

Robert Alexander Kraig:

Woodrow Wilson and the Lost World of the Oratorical Statesman

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Originally submitted in 1999 as a dissertation for the University of Wisconsin, Robert Alexander Kraig's *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost World of the Oratorical Statesman* was published in 2004 by Texas A&M University Press as the ninth in its Presidential Rhetoric Series. Tracing Woodrow Wilson's (1856-1924) development as a student, scholar, and politician, Kraig presents an intriguing look at the place of classical rhetoric and classical ideals of oratory in turn-of-the-century America. As he follows Wilson through his many years of higher education, Kraig gives a concise summary of the status of rhetorical studies as the country entered the twentieth century and saw the reduction of this academic field to composition and belles lettres.

Pointing to influences both classical and modern, and examining oratorical theories both ancient and antebellum,¹ Kraig provides the reader with an intelligent analysis of how one man's adherence to the highest ideals of statesmanship and oratory formed his philosophical and political perspectives. In doing so, Kraig neatly summarizes theories concerning the ethics, practices, and ends of rhetoric.

After offering a concise and intelligent introduction to oratory and postbellum America, Kraig's study neatly progresses in a chronological order, following young Wilson's trajectory from dedicated school boy to accomplished orator and leader of the free world. Reiterating, with each chapter, Wilson's schooling in and commitment to oratorical statesmanship, Kraig traces the shifting of scholarly influences informing Wilson's philosophical development and so, competently and clearly, plants the seeds for his climactic final argument, an apologia of sorts for Wilson's controversial decision to take to the road in support of the Treaty of Versailles.

In his prologue, "The Ends of Oratory" (pp. 3-10), Kraig gives an introduction to the place of oratory in America's political culture and considers its links to ancient Greece and Rome. In doing so, he emphasizes the ethical and practical ends of oratory and the relationship of these ends to perspectives on political leadership. He briefly traces attitudes towards eloquence and points out that Wilson was profoundly influenced by the great orator-statesmen of the antebellum era. This led to his "desire to reconstitute American government so that the oratorical statesman would play a dominant role" (p. 9), a desire Kraig claims animated Wilson's entire intellectual career.

In Chapter One, "The Education of the Orator" (pp. 11-43), Kraig examines how, in the years following the American Civil War (which saw the waning of the orator as central to American political life), Wilson's early rhetorical education developed due primarily to the influence of his father, Joseph Wilson, an eloquent minister, prestigious professor of Pastoral Theology and Sacred Rhetoric, and passionate practitioner of oratory. Tracing Wilson's path

¹ That is, before the American Civil War.

through college, Kraig details Wilson's encounter with thinkers and writers who were to become significant influences (among them Bautain, Goldsmith, Lucy, and Brougham), summarizes the shifts in attitudes toward rhetoric and oratory in colleges of the late nineteenth century, and describes Wilson's disappointment in both the coursework offered and the oratorical exercises undertaken. Examining Wilson's philosophical influences, Kraig offers a brief but thorough treatment of rhetorical theories concerning the nature and ends of oratory, noting that Wilson was particularly influenced by those emphasizing the importance of talent and toil, deep learning, the use of emotion, and the emulation of models. Furthermore, Kraig relates how Wilson addressed deficiencies in the curriculum by schooling himself, practicing his elocution, training in extemporaneous delivery, and studying great orators (Demosthenes was a favorite). Lastly, Kraig deals with Wilson's early ideas on leadership, examining his college writings on politics and government, to construct a portrait of a young man passionate about the place and future of the ideal statesman in America, devoted to excellence in oratory, and insistent on the need for a revival of serious and public legislative debate in the US Congress.

In Chapter Two, "The Literary Politician" (pp. 44-90), Kraig gives an account of Wilson's brief foray into law and entry into and subsequent graduation from Johns Hopkins University, where he earned his PhD with submission of his first published book, *Congressional Government*. Kraig then describes Wilson's career as a professor, initially at Bryn Mawr, then at Wesleyan, and finally at Princeton, where he would later become president of the university. It is during these years, Kraig suggests, that Wilson came into his own as a college lecturer and public speaker, and here Kraig quotes various former students who praise Wilson's powerful and beautiful orations. During this period, Wilson devoted himself to more specialized academic research in public administration, focusing, in his writing, on the nature of public opinion and advocating the ideal statesman as one who could combine the worlds of scholarly learner and practicing politician while avoiding the pedantry of the former and the narrowness of the latter.

