

Inga Floto: *Colonel House in Paris. A Study of American Foreign Policy at the Paris Peace Conference 1919*. Universitetsforlaget, Århus, 1973. 374 s. 75 kr.

Colonel Edward Mandell House continues to be something of a mysterious, and very much of a controversial person, in spite of everything that has been written about him. No one doubts that, for a time, he enjoyed the complete confidence of President Woodrow Wilson and played a crucial role in the diplomacy of the period 1914–1919. But controversy still swirls around the questions of whether he was wise and farseeing, or shortsighted and naive; loyal and truthful in his relations with Wilson, or disloyal and prevaricating; and “the best diplomatic brain that America has yet produced,” as Harold Nicolson characterized him, or inept and bungling. Deeper still are the questions relating to his personality and mental state. Was he as modest and unassuming as he appeared to be? Did he function well in difficult situations? Was he capable of distinguishing reality from unreality and truth from falsehood? Was he an egomaniac, and did egomania prevent him from seeing things as they were? Or did he simply fanatize and confuse daydreams with reality?

Inga Floto, in *Colonel House in Paris* has ventured into the scholarly minefield defined by these questions and has cleared a pathway to new ground on which the debate over House may be conducted with clearer insight, greater objectivity, and ampler knowledge.

Inga Floto came to her task with extensive knowledge of the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference. She is tough minded, looks hard at the evidence, and has strong powers of analysis. She had done enormous research in all the pertinent sources, particularly in the Wilson Papers, the House Papers, and in the diaries and papers of Wilson's other advisers at Paris. This thorough preparation and skill were effective safeguards against House's own trap – his massive diary written to establish his version of the history of the period and of course to gratify his monumental ego. Hence she was never the Colonel's captive as were, say, Charles Seymour (*The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*) and Alexander and Juliette George (*Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*). Best of all, she is a European – an outsider to American historical controversies. No one can ever accuse her of having any axe to grind.

The result is in my opinion the best book on Colonel House now in print. It is also one of the best books ever written on the Paris Peace Conference. The literature on that great subject is of course enormous, and much of it is excellent. However, I would recommend *Colonel House in Paris* as the best single-volume history of the peace conference, one that now supplants Paul Birdsall's *Versailles Twenty Years After* as the best overview of the subject.

A review is not the place to repeat the contents of a book. *Colonel House in Paris* is before us, and all who are interested will read it. So let us focus on its main findings and contributions, as follows:

1. Professor Floto clearly demonstrates that House, for all his guile and apparent cleverness, was not a good diplomat. He permitted Allied leaders to outmaneuver him during the Pre-Armistice negotiations and the French to win such military terms as almost to preclude the negotiation later of a just peace settlement. All the while, he deluded himself and Wilson into thinking that he had won a great diplomatic victory. Not long afterward, during discussions over preliminary peace terms, Clemenceau once again outwitted House. And during the negotiations at Paris, House was either outmaneuvered or yielded time and again because he was a trimmer and a compromiser; because he was incapable of working through complex problems, or was unwilling to do

so; and because flattery so satisfied his ego that he was vulnerable to manipulation. Dr. Floto does not say so, but she makes it clear that the Georges psychoanalyzed the wrong man.

2. Time and again, House failed to keep Wilson informed or prevaricated in reports to Wilson about his negotiations. This was true during the Pre-Armistice negotiations. To cite a second example, this was true when House agreed to the Tardieu plan for an independent Republic of the Rhine without informing Wilson, who was then in the United States.

3. The simple cause of the break between Wilson and House was House's egregious disloyalty to Wilson at Paris. There has been considerable controversy about this matter. Birdsall says that the break occurred because House gave away Wilson's bargaining position on reparations and other key issues during the President's illness at Paris. The Georges say that relations between the two men cooled once House ceased to flatter the President and the latter came to regard House as a competitor.

Inga Floto lays the facts of this matter out meticulously. She proves that House, hitherto frustrated and increasingly isolated among Wilson's advisers, decided to take charge after Wilson left Paris on February 14 for a trip to the United States. Long convinced that he could conclude a peace settlement in two or three weeks if only Wilson would not interfere, House now proceeded to carry out his plan for a speedy conclusion of a peace treaty. Thus he agreed to shelve the League and joined Clemenceau in moving to agreement on a "preliminary" treaty on French terms. Unwittingly(?) he also became a tool of the French Premier. It is hardly necessary to add that he did all this without informing Wilson; and it is no wonder that Wilson was aghast when he learned, upon his return to France in mid-March, what House had done. It was this betrayal that caused the break, not House's behavior when he acted as Wilson's spokesman in the Council of Four during Wilson's illness in early April. Wilson himself made the concessions that Birdsall attributed to House, even though the latter did not act with much loyalty to Wilson at this time, either.

