



Review: Wilson and Congressional Government

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my life in teaching" (p. 499). Human purposes are not always achieved, and Wilson became a great teacher, not only of several generations of college students, but also of the American people and of the human race. This volume makes it abundantly clear, nevertheless, that he rejected the owl of Minerva as a traveling companion. Indeed, it is equally clear from this volume that he really did not want *any* traveling companion, with the possible exception of Ellen Louise Axson. In an exceedingly revealing letter to her, Woodrow Wilson spoke of a bird which does not fly in flocks:

It must be worth while to be a genuine eagle, born with an eagle's spirit. It's something, in the first place, to begin life on a mountain-top where the eye is not stopped in its view by your neighbor's stupid, square brick house with its chintz curtains at the windows. There's education in a "bird's-eye" view. Then, too, its [*sic*] better to wing in independent flight from top to top than to be all your life flocking and nest-building and chattering with innumerable commonplace little birds in the branches of a tree which is, even at its highest twig, very near the ground after all. The only difficulty is that when you want company there are not eagles enough to make it. It's all well enough to make notable passages over wide continents and see noble stretches of the world, but it's lonely to do it all alone, and after it's done, nobody's the better but yourself. . . . It must be right chilly up on the dizzy crags when one gets old and feels his feathers growing thin! . . . there's no one to bury him, and no work interrupted when he dies. He's been a great, mayhap a famous, traveller; but travelling do'nt [*sic*] hasten the millennium. The fact of the matter is, that it's hard to find anything to do when one lives away from the haunts of ordinary birds. . . .

—MARVIN RINTALA

WILSON AND CONGRESSIONAL GOVERNMENT*

The earlier volumes of Wilson's papers have shown in rich detail how it was that Woodrow Wilson came to write a book on American political institutions, and how his book came to contain what it did. This volume of Wilson's papers includes, besides the complete text of *Congressional Government* as published in early 1885, most of the contemporary reviews of Wilson's book. Since there were no American political scientific journals in those sad days, reviews in daily newspapers and weekly journals of opinion could make or break a scholarly author's reputation. Wilson's reputation was made in spite of mild criticism in the *New York Times* and a nasty attack in the *New York Tribune*. Most of the reviews were favorable, but

* Arthur S. Link, editor: *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson: 1885*. Volume 4. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968. Pp. xvi, 758. \$15.00.)

many of these were at least indirectly planted by Wilson, and written by friends of his from college, law school, or graduate school days. If nothing else, this volume demonstrates that Wilson was very adept at making and keeping friends, who remained faithful to him throughout his academic and political careers.

It is helpful to see *Congressional Government* in the context of its own time, and especially refreshing to read it without the doubtful benefit of, say, Walter Lippmann's misleading introduction. Since, like so many other important books, *Congressional Government* is mentioned much more often than it is read, it might still be worthwhile to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, it is about time scholarly journals got around to reviewing it. *Congressional Government* is today one of the most widely used political scientific texts in American colleges and universities. The suspicion is perhaps pardonable that not all those who assign it as required reading have done their homework.

Wilson describes the purpose of his "essays" as being ". . . to point out the most characteristic practical features of the federal system. Taking Congress as the central and predominant power of the system, their object is to illustrate everything Congressional" (p. 13). Already a serious problem arises: *was* Congress in 1885 the most powerful institution in American politics? Too much of *Congressional Government* is devoted to reaffirmations of Wilson's faith in his own assumption, and too little to concrete evidence that he was justified in making it. Wilson's treatment of the power of the presidency is, bluntly, cavalier. The chapter on "The Executive" is by far the weakest part of *Congressional Government*. Even in 1885, it must have been difficult to swallow Wilson's pronouncement: "The business of the President, occasionally great, is usually not much above routine. Most of the time it is *mere* administration, mere obedience of directions from the masters of policy, the Standing Committees. Except in so far as his power of veto constitutes him a part of the legislature, the President might, not inconveniently, be a permanent officer; the first official of a carefully graded and impartially regulated civil service system, through whose sure series of merit-promotions the youngest clerk might rise even to the chief magistracy. He is part of the official rather than of the political machinery of the government, and his duties call rather for training than for constructive genius" (p. 140). This must be one of the most original interpretations ever advanced of the American presidency. If there were the slightest grain of truth in what Wilson said, one can only wonder why the two major parties and many minor parties were so busy trying to capture an office which was without power, even to the point of sometimes buying and stealing the presidency.