At this point, Kraig also examines the evolution of modern mass communication at the turn of the century, detailing the ways in which Wilson responded to the new rhetorical situation presented by these emerging technologies. It seems clear, from Kraig's treatment, that Wilson was acutely aware of the new challenges and opportunities and especially adept at anticipating the demands of multiple audiences, a talent which would serve him well in later years on the campaign trail. Kraig next presents an overview of Wilson's dozen years of teaching at Princeton, years in which he replaced Walter Bagehot with Edmund Burke as his personal model, issued three books and several articles, and found his reputation as a public lecturer growing.

Kraig's third chapter, "The Oratorical Revival and the Emergence of Woodrow Wilson" (pp. 98-119), summarizes 'oratory's secondary renaissance' from 1896 to 1919 and discusses the emergence and appeal of spellbinders and Chautauqua orators, that is, charming or entertaining speakers popular with audiences at the turn of the century. Moving from a consideration of the wider political context, Kraig treats Wilson's tenure as president at Princeton (a position he held for 8 years), during which (in 1907) he presented a series of lectures at Columbia University, which argued for an 'oratorical presidency' and were published (in 1908) under the title *Constitutional Government*. Kraig deems Wilson's "doctrine of the oratorical presidency as the culmination of his thirty-year search for a way to place exalted statesmen at the head of American government" (p. 104). When, due to disputes over university politics, Wilson's situation at Princeton became untenable, he could, Kraig notes, reach for his boyhood dreams of public office. Publisher George Harvey, who had been inspired by Wilson's talents for oratory, was instrumental in securing the New Jersey gubernatorial Democratic nomination for him, and he was inaugurated in January of 1911. In sketching a brief portrait of Wilson's tenure as governor, Kraig emphasizes Wilson's openness to compromise in situations where the

fundamental purposes of his bills were not undermined, and, in doing so, anticipates his concluding arguments regarding Wilson's decision to undertake what would be his last speaking tour in 1919.

Kraig characterizes Wilson as the apotheosis of the 'second oratorical renaissance', and describes his rhetorical style. Focusing primarily on Wilson's powers of invention and delivery, to the exclusion of any significant consideration of the text of his speeches, Kraig argues that the simplicity of his language made him accessible to mass audiences. Direct and conversational, Wilson spoke extemporaneously most of the time and managed to seem both classic and modern, both rational and yet emotionally powerful. Working only from loose outlines and using stories and humor to reach his audiences, he received favorable national coverage for his speeches.

In Chapter Four, "The Creation of the Oratorical President" (pp. 120-140), Kraig follows Wilson's steps from the campaign trail in 1911 to the 'preparedness tour' in 1916, and outlines the connection between Wilson's remarkable political success and his oratorical capacities. Wilson, Kraig writes, undertook the campaign tour in the hopes that popular support would put pressure on the Democrats to nominate him. For three and a half weeks Wilson projected an aura of intellectualism and was warmly received, often making the front page. Kraig outlines the political maneuvers which, in addition to his campaigning, secured for Wilson the Democratic nomination, and reiterates Wilson's rhetorical method of drawing on romantic nostalgia for old ideals in order to promote progressive ones, for example, when, in 1912 speeches he called forth images of America's pre-industrial past in order to argue for more government intervention into the economy.

Here Kraig also elaborates on the fascinating manner in which Wilson, bucking the tradition of the silent president, made the State of the Union address to Congress in person, and, furthermore, spoke over the heads of the Congress to the people, using the press as his intermediary. Wilson's goal, Kraig writes, was to focus the public gaze on Congress to such an extent that individual legislators felt compelled to support his initiatives. In doing so, Wilson showed an astute awareness of public opinion, releasing public statements at key times so the press would pick them up.

Kraig next describes the triumph of Wilson's first presidential speaking tour in 1916, during which he addressed over one million people arguing in favor of increasing American land and sea forces in preparation for war. Journalists, Kraig writes, were impressed with the tour, which reinforced Wilson's belief in oratory as a means for overcoming congressional opposition and rekindled his lifelong love of oratorical endeavor.

In his fifth and final chapter, "The Leader and the Cause: The Western Tour of 1919" (pp. 141-185), Kraig pulls together his most critical supporting arguments from the previous chapters and delivers his central argument. He first narrates the events leading up to Wilson's final oratorical campaign, during which he planned to deliver 30 major addresses and dozens of back-platform speeches promoting ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. The campaign, the tale of which, as Kraig points out, has been retold many different times, in many different ways, and for many different purposes, ultimately failed, ending prematurely when Wilson suffered a major and debilitating stroke in October 1919. Kraig then confronts the many questions resulting from Wilson's decision to make this tour at a time when his health was, at best, questionable, and when success seemed highly improbable. Outlining several theories, Kraig finally attempts to place Wilson's decision in the context of his long history of belief in the power of oratory.

