is an armistice for 20 years" (Plowright 2007: 11).

Soviet Union since his main goal was to pull out the US of the great economic depression. The situation began to evolve in 1936-1937, when the New Deal programme had stabilised the US economy and Germany and Japan were clearly becoming revisionist powers. For Roosevelt these countries posed a threat not only to the security but also to the survival of the United States and the American way of life. Contrary to the US Congress's isolationist efforts, Roosevelt understood that due to the globalisation of the international system even remote threats can endanger US security.<sup>16</sup> In 1935-1939, Congress passed several neutrality acts that banned US involvement in foreign military conflicts. They were supported by the pacifist movement but they also resulted from the widespread belief among Americans that interference in European wars was fruitless (Leuchtenberg n.d.). Due to the exacerbation of the international situation, President Roosevelt, driven by liberal internationalism, sought to revise those acts. In his January 1939 State of the Union address to both houses of Congress, he emphasised that storms from abroad challenged three complementary and supportive institutions, that is religion, democracy and international good faith (Roosevelt 1939). The president very clearly stressed that neutrality could have unfair effects as it could actually support the aggressor and deny aid to the victim. In his view, survival, and even decreasing the probability of attack, was only possible by providing prior assurance of adequate defence and armament (not after the attack begins).

Wilsonian ideas were very clearly reflected in President Roosevelt's approach to defining the foundations of the post-war world order. That approach was laid down in the Atlantic Charter, a joint British-American statement signed by Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt on 14 August 1941, that is before the United States entered World War II. Its principles concerning post-war security were derived from Wilsonianism and did not include any geopolitical elements (Kissinger 1994: 390-393). This was because Roosevelt understood that in order to convince Americans that the US should become engaged in the war effort, he –like Wilson before him – needed to appeal to their idealism.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he disregarded the balance of power and thought that a future peace settlement could only be guaranteed through the creation of a world community that would be consistent with American ideals of democracy and social order. After the signing of the Atlantic Charter and particularly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, he embarked on a programme designed not only to defeat the enemy but also to establish a liberal world order that would ensure peace and security.

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<sup>16</sup> In February 1939, the isolationist Republican senator Arthur Vandenberg admitted that "time and space are relatively annihilated"; however he thanked God for two insulating oceans (Kissinger 1994: 385). In January 1945, Vandenberg announced his conversion to internationalism and thanks to his close cooperation with President Truman it was possible to achieve the fundamental objectives of US foreign policy, from the birth of the United Nations up to the establishment of NATO (Podraza 2019: 87).

<sup>17</sup> In May 1940, 64% of Americans thought that the preservation of peace was more important than the defeat of the Nazis. Shortly before the Pearl Harbor attack, in December 1941, the same view was held by a mere 32% (Kissinger 1994: 392).

At the centre of Roosevelt's vision was an international organisation whose project began to be developed with the approval of the Atlantic Charter, and which the president himself called the United Nations at a meeting with representatives of 26 countries over the Christmas 1941 holidays in Washington (Hamilton 2016: 19). However, if the United Nations was to avoid the fate of the League of Nations, it was necessary to ensure not only their participation but also strong leadership, which was linked with the concept of the four policemen including – besides the US – Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China. This idea led to the establishment of the United Nations Security Council. Roosevelt's project to establish the United Nations was thus a modification of Wilsonian ideas as to some extent it came to include a realistic approach. However, the degree of departure from Wilsonian idealism was modest since the future role of the great powers was to enforce international law in the spheres of influence under their control (Brand 2019: 643). The use of the term sphere of influence, as declared by Roosevelt himself during the Yalta Conference in February 1945, had nothing to do with a realistic mechanism of the balance of power since the new universal organisation, whose goal was to secure peace, should put an end to the system of unilateral action, exclusive alliances and spheres of influence.

