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.

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My Personal Review:
H.W. Brands has written ambitious biographies of American historical figures, including a major work on the life of Andrew Jackson. Here, in keeping within the format of the American Presidents Series, Brands has written a shorter, but nonetheless, insightful work. Wilson might have been a great president but, he was flawed. He was stubborn and uncompromising. Although he suffered a major stroke in his second term, he evidently had suffered other, less serious strokes over the years. It is difficult to say whether his physical condition led to his unwillingness to yield but, much that could have been accomplished through compromise never came to fruition.

An early sign of Wilson’s concreteness appeared during his presidency of Princeton University. There was a dispute as to whether the graduate school should be located on the main campus or at another site. Wilson, a proponent of locating it on campus refused to negotiate a compromise and the project was stalled.

Wilson was a Virginian and his racial attitudes were that of the Jim Crow South. However, being president of Princeton established his credentials as a New Jersey resident and Democratic party leaders put him up for
governor of that state. He was elected and he showed remarkable independence as he proposed reforms that disappointed the party leaders and led them to consider him to be an ingrate. Later, when he was elected President of the United States, he continued his reform path in domestic matters.

What defined his presidency was World War I and its aftermath. After the war, Wilson traveled to Europe to negotiate the peace treaty. On a tour of Europe, he was cheered wildly wherever he went. He was a genuine hero. However, in the negotiations England and France sought to impose harsh terms on Germany whereas Wilson sought more leniency. The heart of Wilsons Fourteen points proposal was a League of Nations. This League was included in the treaty and Wilsons next major battle was to get the Senate to ratify it. Here is where Wilsons stubborness did him in. Rather than negotiate with Republicans in the Senate, led by Henry Cabot Lodge, Wilson bypassed them and took his case to the people in a speaking tour. This was not the way to win favor in the Senate.

Wilsons most egregious error, probably compounded by his stroke, was his total unwillingness to yield on one point regarding the League of Nations; i.e. a clause that required members to come to the aid of other members militarily. Republicans in the Senate were concerned that this clause might weaken US sovereignty. They noted that under the Constitution, it was the Senate, not the President who declared war. Paul Johnson, in his History of the American People noted that if one of Great Britains colonial possessions, such as India, had been attacked, the treaty might require the United states to get involved militarily. Anyway, Wilson refused to allow a reservation which would clarify the United States understanding of the clause to the satisfaction of Lodge and other concerned Senators. Accordingly, the treaty didnt pass the Senate.

The tragedy of the Wilson presidency is that so much more could have been accomplished. He was a great reformer on domestic issues and was a popular war president. However, his one major flaw kept him from achieving true greatness. Brand does a good job in capturing the essence of Wilson and I recommend this book.