

appearance: Elliott West's *Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion*, and John Findlay's *The Mobilized American West: 1940-2000*, published in the spring and summer of 2023, respectively. Taken together—and exemplified by Deutsch's glittering installment—these books offer a riveting portrait of a region that continues to fascinate and confound in equal measure.

## Woodrow Wilson and His Inner Circle

**Neu, Charles E. *The Wilson Circle: President Woodrow Wilson and His Advisers*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022. 296 pp. \$49.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781421442983.**

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This is not Charles Neu's best book. The distinguished historian of American foreign relations has written penetrating and accessible analyses of America's involvement in Vietnam and U.S. relations with Japan, as well as a comprehensive biography of "Colonel" Edward M. House, Woodrow Wilson's sounding board on foreign policy (until their break midway through the Paris Peace Conference, when, during Wilson's brief illness, House made concessions to the British and French that the president considered insubordinate and intolerable). As Neu admits in his prologue, *The Wilson Circle* is an outgrowth of his book on House, a chance to "get to know" the full "inner circle" of men and women whom Wilson brought into his confidence as president (xi). For this reader, it feels like an effort to publish the ancillary notes biographers take on the individuals and relationships critical to understanding and sensitively portraying their central subject, but that do not belong in the biography of the central figure itself. The overall impression on this reader is a collection of potted biographies no greater than the sum of its parts—a string of profiles offering little new insight into Wilson's thinking and decision making either individually or collectively.

There are bright spots. It is welcome to see a historian take seriously Wilson's relationships with his two wives, Ellen Axson Wilson and Edith Bolling (Galt) Wilson. In the first case, however, it would have been useful for Neu to have spent more time on Wilson and Edith's pre-presidential life together, especially during Wilson's tenure as president of Princeton, when Edith helped Wilson develop, test, and implement some of the political habits, skills, and strategies Wilson would take into the New Jersey governor's mansion and White House. In the second, Neu successfully navigates a trickier subject by refusing to either swallow the myth of Edith as shadow president running (or bungling) the nation's affairs in the aftermath of Wilson's paralytic stroke of October 1919 or

disregard altogether Edith's importance as a sieve of visitors and information. Still, in following his mini-biographical format, Neu misses a chance to delve deeply into the single greatest case of presidential disability in history, clarify exactly what role Edith played, and explore what consequences followed.

The other eight sketches of the "inner circle" do not provide new information about their relationships with Wilson. They do serve collectively, however, to remind readers that presidents do not and cannot run the executive branch alone, and that a president's inescapable personal accountability for their administration's policies does not necessarily entail any philosophical commitment to or even approval of them. Yet the specific historical meanings of this general lesson are only brought home through concrete examples, and Neu's choices are problematic in two regards. First, Neu's sketch of Colonel House takes the latter's accounts of his interactions with Wilson and others far too uncritically, despite multiple efforts by John Milton Cooper Jr. and others to demonstrate their frequently self-serving nature. (House fully expected his "diary"—really a collection of daily memos containing no expressions of vulnerability, self-doubt, or genuinely private feeling—to be published someday.) The consequent impression is that House was responsible for most of Wilson's successes and uninvolved in those of Wilson's failures that he did not actively attempt to forestall. Other Wilson scholars find the record far more complicated. Second, Neu omits several characters who had a decisive influence on Wilson's thinking and policy at truly epochal moments. There is no sketch of Louis D. Brandeis, who gave Wilson his winning campaign theme in 1912—regulated competition rather than regulated monopoly—and sketched out much of the legislation that fulfilled those campaign promises in Wilson's first term. There is no sketch of Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson, who was Wilson's primary adviser on congressional relations, the instigator (along with Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo) of the racist segregation policies that have forever tarred Wilson's presidency, and a primary architect of wartime censorship. Finally, Neu's focus on inner-circle figures excludes from careful analysis the origins of arguably his most important policies, those relating to U.S. intervention in World War I, the Armistice, and the League of Nations, none of which can be fully understood without attending to the influence—however time-limited—of the publicists Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann on Wilson's thinking.

Indeed, Neu's lack of attention to the development of Wilson's thinking and policies is this book's major disappointment. It tells particularly in Neu's opening sketch of Wilson, which credits him with political astuteness and effectiveness (21) but offers no analysis of the ends to which these skills were directed, much less how Wilson came to embrace such ends instead of others. One result is to ignore Wilson's deep interest in the war before intervention—including his prescient fear that modern war would tend to engulf even distant neutrals—and, more surprisingly, the reasoning behind his ultimate decision to intervene (21-22). This inevitably affects Neu's cursory treatment of the Paris Peace conference and subsequent League fight. The reader is left wondering why, beyond pure spite or congenital incorrigibility, Wilson resisted the so-called Lodge Reservations to the Treaty of Versailles, which would have undermined the primary purpose and proper functioning of the League as Wilson conceived by making U.S. cooperation in all significant actions discretionary. The shopworn caricature of Wilson as a thin-skinned egomaniac and rigid moralist out of touch with the times is also reinforced by major factual omissions. For instance, it is easy to say that Wilson "failed...to devise his own modifications to the treaty" (27) and thus save League membership in 1919 when one has omitted the facts that a) Wilson had already convinced other world leaders to accept major revisions to the League Covenant demanded by Congress *after* its initial drafting

treaties cannot be unilaterally modified; and b) treaties cannot be unilaterally modified by one party.

In sum, it is Neu's failure to illuminate the eponymous figure at the center of his titular circle that most disappoints. Thankfully, the book bucks the current trend of portraying Wilson as the worst embodiment of every national sin and shame with which our nation needs to reckon. But it does so without offering an alternative interpretation of this complicated figure and his momentous administration.

## Creating Welfare States?: A Comparative History of Early Child Labor Legislation

**Anderson, Elisabeth. *Agents of Reform: Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. xvi + 362 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-22090-1; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-22089-5.**

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*Agents of Reform: Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State* is an ambitious attempt to reframe our understanding of the early welfare state in Europe and the United States through a series of case studies centering around nineteenth-century battles for the passage and enforcement of child labor laws. Elisabeth Anderson argues for an understanding of a welfare state as something beyond the simple existence of social insurance programs such as old age insurance and health care systems. It should also, she says, include child labor laws, overtime pay, family leave, and various other policies supporting workers and restraining employers. The lengthy introduction to *Agents of Reform* departs from a typical historian's introduction that might engage the literature on the development of welfare states by placing her approach firmly within sociological schools: Anderson seeks to “combine insights from Bourdieusian field theory and US pragmatism to build a novel approach to policy reform that highlights individual actors” (14).

Comparative welfare history is difficult to do well. Many factors shape a nation's policies and few scholars are deeply knowledgeable about the histories of various nations. Anderson makes this problem manageable, however, by engaging a variety of primary and secondary sources thoroughly and thoughtfully while narrowing her focus specifically to laws surrounding child labor and factory inspection.

The first half of *Agents of Reform* examines efforts to pass laws limiting child labor in factories. This section is, in effect, a short book complete with its own introduction and