



## Episode 496: Wilsonianism: The Legacy That Won't Die

Guest: Paul Gottfried

**WOODS:** It's another case of, just yesterday I was talking about an article by Antony Flew that appeared years ago in *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*. I just was going back looking through old issues, thinking maybe there's some good gems in here, some topics that I can discuss on the show, so I thought Antony Flew would be a good guy to talk about. And then I came across your article, "Wilsonianism: The Legacy That Won't Die," and I realized it's from 1990, so the article is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. So I thought in honor of that, let's have you on to talk about it.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** I love when books and articles have anniversaries, because it makes me feel old. So anyway, let's talk about Wilsonianism. I'm pretty sure most people listening have a sense of what we're talking about, but especially for the overseas people – although, probably the people on the receiving end of Wilsonianism know him even better than the Americans – but give me a working definition of what we mean when we say somebody is a Wilsonian.

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I think in the American context, it means that that person believes in what is called liberal internationalism in foreign affairs. United States must impose its power together with other democracies, meaning particularly England, and since the neoconservative association with Israel, now Israel is sort of part of it. So England and Israel, but particularly England and the English speaking world, must together impose our vision of the world on other countries that are seen as less well developed in terms of their political consciousness. That is to say, we have a moral duty as an exceptional nation – which is a term I hear most in these Republican candidates for the presidency using – we have a moral duty to make other countries like ourselves, and if this does not happen, these countries can become a danger to our way of life. Moreover, if we fail to carry out this moral mission, people are going to languish in superstition and political backwardness.

So what Wilsonianism is is sort of what Edmund Burke I think referred to as an armed doctrine that he associated with the French Revolution. It's simply an updated version of that. And I think by now, although it goes back too and is associated with Woodrow Wilson, I think you and Richard Gamble and other scholars have pointed out that there is a very long tradition or a very long genealogy for Wilsonianism going back, one

might say, even to the founding of the United States. That the United States is an exceptional nation and it has a duty to make other countries like itself.

**WOODS:** Is it the case in your opinion that Wilson sincerely believed these things, given that he apparently made numerous exceptions over the course of his life? Particularly, obviously in the case of the Treaty of Versailles, where he had denounced the existing standards of international political conduct, and then he joined in that exact kind of behavior. Some people, his apologists, would say, well, he was outnumbered at the conference, and there was only so much he could do, and he did the very best he could. Is this a case of he was just outnumbered and he did the best he could, or is it a case of he believes his principles when it's convenient for him? How do you sort this out?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, I think it is impossible, as I've argued in a long article I wrote in *Historically Speaking* on the relationship between the old WASP patrician United States and the neoconservatives. It is impossible to separate Wilson's ideals from his anglophilia. And once World War I begins with this loathing of the countries that dared to defy England, particularly the Germans, so that for Wilson, maintaining Anglo-American world supremacy is inextricably wrapped up with his vision of a global democracy, with the entire world being transformed to look like the United States. I think in the Treaty of Versailles it's true that he does give in on certain points, but I think that his support of one side in the war as the righteous side, I think a point that Richard Gamble makes in his book, *The War for Righteousness*, and his view of the other side is totally evil, you know, I think sort of eases his conscience that it was not an entirely just treaty.

Moreover, there are people who have argued the Treaty of Versailles was eminently just. The Germans and Austrians and Hungarians and the others got exactly what they deserved. They were evil countries that were trying to trample on the western democracies. So I think Wilson definitely sold himself that bill of goods, and even with the distribution of food stuffs after the war, I think as Arthur Link points out in his biography of Wilson, Wilson's position was that the people who fought on our side should be fed first. The other people, you know, if they ended up on the other side, were necessarily evil. The Croatians weren't as good as the Serbs, because the Serbs fought with us. So that I think his moral righteousness allowed him to believe that the Treaty of Versailles was not really a bad deal, considering that the side they had fought represented total evil.

