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*H.W. Brands , Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor)*

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**Woodrow Wilson** H.W. Brands , Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Editor)

**A comprehensive account of the rise and fall of one of the major shapers of American foreign policy**

On the eve of his inauguration as President, Woodrow Wilson commented, "It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs." As America was drawn into the Great War in Europe, Wilson used his scholarship, his principles, and the political savvy of his advisers to overcome his ignorance of world affairs and lead the country out of isolationism. The product of his efforts—his vision of the United States as a nation uniquely suited for moral leadership by virtue of its democratic tradition—is a view of foreign policy that is still in place today.

Acclaimed historian and Pulitzer Prize finalist H. W. Brands offers a clear, well-informed, and timely account of Wilson's unusual route to the White House, his campaign against corporate interests, his struggles with rivals at home and allies abroad, and his decline in popularity and health following the rejection by Congress of his League of Nations. Wilson emerges as a fascinating man of great oratorical power, depth of thought, and purity of intention.

## Woodrow Wilson Details

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# From Reader Review Woodrow Wilson for online ebook

## Jim Thomas says

Short and sweet

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## Robin Friedman says

The Distinguished Professor of History at Texas A&M University, H.W Brands, has a rare talent for writing accessible, and engaging works covering broad periods of American history. Brands has written, for example, biographies of diverse figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Franklin Roosevelt. He has written overviews of the Gilded Age and of contemporary American history which are informative and entertaining. His books about Aaron Burr and U.S. Grant are scheduled to be published this year.

Brands' short biography "Woodrow Wilson" (2003) is part of the American Presidents series edited by Arthur Schelsinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz, and it shows both the strengths and weaknesses of his writing. The book has a lyricism and an immediacy that draws in the reader. It offers a good basic portrayal of its subject and of his importance. Brands organizes his book around a basic insight into Wilson which sees the president as a "man of words", an intellectual, and an idealist. The book works well as an overview and introduction which focuses on Wilson's strengths but at the cost of some simplification.

Wilson (1856 -- 1924) served from 1913 -- 1921 as the 28th American president. Before his election to the presidency, Wilson was an academic and intellectual with several important books on politics and American history to his credit. From 1902 -- 1910, Wilson served as president of Princeton University. In 1912, Wilson ran on Progressive principles to defeat his divided opponents, former president Theodore Roosevelt and incumbent president William Howard Taft. In a short opening chapter, Brands covers Wilson's early life, his career at Princeton, his election to the presidency, and the domestic achievements of his early administration. These achievements include the reduction of the tariff, the creation of the Federal Reserve, the strengthening of antitrust laws, and the creation of the Federal Trade Commission, among much else. There is a great deal of material to be absorbed and considered for a brief chapter.

The focus of Brands' biography is on WW I and on Wilson's role in the conflict. Wilson initially sought to keep the United States neutral. As a result of a complex series of events, he sought and received a declaration of war from Congress following his reelection. The book describes the tortured course which led to the War, its prosecution by the United States, Wilson's attempt to create a peace based upon the League of Nations, and the Congressional rejection of the League. This period of American history is difficult, complex, and controversial. Brands casts Wilson and his idealistic principles in a highly positive light. There is, however, a broad divergency of historical opinion about Wilson which Brands does not develop fully. Brands also tends to downplay the Wilson administration's attack on Civil Liberties during WW I together with the Administration's strong support, and strengthening, of Jim Crow. Most of the books in the American Presidents series focus upon the strengths of their subjects rather than on their shortcomings. This approach allows the reader to focus upon the goals of each president and upon that president's understanding of the United States and of leadership. On the whole, this approach is preferable to a deflationary approach, especially in an introductory study. But readers need to use judgment and reflection.

Brands, as well as his protagonist, are men of words. The words of both author and subject feature

prominently in this account. For example, Brands sets the tone of his biography of Wilson at the outset:

"In the beginning was the word. And in the end was the word. And in between were words: beautiful words, soaring words, words that moved a nation and enthralled a world, words that for a wonderful moment were more powerful than armies, words that made the most terrible sacrifice seem part of a glorious struggle, words that echoed across the oceans and down the decades."

Brands quotes extensively from Wilson throughout the short book. He allows his subject to speak for himself to give the reader a feel for Wilson's intellect, passion, and idealism. Thus, the book opens with Brands' own summation, and it closes with a moving excerpt from Wilson's second inaugural address of March, 1917. Wilson said:

"We are provincials no longer. The tragic events of the thirty months of vital turmoil through which we have just passed have made us citizens of the world. There can be no turning back. Our own fortunes as a nation are involved whether we would have it so or not."

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"The shadows that now lie dark upon our path will soon be dispelled, and we shall walk with the light all about us, if we be but true to ourselves -- to ourselves as we have wished to be known in the counsels of the world and in the thought of all those who love liberty and justice and the right exalted."

Brands' book offers an inspiring overview of an important American president and his ideals at a pivotal moment of history.

