Leading Them to the Promised Land

*Woodrow Wilson,
Covenant Theology,
and the Mexican
Revolution,
1913–1915*

**Mark
Benbow**

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Introduction

President Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy has undergone frequent examination since he left office in 1921, although little agreement exists on his motivations or his relative successes and failures. Most historians studying Wilson have noted his deep Christian faith, but few have differentiated his specific Presbyterian Covenant heritage from a general nineteenth-century Protestantism. Even Wilson's most prominent biographer, Arthur Link, neglects this particular aspect of Wilson, favoring instead a more generalized ecumenical liberal interpretation of Wilson's motives. In this study I examine Wilson's assumptions and his personal ideology—what Alexander George labeled an “operational code”—by examining Wilson's policy toward Mexico during that country's revolution. I will show that Wilson's operational code was founded predominantly on Presbyterian covenant theology. Covenant principles permeated his political decisions, his tactics, and his long-term diplomatic objectives.¹

Woodrow Wilson's Presbyterian background made it natural for him to rely on orderly, voluntary agreements to manage a society or organization. His grounding in covenant theology further led him to believe that Christians had a duty to fulfill God's will on earth. While he did not rely exclusively on these ideas, he placed special emphasis on them in his administration's management of foreign affairs. They formed a template for him to use in evaluating events, especially during crises when he had little contemplative time before making a decision. Wilson's deep religious beliefs and personal ideology helped shape his diplomatic goals but were themselves constantly being tested by the need to deal effectively with practical foreign policy contradictions and the dilemma of the revolutionary whirlpool in Mexico.

Wilson came to the presidency with no experience in foreign policy and little evidence that he had thought much about it. He had traveled briefly in Europe as a professor and as president of Princeton University, but he spent most of his time overseas in Britain, venturing onto the Continent only for a short trip to Paris with his first wife, Ellen. He therefore had little opportunity to study firsthand a culture radically different from his own. He was equally focused on domestic affairs in his writings. In his book *The State*, Wilson discussed the formation of various governments, including those of France and Germany, but his writing was based upon secondary texts and his work was written for undergraduates rather than as an in-depth study. Nor did he show much awareness for the diplomatic duties of the

national government he would eventually lead. In *The State*, he discussed the duties of the secretaries of state of the individual American states at length but dismissed the duties of the federal office with one short sentence. Moreover, he barely mentioned the powers of the president in determining foreign policy and addressed the duties of the secretary of war with only two short sentences. In short, Wilson virtually ignored the issue of how the American government managed its diplomacy.²

These observations do not, by any means, suggest that Wilson did not have preconceptions about how he would conduct his foreign policy once he became president. As Link noted, Wilson's assumptions about the role of the Christian in the world and his belief in American democracy served to guide and shape his policies. According to Link, Wilson believed God had "created the United States out of diverse peoples for a specific, eschatological role in history." In Wilson's view, America had a part to play as a divine instrument. To deny the United States an active role in the world was an attempt to deny God's will.³

As president, Link claimed, Wilson tried to look at the long-range effects of policies, rather than at only the short-term realities of international power, a tendency that Link labeled Wilson's "higher realism." For example, Wilson believed that any people could be taught democracy over the long term. He wanted the United States to demonstrate the correct, benevolent way to respect "the rights of small and helpless states" while striving to elevate their governments. As president, however, Wilson found that events and political pressure restricted his possible responses to events abroad. In Mexico, the presence of extensive American business interests and the threat of violence spreading north across the border restricted Wilson's options and, at times, exerted seemingly irresistible pressure on him to act. Wilson initially resisted domestic cries for a military response to the chaos in Mexico, in part by impugning the motives of those who called for it. Those pressing for intervention, he argued, not only had no "sympathy for the Mexican people" but also were acting against the interests of the United States. While efforts to reestablish "order" in Mexico could ensure profits for American businessmen in the short term, they would endanger the larger goal of encouraging the establishment of democracy.⁴

Nonetheless, Wilson did intervene in Mexican affairs, even while professing his role as an objective party. Wilson seems to have assumed that he could avoid hypocrisy by defining intervention very specifically. For Wilson, the intention of the intervening power was crucial. Although it was immoral for a larger nation to impose its will on a smaller state for selfish gain, taking action to strengthen democracy abroad was not intervention in this traditional imperialistic sense. Wilson believed that those nations in which the United States intervened, such as Mexico, should consider the good intentions behind U.S. actions, drawing a distinction between American intervention and that of old-world imperialist countries. He wanted the world to see that he was acting to achieve a larger purpose, not to satisfy short-term nationalistic greed.