**WOODS:** I'm pretty sure Paul Johnson, a historian both of us are familiar with, said in his book, *Modern Times*, I think he took the position that the Treaty of Versailles was actually not so bad.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** I think that's part of his general tendency to be a contrarian, and sometimes

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**GOTTFRIED:** Well, no, I don't think he's a contrarian. He's —

**WOODS:** Well, also he's a British imperialist.

**GOTTFRIED:** A British imperialist who *hates* the Germans. He seems to buy into the Fischer thesis, although he offers absolutely no evidence for why it is correct or why Fischer's claims are correct. He just accepts it. And another one is Victor Davis Hanson, who thinks the Treaty —

**WOODS:** Who's much worse. I can enjoy a lot of what Paul Johnson has written on other topics —

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** — I just can't enjoy Victor Davis Hanson on any level.

**GOTTFRIED:** Because he's a monomaniac. You know, it's the Anglo-American world is good and democratic, and the Germans and Russians are evil, or something like that. And he even pushes us back, Kagan, into the ancient world, so the Athenians are fighting or they're precursors of Anglo-American democracy, and the Spartans are the German heavies, you know, 2,400 years ago. So it's impossible to read Kagan unless you accept his prejudices, which neither one of us does.

**WOODS:** That's right. In fact, before I forget about Paul Johnson, I remember back around the time, I think it was around the time of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, he had a cover story on *National Review*; I'll never forget the title: "What the World Needs Now: Western Imperialism."

**GOTTFRIED:** Right, right.

**WOODS:** Yeah. That's just what we all need. I was thinking to myself I had too much disposable income.

**GOTTFRIED:** (laughing) Right.

**WOODS:** What can I blow it on that will accomplish nothing? Would you say Donald Rumsfeld is a Wilsonian?

**GOTTFRIED:** Not really. I think he's pretty much of a kind of technician, you know, a Washington bureaucrat, who's sort of fascinated by the use of force. And the neoconservatives, who are in a sense the ultimate Wilsonians, did like him during the Iraq War, but I just don't see that mindset in Rumsfeld.

**WOODS:** I was just wondering, because he didn't speak of war entirely as an instrument of the advancement of American interests, although he did speak of it that way. He did also talk about liberation and how wonderful it is —

**GOTTFRIED:** Right, right.

**WOODS:** – because then he was trying to soothe us when things started to turn sour. He said, well, you know, the liberation of a people can be sometimes a messy process, he was saying. So he did push that, and I wondered was that just for public consumption.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yes, I think it was for public consumption. Also, he was availing himself of the rhetoric, one might say of American international relations. He was supposed to say that, because American international relations has been predicated on Wilsonianism for many, many decades. So when Johnson was bombing Vietnam, he spoke about bringing democracy to the Mekong Delta. I mean, he was supposed to use those – I remember Kissinger complained this is a little silly; they always talk about democracy and this. And then he had to sort of backtrack and say, well of course, this is our ultimate aim, but you know, in the meantime we have to do something else.

I always like to point out that when Mussolini attacked Ethiopia in 1936, he spoke about bringing progress and modern civilization to the Ethiopians. He never attacked them, by the way – with all due respect to Christopher Hitchens who makes this claim – as monophysite Christians, you know, fighting them in the name of Roman Catholicism. I have not come across him ever saying – and I've read all this Axis literature. He always appealed to progress and bringing people the gifts of modern civilization by gassing them, I suppose. So you get something that sounds like Wilsonianism in most forms of imperialism.

I mean, the British imperialists toward the end sounded very Wilsonian. You know, they were in Africa to bring these people democracy and women's rights. They used the same kind of language. It's sort of a last gasp, one might say, of western imperialism, Wilsonianism. So I think it serves that purpose, as well as energizing Americans to fight wars which we would do well to stay out of.