Robin Friedman

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### **Jennifer says**

I was able to fly through this smoothly written summary of Woodrow Wilson's life. The author in a very even-handed, unbiased way captured the essence of Wilson's life and passions. At the end of the book, though, I was saddened by the fact that Wilson was never to see his vision for the world fulfilled. He envisioned a world full of peace, with all of the world powers setting aside their selfish desires, living in harmony with each other. This is a beautiful vision for the world, and when God overturns this world and creates a new one that is exactly how it will be. It will never happen in this world, though, and I think that Wilson would have been a better leader of if he had realized this: humankind is at its heart sinful and evil; world peace can never be accomplished as long as sin is in the world.

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### **Zach Koenig says**

For a President like Woodrow Wilson, in which so many important events happened to our country during his administrations, this biography could easily be expanded two or three-fold and probably not get overly boring. However, this short little effort is EXACTLY how the American Presidents series is supposed to function (though it doesn't always happen this way).

Basically, this is a free-flowing narrative of Wilson's life, covering such key events as:

- His early years studying to be a lawyer.
- His rise through the Democratic party.
- His first election victory and first term skirmishes with Europe and Mexico.
- His involvement in World War I, including the 14-point plan, the war strategy itself, and the League of Nations he so desperately believed in.
- The personal life and thought processes of perhaps one of the most idealist Presidents this nation has ever seen.

If the goal of this series is to give a concise biography of each U.S. President, then this Brands effort suits the bill perfectly, as it never gets long-winded or goes too fast. I wished that a few more pages would have been devoted to President Wilson's personality and "home life", but overall I very much enjoyed this installment of the series.

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### **Irving Koppel says**

Aside from being somewhat sparse on the early years of our 27th president, Mr. Brands has written a very readable, well-annotated work on

the major portions of Wilson's career. He shows how a young man dedicated to improving his oratorical skills became a much sought-after professor of Political Science at Princeton University. From that position he became that university's president. When the state of New Jersey needed a fresh face for governor, Woodrow was available and electable. In 1912, he went on to become the president of the United States. While he was responsible for much progressive legislation, he is more remembered for his contributions to ending World War I and the establishment of the League of Nations. The fickleness of the public is so well illustrated by the way

Wilson was hailed as a messiah at first and then cast down as a pariah.

Had this been fiction, one would have called it a tragedy. Since it was a real story, it became everyone's tragedy when World War II broke out 20 years after Wilson's unsuccessful attempt to persuade America to become a member of the League of Nations.

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### **Shawn Thrasher says**

Excellent short sketch of Woodrow Wilson; not really a biography per se, more of a political sketch of Wilson and his term with some biographical elements. Brands writes masterfully and powerfully. The last chapters in particular engage the reader. I've read -- or attempted to read -- some biographies of Woodrow Wilson that were longer and much, much less influential on my thoughts about the president. I thought some of the ideas that Brands expands upon were quite interesting and well done in what amounts to a very small space: Woodrow Wilson's relationship with his second wife Edith was incredibly influential on both domestic and world affairs, in ways we probably will never know; that Wilson "lived too long and died too soon" meaning if he died from his stroke, he would have died a hero and martyr instead of a broken man, and

that if he'd lived long enough, he would have seen many of his ideas come to fruition. Or another idea: "Wilson discovered -- in the way presidents typically do -- that power isn't nearly as threatening when wielded by oneself as when one's opponents hold it." Isn't that true about every president, even those in the same party?

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## **Mark says**

Shortly before his inauguration, Woodrow Wilson told a friend that "It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs". Of course we all know what happened - or if you don't then you definitely have to read this brief (~140 pages of actual text) and informative account of the Wilson administration that focuses almost entirely on Wilson's foreign policy. (Wilson's blindness to racial injustice gets a mere paragraph in the postscript).

I've now read the first 27 installments of The American Presidents Series, and there's a general rule: volumes about obscure presidents are more interesting than volumes about more important presidents. Some of this finding may be personal, as I come in knowing a fair amount about American history. Despite my prior knowledge about this prominent President, I still found H.W. Brands's account interesting and engaging. I especially enjoyed his emphasis on the power of Wilson's rhetoric, as demonstrated by numerous direct quotations.

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## **Gary Schantz says**

This book is very insightful as it does a nice job of pointing out that despite Wilson's flaws as a man (somewhat narrow-minded and a bit on the overly sensitive), he was intuitive. This is particularly understood by his vision for handling of the end of WWI with his League of Nations idea. At the time, it was viewed as bad plan that would commit America to future wars should Europe or any place else erupt into a dispute. However, this was a simplified view of his idea that failed to understand the many exceptions to prevent American involvement in other wars.

In his lifetime, this plan was voted down only to be revisited as the United Nations more than 25 years later in the aftermath of WWII.