Despite Wilson's assertion that U.S. actions were intended only to help the Mexicans reach democracy, Mexico did not welcome American interference. Mexican revolutionaries denied that Washington had a legitimate voice in determining their nation's future. The president discussed this dilemma in a 1916 essay entitled "The Mexican Question." He noted that Latin Americans' relations with the United States had only recently improved, and that they were still suspicious of American power. Intervention in Mexico would "undoubtedly revive the gravest suspicions throughout all the states of Latin America." Moreover, U.S. action to establish "order" in Mexico would only serve to further bind Mexico to American interests and businesses. Wilson wrote that he believed Mexico would "struggle through long processes of blood and terror before she finds herself and returns to the paths of peace and order" but that such was the business solely of the Mexicans.⁵

After vacillating between supporting Venustiano Carranza and Pancho Villa from 1914 until late 1915, Wilson eventually settled on policies compatible with his personal beliefs and his assumptions. Both leaders promised to restore a democratic government to Mexico, but although Villa seemed more responsive to American interests, neither faction was completely amenable to American pressure. Finally, in late 1915, Wilson recognized the Carranza Constitutionals as the *de jure* government of Mexico as they seemed the more likely to establish a constitutional government. To strengthen Carranza's position, Wilson acted to cut off arms to Villa and continued to resist calls to intervene militarily in Mexico, at least until Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916. Wilson's actions satisfied few people, either political opponents or supporters, but they did keep the United States from being drawn into a full-scale military intervention. His efforts illustrate his diplomatic and political dilemma: leaders whose personal and religious beliefs compel them to act as diplomatic models must reconcile such a role with their nations' security needs.

I have broken this study into several sections. First, I will examine Wilson's beliefs, and the assumptions about government and democracy that follow from his ideology. Next I will trace Wilson's actions from 1913 to 1915 as he attempted to deal with events in Mexico, showing how his assessment of events changed with time even as his basic assumptions remained steady. Finally, I will assess how successful Wilson was in responding to the Mexican Revolution in light of his goals.

Woodrow Wilson and Covenant Theology

The difficulty in studying the assumptions underlying the actions of any decision maker is to determine “what goes without saying.” It is the largely unspoken assumptions arising from Wilson’s ideology that concern us in this study: what were the assumptions that Wilson left unquestioned? Political scientists studying decision making have wrestled for decades with the problem of how policy makers interpret and act upon incoming data, employing numerous theories on decision making, including the Hovland attitude change approach, cognitive dissonance theory, attribution theory, and self-perception theory.¹

For the purposes of this study I am using the theory of analogical reasoning as set forth in models by Jaime Carbonell and used by Alex Hybel in *How Leaders Reason*. In Hybel’s summation of Carbonell, he notes that “a decision maker, when encountering a new problem situation, is reminded of past situations as different levels of abstraction that resemble the present problem. The problem maker derives a generalization from discovery of commonalities among previous and current situations and the successful application of the policies to solve these problems.”²

People are naturally more comfortable with problems that seem familiar, so policy makers look for elements of prior situations that resemble the current one even if the new situation bears only a slight resemblance to any situation the policy maker faced previously. In attribution theory the models used to evaluate data are called *cognitive schemas*. A schema, as defined by Deborah Larson, is “a generic concept stored in memory.” It is “a collection of knowledge related to a concept, not a dictionary definition.” A schema is, in effect, a series of related ideas useful in decoding events and objects. For example, an individual’s schema of a “president” might include memories of past presidents, the White House, duties of the office

learned in school, bits of movies about presidents, news stories, and so on. These ideas need not be accurate, only memorable. When the individuals are presented with information about a “president” they try to fit the new information as best as possible into the existing schema.³