**WOODS:** But when the British would say things like that, is that always just a gimmick to bring people on board? Because even today, you can find people who – I had somebody on this very show who defended the British Empire on the grounds that these were obviously backward people, and you can talk about brutality all you want, but the fact is, now they have indoor plumbing. Now they have infrastructure. Now they have hospitals. Now they have some semblance of order. I don't think that's just an afterthought. Surely that's part of what we'll call the warp and woof of British imperialism, in that we are bringing something of what makes us great to these people.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, I think that's always been present in imperialism, but the British did not claim in the 19th century during the height of imperialism that they were bringing democracy or human rights or this sort of thing. They may have prohibited the burning of widows on the pyres of their dead husbands or tried to end the slave trade, but it was fairly limited, and they assumed that cultures were simply different, and

you know, the British could bring some gifts of civilization to other parts of the world, but they pretty much had to leave things as they are.

But the missionary spirit that is tied up or tacked to the notion of modern democracy or that this is a perfect form of government that suits everybody, I think this comes later, together with something else that I came across about 25 years ago, that you have American academics who, at one point, were given the job of writing constitutions for other countries. You know, this was their job, constitutions that would look like our constitution – not the one that of course was written by Hamilton and Madison and Jay, the one that we have right now. So I think this is another, one might say, manifestation of the Wilsonian spirit, that we can make other countries just like us by giving them the appropriate constitutional document.

**WOODS:** You mention in your article a thesis common to some historians, and I remember – I for the life of me can't remember the name of the author – but I remember reading a book in graduate school that made this thesis, that in the 20th century, the world's choice is really between Lenin and Wilson.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** Like, these are the two polar opposites. And it's not quite the same thing as Hillary versus Bush, because at least I can identify a difference between Lenin and Wilson, but for heaven's sake, is that – those are my choices? It's two forms of international crusading, and that's it. You pick the kind of crusading you want, and that's your choice.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, and I know that John Lukacs makes this argument and there's another person who wrote – I'm not sure, his name actually escapes my mind right now, but he was a Marxist, and this choice may in fact be one that we face. Lukacs, though, has an interesting argument about this, that the Wilsonian choice may not be international democracy and crusading; it may also be nationalism. You know, the self-determination of countries. So Lukacs argued that Mussolini is sort of the child of Wilson, because he represents the option of national self-determination, as opposed to the internationalism of Lenin. But I think you are correct. I think this is certainly the way, let's say, neoconservatives and other American liberal internationalists see the world, the way they saw it by the end of the Cold War, that it was essentially Wilson against Lenin, and we Americans as global democrats are the heirs of Wilson.

**WOODS:** Well, as I think I may have said the last time you were here, the foreign policy difference that we're allowed to have in the U.S. is between basically neocons and realists, and this is supposed to be a vast chasm separating these two positions, because the neocons supposedly want to spread, as you say, democracy, around the world and democracies are less likely to go to war with each other and this and that, and the realists are people who say we should not be going to war out of a concern for women's rights around the world or voting rights or anything, but simply to defend American interests.

Well, regardless, the fact is that most of the time – not all the time, but most of the time – they both favor the intervention, just for their own reasons. So what difference does it make what their reasons are? But secondly, are they being sincere? Are the neocons being sincere when they say we just want to spread democracy around the world, because it seems like when they've done it, the regimes that have resulted have been so grotesque that even they themselves have to think that maybe this was a bad idea.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, I think they do believe this, though it's usually filtered through all kinds of prejudices and ethnic attachments, so that whatever Israel does to extend its influence, it's doing in the name of democracy. Whoever opposes Israel just has made-up grievances. We have to pretend that 800,000 or more Palestinians were not expelled; they just were driven by totalitarian leaders to leave their homes. So a lot of what they tell you is simply based on their own ethnic prejudice. They obviously hate the Germans, no matter what the Germans do. They don't much like the Russians. It's pretty obvious that they carry with them a lot of ethnic baggage, but I think at some level, they do believe their own nonsense.

