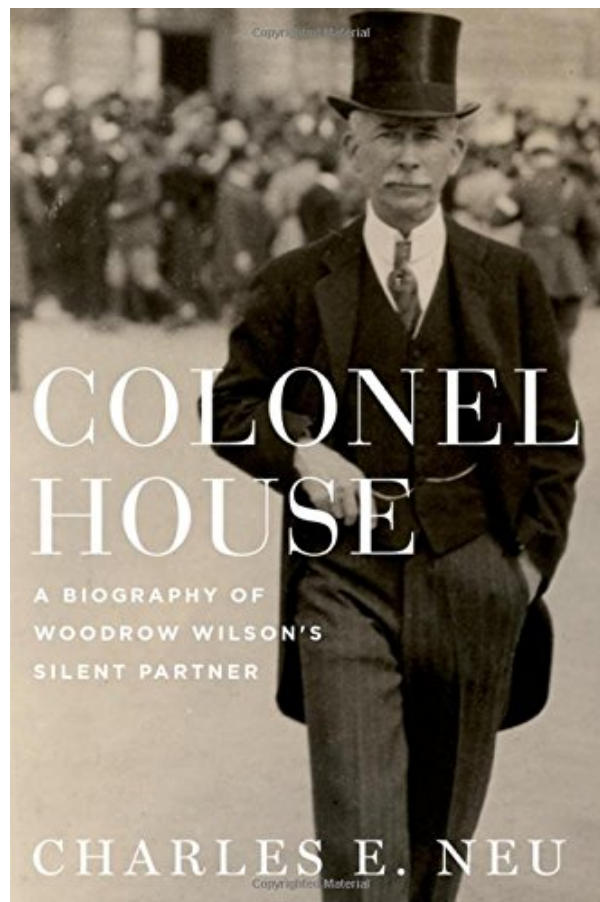
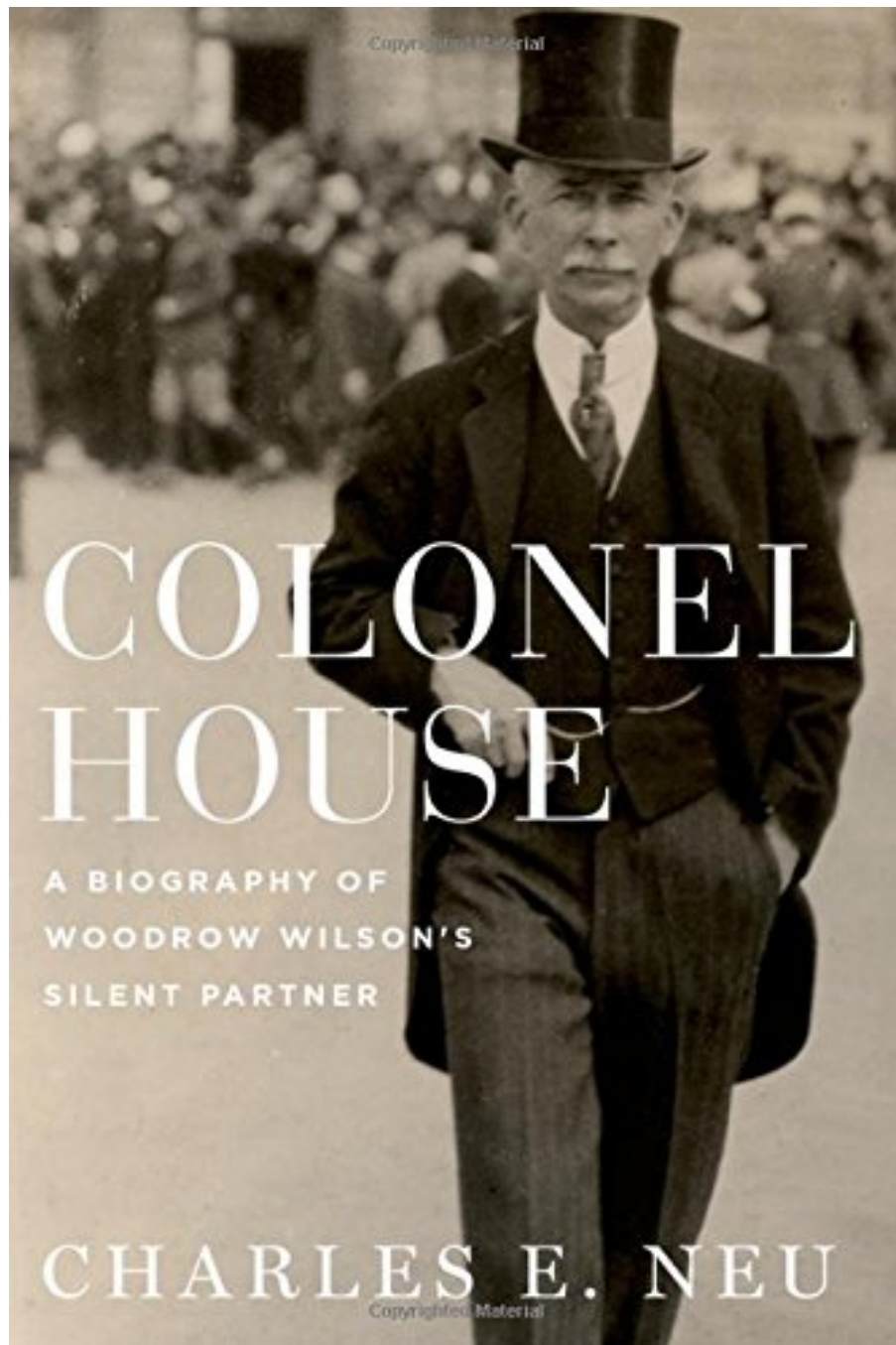