Wilson claimed that the power of the presidency had declined over time, and this may well have been true, although Wilson does not demonstrate it, but it is pure tautology to say that the power of the presidency ". . . has waned because the power of Congress

has become predominant" (p. 35). It is one of the important strengths of Wilson's argument that he perceived institutional power to be relational as well as substantive. He did not even attempt, however, to give a meaningful explanation of how and why Congress had become predominant. Presidents once had been, in his view, powerful men, but were such no longer. *When* the presidential office became one of headship rather than of leadership is an unanswered question in *Congressional Government*. The logical place for Wilson to have answered this question would have been in connection with his brilliant typology (pp. 111, 113-115) of American political leadership. Perhaps Wilson could not identify which Presidents were the first powerless men because there were none such?

Wilson also argued that the most striking difference in modern political systems ". . . is not between presidential and monarchical governments, but between Congressional and Parliamentary governments" (p. 13). This was a very important if partial insight, but it led him to try to do more than one thing in *Congressional Government*. In the same paragraph in which Wilson defined his object as explanation of the realities of American politics, he continued: "My chief aim in these essays has been . . . an adequate illustrative contrast of these two types of government, with a view to making as plain as possible the actual conditions of federal administration" (pp. 13-14). In short, Wilson defined two aims for his book: to show how American political institutions worked, and to show that they did not work as well as British political institutions.

These two aims were divergent and sometimes contradictory. American political institutions worked better in 1885 than Wilson thought, and he often painted the American picture darker than reality to show the assumed superiority of parliamentary over congressional government. Wilson saw no flaws in British politics: "The British system is perfected party government" (p. 72). He assumed that Gladstone's politics was the ultimate form of expression for British politics, and did not bother to ask whether British, like American, politics was changing constantly. He did, however, concede that American political institutions were perhaps reasonably successful: it was ". . . simply amazing to find how few outrageously and fatally foolish, how few bad or disastrous, things have been done by our disintegrate methods of legislation" (p. 70). Congressional government, it turned out, was better than the separation of powers, even though parliamentary government was better than congressional government.

Wilson's real fire was directed against the Constitution of the United States of America, not against congressional government. The most powerful single theme of *Congressional Government* is, in fact, Wilson's attack upon the constitution-makers of 1787. To say that Woodrow Wilson was no worshipper of the Constitution they wrote would be a serious understatement. Just as Machiavelli's real purpose in *The Prince* is revealed in his final "Exhortation to

Liberate Italy from the Barbarians," Wilson's real purpose in *Congressional Government* is revealed in his final paragraph, which is a direct appeal to liberate American politics from the enslavement of 1787. To Wilson the final source of political authority was to be found in "the standards of practical common sense" (p. 179), rather than in any written totems. It was necessary for him to proceed with some caution of language, because the fact of the matter was that ". . . opposition to the Constitution as a constitution, and even hostile criticism of its provisions, ceased almost immediately upon its adoption; and not only ceased, but gave place to an indiscriminating and almost blind worship of its principles, and of that delicate dual system of sovereignty, and that complicated scheme of double administration which it established" (p. 15). Even so, Wilson was relatively direct in his attack upon the Constitution: "The political law written in our hearts is . . . at variance with that which the Constitution sought to establish. A written constitution may and often will be violated in both letter and spirit by a people of energetic political talents and a keen instinct for progressive practical development; but so long as they adhere to the forms of such a constitution, so long as the machinery of government supplied by it is the only machinery which the legal and moral sense of such a people permits it to use, its political development must be in many directions narrowly restricted because of an insuperable lack of open or adequate channels" (p. 169).

