Biographer believes Wilson a great leader, despite faults

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Intellectuals don't make good executives, Woodrow Wilson maintained, unless they take measures to stop their "everlasting disposition to think, to listen — and not act." And so, as president of Princeton University and governor of New Jersey, he had trained himself, when his mind "felt like deciding, to shut it up. My decision might be right, it might be wrong. No matter, I would take a chance and do something."

The only Ph.D. to serve as president of the United States, Wilson was, indeed, a man of action. His progressive reforms, including the Federal Reserve System, the Federal Trade Commission, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, and an eight-hour day for railroad workers, transformed the role of the federal government in regulating the economy. As he led the nation in World War I — and championed a League of Nations — he established new ways of thinking about international relations.

John Milton Cooper, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, provides a lively, lucid, richly detailed biography of the 28th president.

He acknowledges that Wilson was not without faults. Unwilling or unable to move beyond his Southern upbringing, he remained blind to racial oppression. He tolerated mediocre performances from high-ranking subordinates. During the war, he presided over "egregious violations of civil liberties."

Nonetheless, Cooper suggests, Wilson was a great president — and a great man, "one of the most careful, hard-headed and sophisticated idealists of his time."

Cooper doesn't deny that Wilson could be stubborn, self-righteous and even delusional. He simply — and, at times, simplistically — explains his misjudgments as a function of fatigue, nervous strain, and the cardiovascular problems that culminated in a paralytic stroke. To be sure, the stroke did impair Wilson's judgment.

After all, he seriously contemplated running for a third term and made notes for a third inaugural address. But it's not at all clear that the outcome of the fight for the League of Nations turned on the stroke.

A healthy Wilson might not have compromised with "mild reservationists" to get a two-thirds majority in the U.S. Senate to ratify the treaty ending World War I.

More importantly, Cooper celebrates, but does not critique, Wilson's foreign policy initiatives. Wilson's "Fourteen Points" were quite vague. He didn't define self-determination or specify which ethnic groups, within what geographical boundaries, should be allowed to make the determination. He didn't clarify the conditions under which the League of Nations should intervene to prevent war. Or how its powers might affect the sovereignty of nations.

"Woodrow Wilson" is unlikely to deter scholars from concluding that poor preparation and an excessive reliance on his own judgment at Versailles and in Washington helped turn his dream into a nightmare.

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Associate Images:
Woodrow Wilson, 1919.