In recent years, and in light of U.S. attempts to project power in the world, the presidency of Woodrow Wilson has been more commonly invoked than ever before. Yet Wilsonianism has often been distorted by a concentration on American involvement in the First World War. In Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering Americas Neutrality, 1914-1917, prominent scholar Robert Tucker turns the focus to the years of neutrality. Arguing that our neglect of this prewar period has reduced the complexity of the historical Wilson to a caricature or stereotype, Tucker reveals the importance that the law of neutrality played in Wilsons foreign policy during the fateful years from 1914 to 1917, and in doing so he provides a more complete portrait of our nations twenty-eighth president.

By focusing on the years leading up to Americas involvement in the Great War, Tucker reveals that Wilsons internationalism was always highly qualified, dependent from the start upon the advent of an international order that would forever remove the specter of another major war. World War I was the last conflict in which the law of neutrality played an important role in the calculations of belligerents and neutrals, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that this law -- or rather Woodrow Wilsons version of it -- constituted almost the whole of his foreign policy with regard to the war. Wilsons refusal to find any significance, moral or otherwise, in the conflict beyond the law and its violation led him to see the war as meaningless, save for the immense suffering and sense of utter futility it fostered.

Treating issues of enduring interest, such as the advisability and effectiveness of U.S. interventions in, or initiation of, conflicts
beyond its borders, Woodrow Wilson and the Great War will appeal to anyone interested in the president's power to determine foreign policy, and in constitutional history in general.

My Personal Review:
Robert Tucker has written a solid scholarly book examining the neutrality policy of the Wilson administration during WW1. That policy, conceived by the president, stimulated unintended change in the international system. Change that has continued until the present time. Explaining Wilson's unique approach to policy decisions is a strength of this book. The president made his foreign policy decisions, Tucker notes, from a place of isolation "without parallel among American presidents." Thus the book is narrowly focused on Wilson and his closest advisers and does not deal more generally with broader questions of foreign policy. That turns out to be a strength. Too many historians try to find a "Wilsonian" consensus in Wilson's foreign policy - Tucker takes us to Wilson where "Wilsonian" policy is located. There are some criticisms of the book. Some reviewers have wished it were a different type of book. The strengths of the book, however, outweigh these minor weaknesses. In addition Tucker writes in a winsome and very readable style. This book, along with John W. Coogan's, "The End of Neutrality," should be a required introduction for anyone interested in US foreign policy during the period of neutrality in the Wilson Administration.

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