Wilson's criticism of constitutionalism as an ideology was profoundly radical in an American context. Even Calhoun had claimed to be interpreting, not ignoring, the Constitution of the United States. Wilson, however, suggested that the Constitution was intolerable (p. 164). He saw much of the political history of the United States as a conflict between the demands of political wisdom and the legalistic restrictions of the Constitution (p. 112). Wilson did not merely argue that the Constitution had been misinterpreted, or that what had been appropriate in 1787 was no longer appropriate in 1885. The Constitution, in Wilson's view, had been a mistake to begin with—the American political system had been conceived in sin: "It is . . . manifestly a radical defect in our federal system that it parcels out power and confuses responsibility as it does. The main purpose of the Convention of 1787 seems to have been to accomplish this grievous mistake. The 'literary theory' of checks and balances is simply a consistent account of what our constitution-makers tried to do; and those checks and balances have proved mischievous just to the extent to which they have succeeded in establishing themselves as realities" (pp. 155-156).

Wilson's most serious objection to the Constitution was that in fragmenting power it had made power irresponsible (pp. 154, 156). Power, to Wilson, should be integrated rather than disintegrated. Both federalism and the separation of powers were bad because they fragmented power. The primacy of the federal government over the

states was necessary and desirable, and states' rights appeals were a part of political pathology for Wilson, but the Civil War had settled *that* question. Those "forces of disintegration which still remained in the blood of the body politic" had been destroyed in 1865 by "those other forces of health, of union and amalgamation" (p. 29). Even that power still left to the states was likely to decline in the future (pp. 28, 40-41, 171). Wilson therefore saw no need to beat the dead horse of federalism, and centered his attack upon the separation of powers. *This* attack, of course, would have been unnecessary if Wilson had really believed that Congressional power was now predominant. Even if this predominance were a fact, it was Wilson's position that within Congress itself power was still fragmented and therefore irresponsible (pp. 44, 59).

Wilson would have disagreed completely with Acton's now-famous 1887 letter to Creighton. For Wilson, the more power is divided the more irresponsible it becomes (p. 60). The less power a political leader has, the less his sense of responsibility: "It is ever the little foxes that spoil the grapes" (p. 60). Rather than corrupting, a sense of power steadies and sobers a man "by filling him with a grave sense of responsibility" (p. 119). Political leadership was not only the most honorable vocation to Wilson, but the most ennobling as well: "*Power and strict accountability for its use* are the essential constituents of good government. A sense of highest responsibility, a dignifying and elevating sense of being trusted, together with a consciousness of being in an official station so conspicuous that no faithful discharge of duty can go unacknowledged and unrewarded, and no breach of trust undiscovered and unpunished,—these are the influences, the only influences, which foster practical, energetic, and trustworthy statesmanship. The best rulers are always those to whom great power is intrusted [*sic*] in such a manner as to make them feel that they will surely be abundantly honored and recompensed for a just and patriotic use of it, and to make them know that nothing can shield them from full retribution for every abuse of it."

—MARVIN RINTALA

PLANNING HITLER'S DEATH*

Colonel Claus Schenk Count von Stauffenberg is one of the most important figures of recent German history. As the subtitle of this book indicates, he played the leading role in the biggest and most nearly successful of all the wartime attempts to assassinate Adolf Hitler. As a result he qualifies as the greatest hero of the German resistance. And he certainly had most of the qualifications of a hero: young, handsome, authentically aristocratic, boundlessly energetic, serious, and with a resolutely activist nature. To complete the pic-

* Joachim Kramarz: *Stauffenberg: The Architect of the Famous July 20th Conspiracy to Assassinate Hitler*. Trans. R. H. Barry. (New York: Macmillan, 1967. Pp. 255. \$5.95.)