Schemata are useful because they allow individuals not only to interpret new information but also to choose the important parts. They allow individuals to store memories as well as concepts and to make inferences about new information. The policy maker will interpret both the current problem and previous experiences through his own existing worldview. The policy maker searches mentally through his existing schema until, in Larson’s words, “he has found a schema that summarizes and categorizes one or more similar stimulus configurations in the past.” If there is no appropriate existing schema, however, the policy maker will find the best fit possible. As a result, the analogies made by the policy maker will be at best imperfect and at times inappropriate if the analogies seem familiar and comfortable. Larson gives the example of a sixteenth-century Dutch painter who, when attempting to paint a beached whale, gave the whale the head of a wild boar. The painter simply tried to fit the image of something new to his experience, in this case the whale, into the best match he could make mentally. In the painter’s case, it only made for an inaccurate painting. For a policy maker, however, the consequence of such an imperfect fit could easily be the failure of the new policy, because the policy maker’s analogy did not match the reality of the new situation.⁴

If the policy maker’s decision process using schema could be laid out as a flow chart it might look something like this:

At almost every point in this process the bias inherent in existing assumptions will exert some influence. When judging the situation, the policy maker will view it in light of his assumptions about how the world behaves and through existing schema. When comparing the current problem to existing ones the policy maker applies certain assumptions on how previous solutions worked, assumptions that also affect what policy is then adopted. This, of course, affects the action taken. Feedback is independent of the original policy maker’s assumptions because it is a second actor’s reaction. Yet the original policy maker’s biases are again present as he interprets the second actor’s response.

To rephrase the original question, making it more specific, what personal, unspoken biases affected Wilson's interpretation of Mexico's revolution and the role the United States might play in events? What assumptions was he making and what subconscious factors influenced his interpretation of the Mexicans' reactions to his policies? What were the schemata in Wilson's mind influencing his decision making toward events in Mexico?

Wilson's principles were always firmly grounded in Christian beliefs, specifically those from American Presbyterianism. Understanding these precepts is crucial to comprehending the diplomatic tactics and strategy he employed throughout his tenure in office. Historian and theologian John Mulder placed special emphasis on Wilson's faith and labeled his belief system a "gospel of order." According to Mulder, Wilson's faith was shaped by his father, a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor, who was "deeply influenced by . . . covenant or 'federal' theology."⁵

The society and family into which Wilson was born perpetuated this theological perspective. The South in the mid-nineteenth century was, as one historian noted, "the classic age of the preacher-sage." In the overwhelmingly Protestant South, Christian interpretation of public life was more orthodox than in the more pluralistic North. Wilson's home life, where he was surrounded by questions of church and constitutions, only served to magnify the Southern religious environment into which he was born.⁶

Wilson's childhood environment centered on his father, the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson. Reverend Wilson was an important figure in the development of the Southern Presbyterian Church in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Minister to one of the South's largest Presbyterian congregations—in Augusta, Georgia—Reverend Wilson hosted the first meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in December 1861. In 1865, he became stated clerk, a position he held until 1898. This high-profile post required him to act as *ex officio* treasurer of the General Assembly, empowered him to rule on points of procedure in assembly meetings, and gave him the responsibility of ensuring the smooth functioning of the Southern Presbyterian Church government. As a result, Wilson grew up amidst constitutional debates among his father, other relatives, and family friends on the politics of the Presbyterian Church and seminary. Woodrow Wilson's boyhood home frequently served as a meeting place for discussions of Presbyterian theology, church government, and the role of Christianity in the formation of secular social policy.⁷

The Presbyterian Church in the South—which had split off from the main Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) during the Civil War and renamed itself in 1865 as the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) or the Southern Presbyterian Church—was a bastion of the idea that God favored the principle of covenants as the basis of human relationships, including religious and secular governments. As one influential Southern Presbyterian theologian, James H.