The UN, which was founded after the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that is on 24 October 1945 with the signing of the Charter of the United Nations, could not fulfil all of his hopes. This was largely because Roosevelt wrongly assumed that Stalin had a similar perception of the world. Roosevelt was not fully aware that Stalin had created a totalitarian state and had been responsible for murdering millions of people, signing a pact with Hitler as well as exterminating and enslaving neighbouring peoples (Nye 2007: 120). The confrontation of Roosevelt's approach with Stalin's expansionist policies resulted in the need to modify US policy. Soon afterwards, President Harry Truman had to revise the fairly careful approach adopted by Roosevelt, who was opposed to stationing American troops in Europe and US assistance in the economic reconstruction of European countries after World War II (Kissinger 1994: 394-396). A breakthrough came in 1947, when the United States embarked on the policy of containment to prevent the spread of communism primarily in Europe, which embraced the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as well as the establishment of NATO in 1949 (Podraza 2016: 259-266, Podraza 2019: 72-80, 85-89).

Thanks to these initiatives, the United States achieved two goals. Firstly, by providing economic assistance, the US contributed to the economic reconstruction of western European countries, thus stabilising them economically and politically as these countries were developing as market economies and liberal democracies. Secondly, through the establishment of NATO, the United States provided security to their European allies, keeping American troops in Europe. This led to the establishment of an Atlantic system involving Americans and Europeans, also allowing the latter to initiate the process of integration. Thus, the second half of the 1940s saw Wilsonianism being adjusted to the new reality both worldwide and in Europe. Truman established a liberal world order in which the United States became a hegemon. In

doing so, he implemented all elements of Woodrow Wilson's approach. That applied to the establishment of multilateral institutions, democracy promotion, international economic openness, and last but not least, close US involvement in world politics.

#### WILSONIANISM VS. AMERICAN POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

No doubt the end of the Cold War largely resulted from the effectiveness of the US international strategy after World War II and led to the new wave of democratisation across the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A large contribution to the peaceful end of East-West rivalry was made by President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), whose doctrine concerning democracy promotion was the quintessence of Wilsonianism. Tony Smith called Reagan the most Wilsonian president since Wilson himself (Tucker 1993/1994: 84). However, for the United States, the end of the Cold War could paradoxically be associated with the beginning of the end of the American era. The United States became the only superpower and, as the most world's powerful country, was gaining advantages over others in political, military, economic, technological and cultural terms. However, its significance has relatively declined due to the emergence of an increasingly interdependent world, the dispersion of power in world politics and the rising importance of new political or economic centres, such as the European Union, China, India and Japan.<sup>18</sup>

The rhetoric of the George Bush (1989-1993)<sup>19</sup> and Bill Clinton (1993-2001) administrations "echoed the Wilsonian spirit of Reagan's farewell address" (Smith 2017: 187). Their political programs included such elements of liberal internationalism as democracy, open markets, multiculturalism, and, obviously, American leadership, all of which were guarantees of world peace. However, their implementation was of limited in nature. Bush was successful in transforming NATO after the end of the Cold War (contrary to popular views held by politicians and international analysts, who were inclined towards realism and prophesied the end of the North Atlantic Alliance)<sup>20</sup> and supporting countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the democratisation process. Clinton essentially made a very difficult decision on NATO enlargement, as a result of which in 1999 the North Atlantic Alliance expanded to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.<sup>21</sup>

However, the implementation of an assertive multilateral approach in world politics did not bring the expected results if only because the European Union did not

<sup>18</sup> While the issue of a relative decline came up as early as the 1960s., it became hotly debated from various points of view after the end of the Cold War and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Podraza 2018: 14-19).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Nye calls George Bush a pragmatic realist, who used Wilsonian language with reference to collective security and a new world order (Nye 2019: 69).

<sup>20</sup> For more, see Podraza 2018.

<sup>21</sup> In the early 1990s, the prevailing view was that NATO should not acquire new democracies. For more on anti-enlargement arguments see Taylor 1992. For more on arguments from that period on the enlargement of western security institutions see Podraza 1992.



become a real US partner as it was unable to put an end to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (Podraza 2014: 62-63). In view of that, Clinton had no choice but to use force in a more unilateral way and to adopt the indispensable nation approach, which contributes to the restoration and maintenance of world peace and security. With regard to democracy promotion, which was one of the three goals of the US global strategy, Bill Clinton followed pragmatic idealism, which also allowed the use of force.

