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## Book Reviews

Pierce, Anne R.

**Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman:  
Mission and Power in American Foreign Policy**  
Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2003. 274pp.

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The historical debate over the relation between ideology and realism in American foreign policy enjoys a well-trodden path.<sup>[i]</sup> In *Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman: Mission and Power in American Foreign Policy* Anne R. Pierce compares the ideas and actions of two American presidents separated by three decades but closely bound, the author suggests, by the principles that guided their foreign policies. As the title implies, Pierce proposes that the fundamental cornerstones of American foreign policy under Wilson and Truman were power and a national mission. By this the author argues that the United States was primarily motivated in its relations with the international community by a deeply-rooted ideology embodying the spread of its political and economic institutions and moral values. Pierce suggests that during the presidencies of Wilson and Truman the second fundamental, power, rose to significance in conjunction with America's 'mission' due to its greatly enhanced status in international affairs during and after the two world wars.

Pierce chooses two pertinent passages of American history and two extremely influential presidents to compare, yet *Mission and Power* struggles somewhat to resolve or enhance several key issues satisfactorily. Firstly, the author criticises the tendency of historians to lapse into categorising events in terms of dichotomies, such as power versus principle, accounting for "gaps within the literature about each president as well as the huge gap in literature based upon comparison" (p. xv). Yet Pierce seems unable to avoid the very same "either-or" bracketing of history that she encourages to dispel. Despite describing the dichotomy between mission and power as neither "an entirely accurate nor a helpful construct for the evaluation of foreign affairs" (p. xvi) it represents Pierce's central theme of description and comparison between the administrations of Wilson and Truman.

The author also laments the critical authority enjoyed by "realists," "relativists" and "objectivists" and calls for the realigning of historical attention towards American ideals.<sup>[ii]</sup> In other words America's benign ideology should be given more emphasis in explaining its policies. *Mission and Power* is undermined by this agenda, sometimes resulting in the oversimplification of American motivations and actions. Pierce consistently depicts international relations in terms of American power driven by benevolent ideals pitted against a backdrop of Old World colonialism or Communist militarism, whether it be the differing war aims of each nation entering World War I or the reasons for the emergence of the Cold War. Ideological rhetoric of itself is not a sufficient verifier of intentions and motivations, as is keenly observed when it concerns the actions of European nations or Communist Russia, but the same rule of

judgement is not always applied to the activities of the United States. Accordingly Pierce is prone to disregard “sceptical” explanations of US motivations (economic, political and military self-interest) or defends them with the inadequate argument that American ideals were in any case benign even if its actions were misplaced. For example, when discussing the decision to intervene with aid to Greece and Turkey announced in the Truman Doctrine, Pierce applauds the “American internationalist insistence that England denounce its colonialism” (p.173). Yet the tensions between idealism in explaining America’s replacement of the British, defined by Pierce as maintenance of the morale and political freedom of Western Europe, and the practical implications that America might now itself have been engaging in a ‘colonial’ policy is not questioned.

This is all to the disadvantage of *Mission and Power* as it does not significantly build on the historical record but rather leaves the impression of dependence on what has come before. This sense is fortified by Pierce’s frequent citation of secondary historical opinion to make an argument rather than her own analysis of primary material in sections of her study.<sup>[iii]</sup> As a consequence the author’s arguments can lack the authority of sufficient analysis or adequate evidence. The resulting impression is that the choice of comparing Wilson and Truman was largely arbitrary because Pierce bases her arguments on a strain of idealism that she considers universal and perpetual in the American political psyche. A more insightful comparison of the tensions that came out of the relationship between realism and ideology in the administrations of Wilson and Truman would be a deserving subject, but one that *Mission and Power* fails to adequately

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<sup>[i]</sup> Many works on this topic have grappled with the relation between these two elements within US foreign policy covering a broad spectrum of historical opinion. For example see: John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar Foreign Policy* (New York, 1982); *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1998); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT and London, 1987);, Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century* (Chicago and London, 1999), Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1994); and William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1972).

<sup>[ii]</sup> Pierce in particular criticises William Appleman Williams for focusing too narrowly on economic factors in explaining US imperialism and Michael H. Hunt for being restricted by excessive emphasis on racism in American ideology.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Pierce frequently refers to Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York, 1992); Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*; Smith, *America’s Mission*; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* and *We Now Know*.