You know, they believe that other countries have to be made to look like the United States, and not just like the way the United States was at the time of founding, but we must have gay rights. This is a new non-negotiable "conservative" demand, that Putin is a bad guy or Orbán in Hungary, because they don't have gay rights. They don't encourage gay marriage or gay fraternizing or something like that, so much of what they consider democracy is sort of a kind of updated version. It's whatever we're doing now in the United States is democracy. And I think at some level, they believe this.

I mean, if you read someone like John Podhoretz, for instance, which I do usually with a barf bag around, what he tells you is that we have to stand up for democracy, gay rights, women's rights, whatever. But he also loathes Germans, adores the Israelis. You know, there are all of these prejudices that do operate within this welt unshown, but I think at some level, the guy really believes what he's telling you, which I think, by the way, makes them more dangerous, you know?

If you're only a person with an ethnic hang-up, you could say that you know some Frenchman who fought in World War II who doesn't like the Germans or whatever it is or some Englishman doesn't like somebody else, we understand that. Or Margaret Thatcher never quite got over Kaiser Wilhelm. She was like he's denouncing the Germans and – we understand that there are certain national allegiances and certain national enmities. But I think in the case of the neoconservatives, it is wrapped up in this world view that is based on the assumption that we can bring democracy to – and should be bringing democracy. And democracy must be defined as the latest version of democracy as it exists in the United States and our allies, our so-called allies, which are really our satellites.

By the way, I do think realism does represent a counterpoint to Wilsonianism. The problem, it would seem to me, is that all the energy is on one side, a kind of liberal internationalism, so that somebody like Rand Paul may have started out as a genuine

realist, and he still sounds the most sensible of these people on international relations, when I listen to them. It's just that he's under tremendous pressure all the time a) to love Bibi, b) to say I want democracy for other people, c) to support wars which all good American patriots would want and so forth. The Republican media are hysterically in favor of American military intervention, so in order for Rand Paul to stay in a political race for the presidency, it is certainly necessary as a realist to sound similar to the other side. So although I think realism does have intrinsic value as a counterpoint, the realist position never gets played out. That's the problem.

**WOODS:** And also, I think it has a — I'm not saying deserve, but it has a certain air of moral superiority to it, in the same way that leftism generally domestically has an air of moral superiority to it.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** We care about the poor; you don't. We care about workplace safety; you don't. Whereas the other side's view can't be fit onto a bumper sticker. It's a little bit more involved. There's a little more nuance to it, but nobody wants to hear that. So likewise, you could say to the neocons, you have screwed up every society you have touched in the past 15 years, but it doesn't seem to matter because they use magic words like "democracy," and somehow that means that it's okay that we displaced 2 million people from Iraq or that all these other things can be just brushed aside as the unfortunate consequences of our wonderful intentions.

**GOTTFRIED:** They also have lots and lots of money and media exposure.

**WOODS:** Yeah, do they ever.

**GOTTFRIED:** And they write in the national newspapers, the so-called opposition paper. *The Washington Post* they can dominate, *The New York Times*. There's no limit to their influence and power. So this is another reason why they can impose their influence and will on opposition.

**WOODS:** I want to say something briefly about World War I specifically, because when I wrote about this, I guess it was 11 years ago now in *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*, I was trying to show that Wilson, for all his rhetoric about being disinterested and being neutral, everybody knows he obviously had a double standard, because he loved the British and he hated the Germans.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** Anyone can see that.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** So I said that obviously neither policy should have been adopted, but the British had the starvation blockade on the Germans, which is the half-the-time left out

context of the German submarine warfare. It wasn't that the Germans just arbitrarily adopted that policy. They're being starved to death on purpose.

**GOTTFRIED:** Right.

**WOODS:** Okay, so when I talked about that and I talked about how many people died by some estimates of malnourishment or whatever, I was accused by Max Boot of being – which, every time I hear the name Max Boot, I think about that George Orwell image of a boot stomping on a face forever. But Max Boot in *The Weekly Standard* basically accused me of sympathizing with the Kaiser. Like they have only one way of approaching people on this –

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** – and that's always to accuse them of sympathizing with the bad guy.