However, the assessment of the impact of the Wilsonian agenda on the development of the world order in the 1990s is not fully conclusive. The United States managed to aid the democratisation process in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but failed to do so in the case of Russia and China.<sup>22</sup> Even though Wilsonianism contributed to considerable and permanent change in the 1990s, the end of this decade saw its limitations, departures from this approach and the need for its redefinition with regard to the construction of the world order (Mead 2002: 286-292). That state of affairs resulted not only from the misjudgement of the international context, but also from the traditional or even the internal limitations of Wilsonianism. They concerned the logic of Wilsonian policies which led the United States to highly unpopular interventions in the context of lacking sufficient political resources in the US itself (due to often divergent views on the need to use force). Hence, Wilsonianism can be affected more severely by its internal limitations than by the actions of hostile external powers.

The George W. Bush presidency (2001-2009) can provoke disagreements as to what extent it implemented Wilsonianism. Bush's pressure on the issue of democracy promotion, even in the case of the unilateral use of military force<sup>23</sup>, can lead to the conclusion that the Bush Doctrine reflected liberal internationalism (Ikenberry 2008: 2). However, there are also opposing views that the essence of Wilsonianism came down not to the spread of democracy but to a world order based on partnership- and rules-based world order, which Bush generally rejected. Consequently, Bush's approach, called the new unilateralism, can thus be regarded as a modification of Wilsonianism since it was a blend of American idealism (peace through democracy) and *Realpolitik* (unilateral use of military force) (Podraza 2014: 64-66). The Bush Doctrine, manifested in the war on terror with the unilateral and preventive use of force, led to internal divisions in Europe into countries supporting the US (Great Britain) in its invasion of Iraq, and others, such France and Germany, that were strongly opposed to this con-

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<sup>22</sup> The United States had very restricted opportunities to impact the situation particularly in China. As a result, soon after taking office, President Bill Clinton gave up on rhetoric about democracy promotion with regard to this country. In 1994, Clinton made a decision to delink human rights and trade with China even though administration officials kept emphasising that "increased US trade and investment in China would be an important force for political liberalization" (Carothers 2000: 3).

<sup>23</sup> The use of force in democracy promotion arouses controversy. While some point to Germany and Japan as countries that were transformed into democracies thanks to military intervention in World War II, the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan from the Bush presidency confirm the general claim that interventions may not be effective or may even have a negative impact on democratisation (Downes, Monten 2018: 80-81). Detailed analysis of US efforts in the area of nation-building from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to George W. Bush can be found for example in Dobbins, Poole, Long et al. 2008.



flict. Moreover, the European Union adopted a completely different approach to the world order, called effective multilateralism, which was based on the development of a stronger international community, international institutions and international law (European Council 2003, Council of the European Union 2019).

The possibility of overcoming the impasse in transatlantic relations was linked with the 2008 election of Barack Obama as president (2009-2017). In his efforts, Obama attached great importance to the multilateral approach, yet more in a global than in a transatlantic dimension; moreover, he made a clear turn to Asia, calling himself America's first Pacific president (Podraza 2014: 64-67). Considering the most important elements of Wilsonianism, for Obama, multilateralism was a prerequisite for the development of US diplomacy; yet although he perceived the use of force as a last resort, security interests prevailed over democracy. Barack Obama's foreign policy was pursued in an increasingly post-American world. Obama was a pragmatic internationalist who was aware of the limitations that the US encountered on the global stage. Hence, the president emphasised the need for greater engagement of other countries in peacekeeping and international security. Obama strongly argued that he did not need any new grand strategy, but only the right strategic partners, stressing, among other things, a very important issue of burden-sharing within NATO (Popescu 2017: 178).