Dissecting the criticism of Wilson's decision to tour at this critical juncture, Kraig argues that such criticism presupposes that Wilson's decision was aberrant or out of character, a presupposition he heartily dismisses, citing Wilson's consistent responses to rhetorical exigencies throughout his political life. Instead, Kraig suggests that Wilson's decision should be

considered “in light of his ratification strategy throughout that year, in light of his previous political action, and in light of his long-established theories of rhetorical statesmanship” (pp. 143-144). Kraig does so in painstaking fashion, investigating the decision within the broader context of Wilson’s foreign policy leadership and looking at Wilson’s aim and overall political strategy in order to contextualize the speaking tour and justify Wilson’s belief in its efficacy.

Challenging theories that characterize the decision as rash and emotional, and pointing to the multitude of correspondences that indicate the planned and prepared manner of the tour, Kraig reveals how many at the time actually believed it to be a good idea.

Ultimately, Kraig finds that what most modern critics misunderstand (though he does not use this word) is the role of *kairos* in Wilson’s decision: “the most influential rhetoric, that which earns a place in the canon of eloquence, is often that which says the right thing in the right way and somehow strikes an idea at the precise historical moment when it is ripe to be accepted” (p. 164). Wilson’s decision, he proposes, would have been informed by this knowledge and should therefore be regarded neither as the result of mental or physical illness but rather as a consequence of his rhetorical training.

Kraig’s central point is that “[w]hile his willingness to risk his health may seem rash from a modern perspective, it was in keeping with the oratorical culture of his time” (p. 176). And in supporting this claim, Kraig paints a portrait of a man dedicated to the ideals of a good orator, dedicated to fighting the good fight, and giving his all – an ethical and virtuous man, self-sacrificing. Furthermore, Kraig circles back to Wilson’s earlier scholarship in 1898 to demonstrate the consistency of his idealism and activity. In this way, he recontextualizes scholarship on the subject, noting that “the cultural gap between the world of neoclassical statesmanship and our own explains some of our contemporary difficulty in coming to terms with Wilson’s motives” (p. 181).

There have been countless biographies of Wilson, various written evaluations of his presidency and policies, and numerous works that speak to the impact his presidency had on the office of the president in the twentieth and twenty-first century, yet none of these comprehensively address, from a rhetorical perspective, the question of how Wilson formulated the philosophical and political beliefs motivating his presidential actions. And while many important recent works treat Wilson’s “rhetorical presidency”,² Kraig, in situating Wilson’s presidential policies and practices within the context of his upbringing by an impassioned orator, his educational background in rhetoric, his devotion to the ideals of statesmanship, and his academic and political influences, provides a new perspective from which to understand and evaluate Wilson’s controversial attempts to speak to the people in support of ratification of the Treaty of Versailles.

Some might take exception to Kraig’s somewhat cursory treatment of competing theories regarding Wilson’s “last stand”, and others may find his treatment of Wilson’s life curiously devoid of the personal and professional details one might expect of a biographical work (i.e., there is little, beyond description of his father’s influence, on Wilson’s family life, on his personal interests outside of oratory, and on his presidency outside of his work on the Treaty and the League of Nations). However, Kraig succeeds at producing an engaging work that persuasively argues for a revised understanding of Wilson’s failed bid to engage the people of the country in favor of the Treaty of Versailles. In building a solid account of Wilson’s engagement with rhetorical history and theories throughout his lifetime – and subsequently providing a coherent understanding of the rhetorical situation in 1919 – Kraig deftly draws the

² The seminal works by Ceaser, Medhurst, Thurow, Tulis, and Bessette are all listed in Kraig’s Bibliography.

reader in and delivers an effective apologia for a man history has both canonized as a model for future presidencies and demonized as a racist and outrageous interventionist.

Clear, coherent and engaging, Kraig's prose is simultaneously sophisticated and accessible and offers a comprehensive portrait of the neoclassical oratorical culture in the Progressive Era in order to delineate the intellectual atmosphere and rhetorical influences responsible for Wilson's political strategies. Frequently employing rhetorical questions, Kraig engages the reader in his apologia, delivering an effective and emotional case for his theory, and his treatment is an intelligent consideration of the various forces at work in Wilson's life. Familiarity with the history of rhetoric and theories of oratory certainly make this a richer read, but Kraig is adept at situating Wilson's professional and personal trajectory within the context of rhetorical theories and trends in such a way that those unfamiliar with these would be enlightened rather than discouraged. Similarly, while an acquaintance with Wilson's presidency or knowledge of scholarship on the twenty-eighth president would almost certainly result in a more passionate engagement with this revisionist work, Kraig's treatment of the biographical details and his competent handling of the historical context is certain also to invite the interest of an audience unschooled in presidential scholarship.

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