**GOTTFRIED:** More specifically with the Germans. They hate the Germans.

**WOODS:** Boy, yeah.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, I mean, of course because of the Holocaust. The reality was in World War I, most Jews of the world supported the Central Powers. And there were hundreds of thousands of Jews kicked out of Eastern Europe by the Russians, which went into Austria and Germany where they were protected, so –

**WOODS:** Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute. Paul, hold on for a minute. I didn't realize that about most of the Jews supporting the Central Powers. Does that help to account for why the Balfour Declaration occurred when it did?

**GOTTFRIED:** No. The Balfour Declaration was different. They were afraid of losing Jewish support, because the Germans were trying to woo Jewish support by making vague promises of a Jewish homeland. But it is true that most of the Jews in the world were fighting for the Central Powers and were sympathetic. They were certainly anti-Russian, but they were sympathetic to the Central Powers. Remember, Austria-Hungary protected Jews throughout Eastern Europe, and in Germany, although there was some persistent anti-Semitism, Jews had done very well in the course of the 19th and early 20th century, so in order to outbid the other side, they offered the Balfour Declaration.

But I thought you were surprised to discover that the Russian Army displaced all these Jews, which they did, mostly in Poland, eastern Poland, Galicia, other places as the Army came through there. And the Jews are all going to flee westward; many will end up in Germany, and this fuels the anti-Semitism between them more. Because the German Jews who were living there were like Germans; Eastern European Jews were culturally and linguistically very different. And many of them will end up in Hungary as well, and this unfortunately plays into the hands of anti-Semitic roots in the interwar

period. But there had been an enormous displacement of Jews, because of the Russian Army, and the Germans and Austrians protected the Jews.

**WOODS:** At one point in your article – and of course I'm linking to the article and to some other topics that we talked about and some book titles; today's show notes page is [TomWoods.com/496](http://TomWoods.com/496), and people can read this – but you actually reference Kagan, who apparently is of the view that the German Kaiser and Hitler and Stalin, the three of them were basically part of one, great American crusade, like they're all moral equivalents or more or less portrayed them as such.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yes, they are.

**WOODS:** I mean, that's obviously false. And George Kennan even said in the mid 1940s that if we could just have the Kaiser back and not have destabilized anything, obviously the world would be much better.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yeah, I totally agree. I think he was horribly inept at international affairs. He was not a villain. But there is a book by a man named John Rohl, who was really the example of a self-hating German, who did a biography trying to – it's a several thousand-page biography, trying to compare the Kaiser to Hitler. The problem is many of the statements that the Kaiser makes are taken out of context and are just garbled. No, he has never struck me as any kind of villain, but rather horribly inept at international affairs, though a decent ruler at home. Yeah, Kagan assumes the Fischer thesis. In fact, most of the neocons and Straussians do –

**WOODS:** Okay, tell people what the Fischer thesis is.

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, Fischer argues that World War I was caused by a premeditated German plan to create a great German empire by swallowing up most of Eastern Europe, by making France almost into a third world country, occupying eastern part of France, taking Belgium and other territories, and that the Germans launched the war, which they know will be a European-wide war, because they think they can vastly expand their empire and reduce others almost to serfs within a great German imperial structure that they were going to build, which would be some kind of a proto-Nazi dictatorship. There is virtually no evidence for anything that Fischer writes, and I've seen just about every page of his work, *Griff nach der Weltmacht, Germany's Bid for World Power*. I've seen it refuted multiple times, and I've also seen evidence that he has twisted statements made by von Moltke, the German commander, and others. And he takes sort of the desperation and ineptitude on the part of the Germans and sees this as something very different, a kind of imperialist arrogance, which led to what was an intended war, European-wide war.