Doubtless a great challenge to pursuing Wilsonianism as the foundation of US foreign policy was the election of Donald Trump and his taking office in January 2017. His campaign slogan *America first* was perceived as isolationist as it echoed the slogan of the opposition movement against President F.D. Roosevelt's decision to involve the US in World War II (Calamur 2017). However, it should be remembered that the first president to have used the phrase *America first* was none other than Woodrow Wilson himself, who in a Philadelphia address in June 1916 appealed to his fellow citizens to put America first in their feelings (Haglund 2020: 21-23). However, the claim put forward by Haglund, who tries to draw a parallel between Trump and Wilson, should be viewed as a scientific provocation since, as the author himself admits, Trump is generally associated with illiberal nationalism whereas Wilson with liberal internationalism. It can thus be argued that the Trump presidency deepened the process of departing from Wilsonianism as the foundation of the American era even though the US in the post-Cold War era can be regarded as a hyperpower. The role of the United States as the leader of the liberal world order had eroded as "[f]or the first time since the 1930s, the United States has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism" (Ikenberry 2018: 7). In crisis were transatlantic relations, which since the Harry Truman presidency had been the main axis of the US global strategy. It is true that Trump drew attention to some issues that have been and still are problematic in relations between Americans and Europeans. For example, he raised the problem of burden-sharing within NATO, which was a major issue back in the Cold War era. However, he did this in a ruthless and transactional manner, suggesting the limited nature of US commitments as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which resulted from the US abandonment of the missionary sense of responsibility

for the Western world (Kiwierska, Kubera, Morozowski 2017: 81-83). Moreover, his individualism in making key decisions, unpredictability and lack of clearly defined foreign policy objectives raised concerns about US global leadership and intentions towards European partners within transatlantic relations.

Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 elections and the election of the Democrat Joe Biden, former vice president to Barack Obama, are bringing hope that the United States will return to a more constructive foreign policy that will allow more scope for partners from various corners of the globe, including Europe. As Biden announced at the start of 2020, during his presidency he would "take immediate steps to renew U.S. democracy and alliances, protect the United States' economic future, and once more have America lead the world" (Biden 2020). While there are traces of Wilsonianism in this statement, a complete return to this approach is not possible. This is because the United States needs to face serious threats and global challenges, notably Russia's aggression against Ukraine, strategic competition with China and termination of the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly with regard to China, US interests are not identical to the approach of many European countries. A potential cold war with China would be very different from the US-Soviet rivalry. Furthermore, a complete departure from Donald Trump's policies will not be easy as the previous president followed a line of thinking about the US role on the global stage which, on the one hand, was at odds with Wilson's approach and legacy, but, on the other hand, was also rooted in the American tradition.

## CONCLUSION

For decades Wilsonianism has been an extremely influential approach in the implementation of the US international strategy. It is deeply rooted in the American tradition even though Woodrow Wilson abandoned the unilateral approach, which prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and showed the need for the United States to take global leadership. While Wilsonianism is associated with liberal internationalism, the way successive US presidents employed this approach shows that there were many elements identical with the realistic paradigm in international relations. The current events, including the coronavirus pandemic, raise a wide range of crucial questions about the changing world order and US leadership. Will there be a cold war between the US, which has experienced a decline in importance, and China, which is rising in the world and becoming increasingly assertive? What should be an adequate response to the rebirth of Russia's neo-imperial policy and aggression against Ukraine? How is it possible to tackle new and surprisingly changing security threats and challenges? There may be far more such questions. In view of the above, it may be worthwhile to re-embrace Wilsonian recipes, i.e. to create solutions and conditions that will make the world safe for democracy. Time will tell whether this will happen, and this will have a decisive impact on whether the American era in world politics can be continued.

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**Keywords:** foreign policy, the United States, Wilsonianism, democracy promotion, multilateralism

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ABSTRACT

*The main goal of this paper is to analyse continuity and change in American foreign policy with special emphasis on President Woodrow Wilson's approach and its impact on the US international strategy during World War II, the beginning of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era. It is argued that Wilson's approach was not created in a vacuum and although it put an end to the era that was inspired by President George Washington's farewell address from 1796, it fits very well in the traditional thought regarding the American people and mission, as well as other elements that are at the core of US international activity. Wilsonianism, understood as liberal internationalism, has been a very influential concept in the development of American foreign policy for decades and during World War II it contributed to the rise of the American era in international politics. Due to the transformation of the global order after the end of the Cold War and also in the wake of the Donald Trump presidency, it may be considered whether or not the American era has come to an end. The analysis of US foreign policy takes into account both liberal theory, referred to by Woodrow Wilson, as well as realism theory, associated with Wilson's predecessor, President Theodor Roosevelt.*