The United States Accede to Global Leadership

Percipient as Eyre Crowe’s analysis of 1907 was in defining the problem of German political hegemony it failed to address the question of succession. For it was not enough to oppose German ambitions, justified or unjustified; an alternative scheme of world order and alternative leadership had also to be offered. It was not enough to assume that Britain would continue for ever in the role it had played in the two cycles just past (to use our present terminology).

Writing in 1939 what to this day remains one of the best introductions to the study of International Relations, E. H. Carr was more explicit on this crucial question. He knew that the conditions that had secured the lead status for Britain in the nineteenth century no longer existed, but he was also aware that contemporary Englishmen ‘sometimes console themselves with the dream that British supremacy, instead of passing altogether away, will be transmuted into the higher and more affective form of an ascendancy of the English-speaking peoples’ (Carr, 1939, p. 298). This harked back to the early years of the century when many prominent leaders in both countries spoke of an Anglo-Saxon alliance and when the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, allowing the United States and Britain the same ratio in battleships, was a ‘more or less conscious bid by Great Britain for an equal partnership with the United States in the management of the world’ (Carr, 1939, p. 299).

We know now that this idea did not assume permanent institutional form between 1900 and 1945, not even that of a formal treaty of alliance. Confident of its own strength and self-reliant, the United States forged ahead in the world arena on its own terms, strongly under President Theodore Roosevelt, and strikingly under President Woodrow Wilson.

LEADERSHIP OFFERED, AND DECLINED

Wilson’s policies have been called unrealistic, or utopian, in retrospect. But a look at his vision does not justify a simple dismissal. Foremost in his mind, as recounted by an early chronicler (Baker, 1922-3, Vol. I, p. 18) was the need to erect a contrast with what he saw as ‘the German idea’ of ‘the state seeking only its own safety and its own welfare’. The President did recognise that his nation was a powerful state, but he also perceived its role in the light of the Biblical precept (Mark 10:44): ‘Whoever of you will be the chiefest shall be the servant of all’. He saw
the United States committed ‘not to its own aggrandizement, but to the service of the world’.

As the clouds of war were gathering over Europe, the President concluded his 1914 Independence Day speech in Philadelphia with these words:

my dream is this: that as the years go on and the world knows more and more of America, it will turn to America for those moral inspirations which lie at the base of all freedom, that it will never fear America unless it finds itself engaged in some enterprise inconsistent with the rights of humanity, that America will come to that day when all shall know she puts human rights above all other rights, and that her flag is ... the flag of humanity ... America has lifted the light that will shine unto all generations and guide the feet of mankind to the goal of justice, liberty, and peace (The New York Times, 5 July 1914, p. 3).

Three years later Woodrow Wilson took the United States into the First World War. His message to Congress recommending belligerency war (Doc. 49) was cast in the same terms of moral leadership he had used earlier. He defined unrestricted submarine warfare, initiated by Germany weeks earlier, as a threat to the freedom of the seas (echoes of Grotius) and a ‘challenge to all mankind’. He proclaimed the war to be an opportunity to ‘make the world safe for democracy’ now that upon the overthrow of the Tsar by the February Revolution the Triple Entente (with Britain and France) had lost its autocratic element. Germany, too, could be expected to shed its government.

Walter Lippmann, who at the time had reason to know what Colonel House and other Presidential advisers were thinking, believed that the real cause for war was that ‘the cutting of the Atlantic communications meant the starvation of Britain and, therefore, the conquest of Western Europe by imperial Germany’, a situation that ‘would have made the world unsafe’ for the Americas and would allow Germany ‘to gain the mastery of the Atlantic Ocean’. We might notice that such reasoning closely paralleled the way in which British security was thought threatened by French mastery of the Low Countries and the narrow seas in 1793. Lippmann later expressed regret that this ‘simple and self-evident American interest was not candidly made explicit’ (1943, pp. 33–7).

In a historic message to Congress of January 1918, President Wilson defined the aims of the First World War in the form of Fourteen Points (Doc. 50). Of these, six were chiefly Wilson’s own contributions, and constituted a statement of general principles of international relations concerning: freedom of the seas, freedom of trade, arms control, national self-determination, and the need for a ‘general association of nations’. In their rhetorical flourish, these Points recall President Lincoln’s Gettysburg address and the Declaration of Independence.

The eight other Points dealt with territorial questions in Europe and