One of the curious things is that Fischer never looks at what the other countries are doing, because anything he accuses the Germans of doing, like having war plans, exist on the other side. The other sides, certainly the British, were looking for a fight. Churchill was looking for a fight. Poincaré in France was. And if you read a book by Sean McMeekin that came out a few years ago on Russia in World War I, it shows that

the Russians planned to attack Germany in 1914 when they assembled 1 million men on the German and Austrian-Galician border by August 1st, 1914. The Germans were last to mobilize their army. So obviously they were not the only players, and their argument that they had been encircled by the other side was perfectly correct. I mean, they did jump the gun, and they acted disastrously in Belgium, but they certainly were not more responsible for the war than the French or the Russians or the Serbs, and I think the British play at least as much of a role in the road leading up to the war as the Germans. But the Fischer thesis is simply accepted at face value by most neoconservatives and certainly by Max Boot because of their revulsion for the Germans because of World War II and the Holocaust.

**WOODS:** Paul, if people want to read more about this, obviously they should read this article of yours and some of your other work, but if they want to get a sense of Wilsonianism and specifically get a good sense of the correct way to understand World War I, what can you recommend in terms of books?

**GOTTFRIED:** Well, okay. I was going to —

**WOODS:** In English, preferably.

**GOTTFRIED:** Preferably in English, that's tough. I was going to recommend a book that I'm working on right now, a book of essays mostly on World War I dealing with this. There is a very good essay by our friend, Ralph Raico —

**WOODS:** That's right.

**GOTTFRIED:** — on Churchill, that I think is indispensable reading. There's a piece by Murray Rothbard on the United States in World War I that I strongly recommend. There's a book by a man named Walter Karp on American intervention in the war, which is very good. There's a book by Sean McMeekin, which was published by Belknap Press at Harvard a few years ago; I think it came out about four years ago. It's certainly worth reading; it's on Russia in World War I. The best work I have seen in the English language are the essays and texts of Harry Elmer Barnes. I mean, it's better than just anything else that I've read in English.

**WOODS:** But some people would say that Barnes, because he was writing on World War I in the 1920s, is out of date now. He didn't have access to the sources we've got.

**GOTTFRIED:** This to me is a nonsense argument. Most of the sources that I've seen that have come out since then would seem to argue in favor of what he's saying. My only criticism of Barnes is he's insufficiently critical of the British role and Edward Grey and Churchill, who were certainly warmongers in this period and were preparing for an inevitable confrontation with Germany, which was their continental rival. But on the French and Russian role, I think he's excellent. McMeekin, by the way, does use documents that were made available after the fall of the Soviet Empire, and everything he shows just confirms what Barnes says about the belligerent intentions of the tsarist government in 1914.

**WOODS:** Okay, well that's interesting to hear, because I've heard Barnes dismissed on those grounds.

**GOTTFRIED:** By the way, one of the reasons Barnes has been dismissed is that he's a Nazi atrocity minimizer after the Second World War, and I think —

**WOODS:** Yeah, that really surprised me.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yes, it does surprise me, because he is certainly not writing from a pro-Fascist, poor Nazi point of view. If you read his work on the earlier stuff, it's clear that he is kind of a man of the moderate left who is writing. I think he just became so sick of war propaganda, he went off in the other direction.

**WOODS:** Yeah, yeah. That was my feeling as well. Well, one thing I would add, also by Ralph Raico, is in a collection of essays called *Great Wars and Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal*. He actually starts off with a chapter on the coming of World War I, and he assesses the different arguments as to who was to blame the most and so on. And he talks about the steps and the historical events that occurred, so I'm going to link to that also. This is going to be the most important and chock-full show notes page ever, [TomWoods.com/496](http://TomWoods.com/496). Well, when your book on fascism comes out, I guess in the relatively near future, I hope you'll come back and we can return to the subject of fascism, which is always in a macabre way kind of fun to discuss.

**GOTTFRIED:** Yes, the book will be out in mid-November, so any time afterwards would work.

**WOODS:** All right, we'll definitely do that. Thanks for your time today, Paul.

**GOTTFRIED:** Okay, bye.