Also, his vision that harshly punishing Germany would haunt England and France in the years to come. WWII could have been avoided had pride not ruled over reason as the the Treaty of Versailles not been more about punishment than about peace. This one act was the spark that ignited Adolf Hitler's campaign against the west 20 years later.

Incidentally, the treaty was signed in the Hall of Mirrors (one wonders how much reflection there would be when the treaty manifested itself into a much larger European war).

The only item that was missing from the book was the impact of the Spanish Influenza on the world. I cite this because it played a big factor in WWI as well as Wilson's own health and eventual incapacitation during the last 2 years of his presidency. It resulted in quite a famous question for history due to his illness...who was really the President for those 2 years...Wilson or his wife?

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### **Faith says**

I read this book as part of my research for WWI. The book itself was good, though I didn't know quite so much about Woodrow Wilson before. And now I kind of wish I didn't. But those are just personal beliefs about how the government should be run, not anything to do with the book itself. If you want to know about Woodrow Wilson, this is a good book to read or listen to.

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### **Doreen Petersen says**

Although Wilson was not rated as one of the best presidents I believe his intentions towards bettering the US's international reputation were solid and helped towards the formation of the United Nations. He had his faults to be sure as we all do but this is definitely a book well worth reading.

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### **Bill Christman says**

Woodrow Wilson's first term as President may have been one of the best terms by any President. The numerous reforms and progressive legislation that was passed ranks Wilson as one of the most effective Presidents. What Brands brings out in this small biography is that his expertise was in domestic politics. His knowledge of foreign affairs was not as well versed and mistake after mistake would be made. What compounded Wilson's problems would be his idealistic rhetoric. He created a reason to fight in The Great War that could not be fulfilled by mortal politicians. Much of Wilson's rhetoric and idealism would come to fruition during World War II and after. Both for good and bad. Wilson's idealism at this particular moment in history gave him an impact that is still being felt. H. W. Brands is one of the best historians around and this very small biography is a great introduction into Woodrow Wilson.

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### **John Kaufmann says**

Excellent, and brief, introduction to President Wilson. Very little about his childhood, some background about his experience at Princeton and as Governor, but mostly about his years as President. Wilson was the President who gave us the Federal reserve, the income tax, and the Federal Trade Commission, as well as a host of other progressive legislation (child labor laws, etc.). Most of that was accomplished in his first term. In 1914, of course, Europe broke out in World War I. The book then chronicles his (eventually unsuccessful) efforts to keep the US neutral, and, of course, the battle over his Fourteen Points and the League of Nations. Excellent read. Brands, of course, is one of our best historians - he has a knack for finding the essence of a story and making clear and understandable.

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### **Gary says**

I fairly high level over view of Woodrow Wilson's life story.

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## Steven Freeman says

A comprehensive biography of President Wilson. An academic who studied politics and then got the chance to actively participate. A southerner by birth who never came to terms with his racist upbringing. He was also an idealist who foreshadowed the global cooperation to prevent and deter world wars. His League of Nations concept may have prevented World War II if it had been successful. However, a debilitating stroke put him on the sidelines just when his persuasive oratory powers were needed to pass the treaty. In a time without radio or television, he remained president until the end of his term, about 17 months, while his inner circle kept his condition from the public. It would take another world war for his vision to become reality as the United Nations.

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## Steven Peterson says

Many people ask when they found out that I'm a political scientist: "When has a political scientist ever affected politics?" Frankly, there are quite a few who have done so (think Henry Kissinger, for instance). But, above all, there is Woodrow Wilson. He served as President of the American Political Science Association and wrote a series of works that are still viewed as classics in the study of politics and public administration.

This biography, another of those brief looks at presidents in "The American Presidents" series, does its job well. While I agree with other reviewers that this is such a brief volume that it glosses over much of Wilson's career, the series is what it is. And I think it somewhat unfair to criticize the book for working within the parameters imposed upon it.

That said, this is a capable biography. I think a little more information about his early career, his life as an academic, an academic administrator, and governor may be covered too briefly even for this series. But that is not atypical.

The book does give a sense of his persona--aloofness, stubbornness, rigidity, certitude, erudition, persuasive ability--and how this helped him succeed, but also could lead him to take stands that hurt his cause.

The volume lays out the accomplishments with which he is associated, advancing the progressive agenda, enunciating a political perspective ("The New Freedom"), and the like. It also addresses his foreign policy--from the not terribly successful Mexican adventure to his leadership of the country in World War I to his efforts to transform global governance after the war (note his 14 points and his effort to establish a meaningful "League of Nations").

He ran into political opposition with the League. The book does a nice job--even with its brevity on this score--explaining why he failed and how the effort here plus preexisting medical problems led to his breakdown and the strange last months of his presidency.

There were contradictions with Wilson--his Southern background was associated with racism, even as his ideals led him to assist workers throughout the country with his Progressive policies. If you want a quick introduction to Wilson that nonetheless provides some understanding of his presidency, you could do a lot



worse than visiting this volume.

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