We now have conclusive evidence that Wilson had influenza and encephalitis, not a stroke at Paris. Edwin A. Weinstein, M.D., author of a medical biography of Wilson, which will be published in the near future by Princeton University Press, has concluded that Wilson made the aforementioned concessions during the week following his recovery because he was in a state of post-recovery euphoria.

Dr. Floto is almost always on solid ground because she has done her own research and takes no other historian's findings or interpretations as conclusive. There is one exception. She was led down the garden path by N. Gordon Levin, Jr. (*Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*) on Wilson's policy toward the Russian Revolution. That policy was consistent, straightforward, and grounded upon three principles or assumptions that were sacred to Wilson: (1) the right of the Russian people to self-determination, that is, their right to establish their own institutions and hew out their own destiny; (2) preservation of the territorial integrity of what had been the Russian Empire (except for the creation of an independent Poland, which Wilson understood all Russian authorities favored); and (3) no outside intervention, military or otherwise, in Russian affairs. Levin would probably not disagree with this general statement. The main question at issue is whether Wilson was ever prepared to recognize the Bolshevik regime. Levin says not, and Dr. Floto says that his discussion on this point is convincing.

The matter came up in a way that required decision when William C. Bullitt brought proposals from Lenin and Trotsky back to Paris in late March 1919. Levin argues that Wilson rejected them because he still wanted, hoped for, and expected to see the triumph of

a liberal, reformist regime that would carry on the ideals of the Revolution of March 1917, and that Wilson had no intention of according *de facto* recognition to the Bolsheviks.

This argument fits neatly into Levin's theoretical framework, but there is not much evidence to support it. Like all other western statesmen, Wilson would have preferred to deal with a moderate Russian government. However, he had tried, in his Fourteen Points Address of January 8, 1918, to convert the Russian-German negotiations then in progress at Brest-Litovsk into a *general* peace conference. He surely must have known that he would have to recognize the Bolshevik regime if his plan succeeded. In the following June, he had considered the feasibility of sending the Y.M.C.A. leader, John R. Mott, to Russia to investigate and perhaps negotiate. Not long afterward, he had finally yielded to Allied pressure and consented to send detachments of American troops to northern Russia and Siberia – but only for specific purposes and with strict orders that they should not become involved in the Russian Civil War. During the following months, and at Paris, Wilson was the one statesman who seemed to understand what the Russian Revolution was all about, and the one who stood steadfastly against various British and French schemes for large-scale American and Allied intervention. He even persuaded the Allies to approve the Prinkipo Declaration of January 22, 1919, which he drafted himself and which affirmed the principles of self-determination and absolute non-intervention by outsiders.

Why, then, did Wilson not respond favorably to Lenin's overtures and grant *de facto* recognition in return for certain concessions? The answer is crucial to understanding how Wilson reacted to revolution in the twentieth century.

Wilson did not recommend revolution as an ideal way to reform society. However, he believed that violent revolutions were inevitable and justified when existing regimes become egregiously oppressive of human rights and are utterly unresistant to change. He believed that the French and American revolutions, for all their excesses, had advanced the cause of liberty and were forward steps in the progress of mankind. He supported and defended the Mexican Revolution of his own time against its domestic and foreign traducers. He said time and again that the Russian Revolution (including its Bolshevik phase) was the inevitable result of long centuries of oppression, and that its causes were primarily social and economic. The Prinkipo Declaration clearly implied his willingness to negotiate with and recognize a Russian government dominated by the Bolsheviks.

Why, then, did Wilson turn a deaf ear to Lenin's proposals? The answer is so simple that most historians, searching for complex answers, have failed to see it. First, as Levin points out, acceptance of the Lenin proposals would have meant the dismemberment of Russia, at least on paper or for a time. Wilson never would countenance that; he never would, and he never did. Second, by the time of Bullitt's return, English right-wing newspapers and politicians had mounted a violent campaign against Lloyd George for having flirted with the Bolsheviks. The British Prime Minister crumbled at once. Moreover, the French, with other plans in mind, made it clear that they would not tolerate any sign of rapprochement with the Bolshevik government. Wilson had enough problems on his hands in late March and early April. There was no way that he could have obtained a favorable Allied response to Lenin. Hence he did what was possible, or what he thought was possible. He took up the McCormick-Hoover plan for establishing contact through

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