



Realism and American Foreign Policy: Wilsonians and the Kennan-Morgenthau Thesis

Steven J. Bucklin

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George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau argued that moralistic and legalistic beliefs bound Wilsonian internationalists to policies outside the national interest. Establishing their claims in the decade following World War II, Kennan and Morgenthau contended that the United States had over-extended its commitments, an interpretation that came to dominate opponents' criticisms of Wilson and his followers. Bucklin shows, after careful examination of the evidence, that the policies that Wilsonians advocated from 1919 to 1954 were generally in concert with those of the realists. Wilsonians understood balance of power politics, sought the professionalization of the Foreign Service, advocated diplomacy, and demonstrated an acute understanding of the long-term national interest.

After establishing the basis of the Kennan/Morgenthau thesis, Bucklin provides a comparative analysis between the policies of Wilson and his disciples and those of Kennan and Morgenthau. This study is based upon an examination of the papers and voluminous publications of three prominent Wilsonians: Quincy Wright, Frederick Schuman, and Denna Fleming, as well as the writings of Kennan and Morgenthau. Beginning with a detailed study of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy, Bucklin presents the case that Wilson's policies were designed to meet the national interest. The test continues with a consideration of American policies in the inter-war years, World War II, and the first decade of the Cold War to include collective security, neutrality, appeasement, and containment. Efforts to label the Wilsonians as idealistic fail when put to the test of the realists.

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