Thornwell, wrote, God “has revealed an order as well as a faith, and that as our attitude in one is to hear and believe, in the other [it] is to hear and obey.” In the teachings of the PCUS, neither theology nor politics was formed in an ideological vacuum: theology was the foundation of the polity. Wilson’s uncle, the Reverend James Woodrow,⁸ a Presbyterian seminary professor, noted that although the Presbyterian form of government was not required by the Bible, it was contained in the Bible, and was therefore preferable to other systems. Reverend Wilson was as much a covenant theologian as Thornwell or Woodrow. His surviving sermons, lovingly recorded and preserved in his son’s papers, show the same steadfast belief that God has established an order in the universe and a role for man in it to do His will.⁹

Young Woodrow Wilson grew up immersed in these lessons and adopted covenant theology as the basis for his life and his faith. Although Woodrow did not simply embrace his father’s ideals wholesale, as an automaton with no views of his own, he did adopt a basic orthodox view of covenant theology as the foundation of his beliefs. While president, Wilson noted to a friend that once matters of faith were determined to his satisfaction, “argument is adjourned.” God’s covenant gave Wilson assurance that human life was predictable. God had a plan. Man, despite his sinful nature, had a set role in that plan.¹⁰

His underlying faith in covenants to provide structure was reflected in a tactic Wilson frequently employed in stressful situations: he found solace in organizing legal frameworks to bring order from chaos or to deal with a new environment. When, during Wilson’s teenage years, his father suffered career setbacks that upset the entire family, Wilson in his leisure time wrote a constitution for an imaginary yacht club. In college, he wrote and rewrote constitutions for every club he joined. When, at Johns Hopkins, Wilson joined a literary society, he noted to his fiancée, Ellen Axson, “I have given [them] a new name, and a brand new constitution of my own composition. I even wrote a set of bylaws for them.” As a young man nervously awaiting the onset of married life, he proposed a two-member “love league” with his fiancée. After suffering a stroke in 1906, an episode that reminded Wilson of his own mortality, he tried to reconfigure Princeton based on a new and more equitable model, rewriting the rules that governed the university. Throughout his life, covenants gave Wilson a framework to create structure in a chaotic world, culminating in his attempt to bring a peaceful order to the entire world with the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1919.¹¹

The same impulse occupied his religious life. When Woodrow Wilson was five, his father began work on a “Biblically correct” constitution for the new Southern Presbyterian Church—a work not completed until after Woodrow was in graduate school. As a young man, Wilson helped his father organize and edit the minutes of the PCUS’s General Assembly. As a professor, and later as president of Princeton, Wilson became an active elder in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), generally known since the departure of the Southern PCUS as

the Northern Presbyterian Church. While the PCUSA did not put quite as heavy an emphasis on covenants as did the South's PCUS, Northern Presbyterians still regarded the concept of covenant as very important as they wrestled with questions on the role of government in society during the Social Gospel movement. In short, throughout Wilson's life, questions concerning the interaction between God, man, and government through covenants were always present and inescapable.¹² Consequently, to understand Woodrow Wilson, we must turn to covenant theology and examine its basic outlines and beliefs.

The first step in understanding the covenant theology pervading Wilson's world-view is to see how the term *covenant* was used in both the Old and New Testaments. In the simplest terms, a covenant is a promise made binding by an oath. Throughout the Bible, covenants bind together those human relationships not based on kinship ties. The covenants of the five books of Moses, for example, are patterned after the historical agreements between ancient kings of the Near East. The covenant between the Israelites and God follows the covenantal pattern by:

1. Declaring who the parties were—in this case, God and the Israelites;
2. Explaining why the covenant has come about—the Jews were fleeing Egypt;
3. Stipulating that one party binds itself to the other to the exclusion of any outside parties and establishing the laws that the covenanted group must follow—God establishes the Ten Commandments;
4. Stating that the agreement be publicly read at set intervals for the population;
5. Listing witnesses—in historic covenants usually higher powers such as gods—to watch over the parties to ensure that the covenant is kept; and
6. Issuing blessings or curses, respectively, on those who keep or break the covenant.¹³

The term *covenant* is sometimes used as synonymous to *compact* or *contract*. *Covenant* and *compact* were used interchangeably until the late eighteenth century in the United States, but in the context of this discussion, there are important differences. Covenants and compacts have similar structures—noted above—but compacts are secular, lacking the oath before a higher moral authority. Compacts also tend to have a more legalistic aspect, compensation in part for the lack of an enforcing higher moral power. Contracts are the most limited of the three, being narrow agreements designed to limit their parties to a few specific duties. The crucial difference among the three for this discussion is the religious aspect of the term *covenant*, which added a dimension beyond man's law that compelled the president to carry out what he felt were his duties to God.¹⁴

Although the term *covenant* is rarely used in the New Testament,¹⁵ the concept is present in the writings of Paul, who postulated that a new covenant between God and the Gentiles had been grafted onto the existing one between God and Israel.

