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Woodrow Wilson

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THOMAS WOODROW WILSON, twenty-eighth president of the United States, is the only chief executive who has given scholarly attention to the presidency before undertaking the duties of that office. Wilson was born in Staunton, Virginia, on 28 December 1856, the son of Janet Woodrow Wilson and Rev. Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a founder of the southern Presbyterian Church. He was graduated from Princeton University (1879), studied law at the University of Virginia (1879–1880), practiced law in Atlanta (1882–1883), and thereafter did graduate work in political science, history, and economics at The Johns Hopkins University, where he received the Ph.D. in 1886.

From his youth onward, Wilson was intensely interested in the problems of modern democracy from a practical, not a theoretical, point of view. Presidential power was at a low ebb in the mid-1880s, and Wilson, in his first book, *Congressional Government* (1885), virtually ignored the presidency and focused on the obstacles that then existed to searching debate and discussion of great national issues. He singled out for particular criticism the committees of the House of Representatives, which, he said, effectively stifled free discussion. The surest way to guarantee that such debate would take place, Wilson said, would be to adopt the British cabinet system and make cabinet members ministers of state responsible to Congress.

Throughout his years as a professor of history, politics, and constitutional law at Bryn Mawr College (1885–1888), Wesleyan University (1888–1890), and Princeton University (1890–1910; president, 1902–1910), Wilson paid close attention to developments in American politics. He admired what he perceived as Cleveland's assertion of the moral leadership of the presidency and noted the impact on the office of the war with Spain and the entry of the United States on the world stage as a colonial and naval power.

It was Theodore Roosevelt's revivification of the presidential office that helped Wilson to come to his mature and definitive understanding of the potential powers of the chief executive. Those powers are described in Wilson's *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908) in what is perhaps the classic view of the modern presidency. The president, Wilson wrote, is the one single spokesman for the nation:

Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country, and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him. His position takes the imagination of the country. He is the representative of no constituency, but of the whole people. When he speaks in his true character, he speaks for no special interest. If he rightly interpret the national thought and boldly insist upon it, he is irresistible; and the country never feels the zest of action so much as when he is of such insight and calibre.

Wilson as maker and leader of public opinion

Parliamentary leader

The cabinet

Executive policies

The new freedom at home

The new freedom abroad

American neutrality, 1914–1916

Confusion and crises, 1916

From mediation to war, 1916–1917

The united states at war, 1917–1918

Peacemaking, 1919

The treaty fight in the united states, 1919–1920

The end of the wilson administration, 1919–1921

The significance of the wilson presidency

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