This sense of inclusiveness is critical for later understanding of federal theology. It made all men equal before God's law and established individual responsibility for keeping that law in every part of life. As theologian Richard Niebuhr later wrote, "All life was permeated by the faith in the fundamental covenant between God and Man, and in every activity some phase of that covenant was enacted."¹⁶

Covenant theology developed as a distinct school within Christianity during the Reformation, most notably in the writings of Heinrich Bullinger. Bullinger's theories formed the basis of the covenant school in the Scottish churches founded by John Knox and of the Southern Presbyterian theology that would become the foundation of Wilson's understanding of the world. Bullinger, a church leader in Zurich, wrote his 1533 treatise, *The One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God*, to answer the debate among Protestants about man's relationship with God. Bullinger saw the covenant as a divine framework for all human life, covering both civil and religious law. All creation, Bullinger asserted, was ordered by divine commandments. Man was created as part of this order in covenant with God, so covenants formed the basis of all social groups, from the family all the way through the state. Because creation's moral order is rooted in God's covenant, that covenant permeates politics and government no less than other relations.¹⁷

Other ideological streams in addition to covenant theology flowed into Wilson's consciousness. Among these concepts were checks and balances, representation, inclusion, and mission. Individually, these ideas were not unusual, but their combination in a religious tradition formed a distinct framework of beliefs through which Wilson conducted American policy toward Mexico.¹⁸

The incorporation of the concept of checks and balances within covenant theology developed from the Presbyterian belief that man was inherently sinful. Therefore, even if man was carrying out God's will, some element of man's willfulness against God would creep into his actions. The safest way to guard against this inevitability was to divide responsibility among several agents to ensure that one individual's sinfulness would not corrupt God's purpose.

Similarly for Wilson, representation in both religion and in government was crucial for several reasons. The concept of representation developed from the idea that Adam represented man in sin. As Southern Presbyterian theologian James Thornwell noted, Adam, "was not a private individual—he was the type of universal humanity. . . . If Adam were the agent of us all, his act was legally and morally ours." This idea that the acts of Adam were, in the words of the Westminster Confession, binding upon "his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" established the principle that one man could act morally for a larger group.¹⁹

As Adam represented Man in the Fall, serving, as Thornwell put it, as "the federal head of his race," Christ represented man in salvation, serving as "the federal head of his seed." In Thornwell's words, the means by which God provided salvation were "a limited probation of the whole race in the person of one man—in other

words, the justification of all through one.” This limitation, continued Thornwell, “introduces the idea of federal representation.” Representation thus figured in both the Covenant of Works (Adam) and the Covenant of Grace (Christ).²⁰

In more earthly terms, it became a rational way to compromise between oligarchy and pure democracy. Representation calmed revolutionary ardor and haste because it encouraged discussion and allowed the formation of group consensus. This, as covenant theology taught, guarded against error. Democratic covenants relied on decisions made by representatives that affected the whole and hopefully reflected the best judgment of the whole. Only through discussion could people create “a purpose of common good out of all their interests.” As Wilson told his students in a series of lectures on the elements of politics, one of the crucial objects of any political organization was “as an instrument of . . . discussion.”²¹

Another idea to evolve from the concept of representation was that of inclusion. The Presbyterian Church doctrine that influenced Wilson had moved far from Calvin’s ideas on predestination. In the centuries after Calvin, predestination evolved to include the idea of free will—that is, God saved those who chose to accept His grace. Predestination became more a matter of God’s knowing who would be saved, than of choosing which individuals to save. In 1903, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the church Wilson chose to attend as an adult, amended its basic precept to note that God wished all to be saved, rather than just a few. The elect of God became all who met the criterion of accepting grace, rather than just a small, select group chosen by God to escape the fires of hell. The New Testament gospel of Matthew heavily influenced this concept of inclusion: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father.” This verse, called the Great Commission, became a part of covenant theology that survived well after the Reformation. Wilson, echoing the duty this implied, noted that “no man is a true Christian who does not think constantly of how he can . . . enlighten mankind.” In the secular version of this covenant, democracy was seen as a universal faith, one that applied to anyone who accepted its requirements. In both, the ranks of the elect were expanded beyond a small elite.²²

Inclusion coalesced within the developing American sense of mission and amid a burgeoning democratic Christianity. As a late-nineteenth-century missionary noted, “Christian obligation and American obligation were fundamentally harmonious.” The elect evolved from an exclusive club of those who were saved to those who had acknowledged the covenant and were responsible for spreading that word to others. Moreover, because the opportunity to join God’s covenant—of either salvation or of a democratic government—was available to everyone, then believers were required to share it with everyone. In Wilson’s words, “We are chosen, and prominently chosen, to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty.” This could have applied as easily to salvation as to secular government. Appropriately, Wilson employed a religious term for such a mission, calling Americans

“apostles of liberty and self-government.” “Leadership,” noted a contemporary guide for Presbyterian elders, “is to be expected [from Church leaders].”²³

Wilson also noted, however, that those who had already learned the lessons of democracy must accept responsibility for educating those who followed. Wilson had no doubt that God intended the United States to assume the role of teacher of democracy to the world. During the 1912 campaign, Wilson stated that he believed “America was created to break every kind of monopoly and set men free upon a footing of equality and upon a footing of opportunity that matched their brains and their energies. . . . Now we are freemen and can say to all the world here under this emblem of liberty we have redeemed our pledges to mankind.” In a July 4, 1914, address, Wilson’s remarks struck a similar chord. “America has lifted high the light which will shine unto all generations and guide the feet of mankind to the goal of justice and liberty and peace.”²⁴

For Wilson, the concept of mission paralleled the idea of progress. God’s triumph was inevitable. His chosen ones, the elect, were the tools to win that victory. Being a member of the elect meant shouldering the responsibility of fulfilling God’s purpose without doubting that God’s purpose would be victorious. Wilson’s favorite hymns, such as “How Firm a Foundation” and “Alleluia! The Strife is O’er,” clearly depict this theme. Man has all that he needs from God to do God’s work, and God supports those who have faith to fulfill His will; these things, together with Christ’s triumph over death, all signified God’s eventual triumph.²⁵

Unlike many of his era, Wilson believed that any people could advance toward a democratic state, including the Mexicans. “When properly directed,” Wilson stated in a 1914 interview with Samuel Blythe on Mexico, “there is no people not fitted for self-government.” In the same interview Wilson also noted, “I do not hold that the Mexican peons are at present as capable of self-government as other people, ours for example, but I do hold that the widespread sentiment that they will never be and never can be made capable of self-government is as wickedly false as it is palpably absurd.”

Wilson adopted a belief in a form of governmental evolution that he laid out in his book *The State*. Government was initially a patriarchal family system, which then grew into a religious institution attached to family groups. Western governments matured through Greco-Roman and British institutions to, eventually, that of the United States. The last represented the most recent, and therefore the highest, stage of human development. In his 1885 essay “The Modern Democratic State,” Wilson wrote that democracy was “the fullest form of state life” because it made politics “a sphere of moral action,” moving toward “the universal emancipation and brotherhood of man.” Wilson believed that God’s inevitable victory would include the establishment of democratic society.²⁶

In *Constitutional Government*, Wilson wrote that all governments pass through four stages:

1. a stage in which “government was master, the people veritable subjects”;
2. a stage when government remained the master “by virtue of its insight . . . its readiness and fitness to lead”;
3. a “period of deep agitation,” when the government found itself “face to face with leaders of the people who were bent upon controlling it”; and
4. the last stage, “in which the leaders of the people themselves became the government.” At this point, “the development [of government] was complete.”

Wilson believed that governments were organic, evolving over time to better fit changing circumstances. The form of a government represented the developmental stage of the people it controlled. As the people grew more aware of the “general will” they would take more and more control of their government.²⁷

Wilson’s optimism was tempered by some pessimism. He did not believe that the growth of democracy could be hastened by even the most skilled instructor. “Nations,” Wilson wrote in *The State*, “are no more capable of borrowing experience than individuals are. The histories of other peoples may furnish us with light, but they cannot furnish us with conditions of action.” The evolution of a democratic system could not be forced before its natural time. Instead, it had to be “built by slow habit.” It could not “come into existence by nurture, like plants in a tended garden.” Also in *The State*, Wilson noted that there was “one rule . . . which may not be departed from under any circumstances, and that is the rule of historical continuity. In politics nothing radically novel may safely be attempted.” Nations could not “run toward [their] end around sharp corners.” Wilson wrote these words during a period in which he held his most conservative political beliefs. Yet Wilson also believed that struggle from within a society was also essential for real progress. This internal struggle was the crucial element: if the people in a society were struggling to bring into existence the next natural stage of their development, they could achieve the next natural form of government in the four stages listed earlier. In Wilson’s view, societies could not jump stages.²⁸

According to Wilson, revolutions were full of “perilous potential” if people tried to advance further than the stage for which they were ready. The example foremost in his mind was the French Revolution of the eighteenth century, which in Wilson’s view turned into a radical bloodbath instead of an expansion of liberty. Reforms made too quickly or that tried to reach too far were doomed to failure. Revolution could be justified only if it established an orderly government that represented society under an established system of laws.²⁹

This suspicion of revolution, however, is easy to overemphasize. Wilson did not reject revolutions out of hand. He judged them by their goals and by their leaders, with a faith that order would come out of the chaos. In effect, Wilson believed that revolutions could be a form of the “wilderness”—a place of exile, penance, and temptation that together could purify God’s people. Reformation theologians

saw the chaotic sinful world as the wilderness in which the few elect had to carve out a godly niche. Covenants were a method of bringing order to that chaos, of moving those emerging from the wilderness closer to God and heaven. To Wilson, democratic covenants developed from the embroiled people of a wilderness maturing toward structured self-government through the four stages he established in *Constitutional Government*. Even as the Mexican Revolution raged, Wilson told an interviewer that the United States had no business concerning itself with how long Mexico took to create order from disorder; it was the business only of the Mexicans.³⁰

Wilson's support of revolution was not without precedent in covenant theology. In *A Defense Against Tyrants* (1579), Philippe Duplessis-Mornay wrote that two covenants were needed to rule effectively and justly. The first covenant was among God, the king, and the king's magistrates. The second covenant, within the first, was between the king and the people. The king promised to rule by justice and law. The people then made a conditional promise to obey the king and depended on him to rule justly. If the king did not govern correctly, then the people had a right to rebel. Indeed, if the king violated God's law, the people had not just a right, but a duty to resist. Political sovereignty was not absolute. It existed within the covenant of God and was tied to the welfare of the members of the state, not just its government. Applying this argument, if a ruler violates the contract with the people by, for example, becoming a tyrant, the people are released from that agreement and are free to form a new contract with another. Southern Presbyterian ministers, including Wilson's father, used much the same rationale to justify the Southern states' secession in 1861. There is no evidence that Wilson read Duplessis-Mornay, but he was certainly familiar with the concept.³¹

Although covenant theology grants the right, or duty, to rebel against ungodly leaders, it is silent on the specific question of the use of force by Christians in international relations. The duty to resist an unjust government implies a right to revolution, including the use of force in extreme circumstances. In covenant theology, however, this right is tempered by the belief that man's sinful nature taints human action. Thus intent becomes a critical component. Covenant theology, while not specifically sanctioning war as a tool of state policy, does imply that force is a tool, but one that should be judged by its intent on a case-by-case basis. Wilson's use of force during his administration—in World War I, in Haiti, in the Dominican Republic, and in Mexico—demonstrates that he did see it as a legitimate means toward an appropriate end.³²

How, then, did Wilson judge when the use of force was appropriate, especially given the ever-present corruption of sin in the actions of man? The best answer lies not with covenant theology but with the doctrine of "just war," which seemed to complement the idea of covenant in Wilson's mind. Traditionally, a war by Christians was viewed as "just"—that is, not in direct conflict with Christian duty—if it met several criteria. It had to be:

1. a last resort, including defense against aggression;
2. in proportion—that is, the evil that force was used against had to be greater than the evil of the force used; and
3. declared by a sovereign authority.

These criteria would apply to any use of force within a political system, revolutions as well as wars between sovereign states.³³

Another criterion for judging a “just” war was application of an aggressor-defender standard, which had developed as a popular tradition, especially in the United States. In this view, war is not only evil, it is unnecessary. No state is compelled to start a war. Thus any state starting a war is committing an act of deliberate evil, and the defender is absolved of blame for defending itself with the use of force. A corollary is that war may be used as an instrument of national policy only if its goal is to banish force as an instrument of another state’s policy. The goal of the defender is not merely to revert to the status quo ante, but to prevent the aggressor from repeating his action in the future. This corollary was also applied to revolutions as well as to international wars.³⁴

Wilson saw war as a sacrifice justified only when it met the strict criteria set forth for a “just” war. A childhood spent in the South of the Reconstruction era made Wilson acutely aware of the destruction and waste of war. “I come from the South and I know what war is,” he commented to his secretary, Joseph Tumulty, “for I have seen its wreckage and terrible ruin.” In his 1916 speeches on preparedness, he repeatedly used the same example of a rusty sword or old musket hanging over a fireplace in a home. A “valued souvenir” of the family, it was a sign, not of honoring war, but of respect for sacrifice for a greater good. In his five-volume *A History of the American People*, however, Wilson examined America’s wars by applying an aggressor-defender standard. For example, he criticized the Mexican-American War as clearly unjust, “an inexcusable aggression” by the United States.³⁵

While Wilson was wary of the use of force, he nonetheless accepted the reality of its use. In a 1911 speech on the Bible, Wilson stated that he would “not cry ‘peace’ so long as there is sin and wrong in the world.” He continued by saying that the Bible “does not teach any doctrine of peace so long as there is sin to be combated and overcome in one’s heart and in the great moving force of human society.” In *The State*, Wilson wrote that governments were frequently founded on a basis of “compulsion.” “Government,” Wilson wrote, “in its last analysis is organized force.” Wilson also noted that there were many kinds of coercion, of which military action was only one. Government authority could rest on the “force” of the consent of the governed. Here, the term *force* was defined as a sense of power being wielded, rather than as a simple use of violence. It was legitimate because citizens consented to be governed without the power to choose the specifics of every governmental action, instead agreeing to be represented within the government and therefore to accept any governmental action within a specific range as legitimate and binding. This concept of representation is critical to covenant theology.³⁶

Examining the motivation behind the action could determine if it had indeed been God's will. Actions conducted for personal gain were unjustified. During the 1912 presidential campaign, Wilson differentiated between wars for righteous causes and those prompted by an opponent's "ugly ambitions." Force wielded to preserve liberty or righteousness was permissible, "If I cannot retain my moral influence over a man except by occasionally knocking him down . . . then for the sake of his soul I have got to occasionally knock him down." Similarly, while he characterized the Mexican-American War as unjust, Wilson accepted the Spanish-American War as just because it liberated Cuba from Spain. The U.S. seizure of the Philippines as a colony during the same war, however, was unjust.³⁷

Wilson felt it critical to maintain civilian control of the use of force. A nation's political leaders were justified in using force as one of several diplomatic tools available to a democratic government. The civilian government decided when and how to use force, with military subordinate to the civilian leadership. In this context, Wilson's opinion of Mexico's 1913 coups takes on new meaning. A general who betrayed and overthrew a democratically elected government went far beyond the pale of what Wilson considered acceptable.³⁸

Woodrow Wilson demonstrated his ardent belief in the concepts of covenant theology, just war, divine selection, and mission. But his actions toward Mexico in his first term illustrated both the positive and negative consequences of this deeply ingrained theological perspective. For Wilson, the responsibility of mission was great and the cause, because it belonged to God, was absolutely just. Such strong belief frequently drove Wilson toward inflexibility; his tendency to view issues as absolutes meant that a position was either right or wrong. Therefore, fulfilling God's plan frequently conflicted with the democratic covenant emphasis on discussion. Wilson acted, however, on what he saw as the moral high ground of attempting to fulfill what he believed was God's will. By judiciously trying to spread the gospel of democracy, he sought to advance the human condition on earth. Wilson saw a covenanted relationship between God and man and between God and the United States that required action to promote God's will. When he looked south to the turmoil in Mexico, he saw an opportunity to advance these ideals through his own actions. Wilson wanted to leave Mexico better than he found it. Mexicans, however, operated under their own set of assumptions and were reluctant to give up any degree of their national sovereignty to accept Wilson's help. As a result, the Mexican Revolution put Wilson and his theological worldview to a serious test.