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WOODROW WILSON'S SILENT PARTNER
BY CHARLES E. NEU**



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A man who lived his life mostly in the shadows, Edward M. House is little known or remembered today; yet he was one of the most influential figures of the Wilson presidency. Wilson's chief political advisor, House played a key role in international diplomacy, and had a significant hand in crafting the Fourteen Points at the Paris Peace Conference. Though the intimate friendship between the president and his advisor ultimately unraveled in the wake of these negotiations, House's role in the Wilson administration had a lasting impact on 20th century international politics.

In this seminal biography, Charles E. Neu details the life of "Colonel" House, a Texas landowner who rose to become one of the century's greatest political operators. Ambitious and persuasive, House worked largely behind the scenes, developing ties of loyalty and using patronage to rally party workers behind his candidates. In 1911 he met Woodrow Wilson, and almost immediately the two formed what would become one of the most famous friendships in American political history.

House became a high-level political intermediary in the Wilson administration, proving particularly adept at managing the intangible realm of human relations. After World War I erupted, House, realizing the complexity of the struggle and the dangers and opportunities it posed for the United States, began traveling to and from Europe as the president's personal representative. Eventually he helped Wilson recognize the need to devise a way to end the war that would place the United States at the center of a new world order.

In this balanced account, Neu shows that while House was a resourceful and imaginative diplomat, his analysis of wartime politics was erratic. He relied too heavily on personal contacts, often exaggerating his accomplishments and missing the larger historical forces that shaped the policies of the warring powers. Ultimately, as the Paris Peace Conference unfolded, differences appeared between Wilson and his counselor. Their divergent views on the negotiations led to a bitter split, and after the president left France in June of 1919, he would never see House again.

Despite this break, Neu refutes the idea that Wilson and House were antagonists. They shared the same beliefs and aspirations and were, Neu shows, part of an unusual partnership. As an organizer, tactician, and confidant, House helped to make possible Wilson's achievements, and this impressive biography restores the enigmatic counselor to his place at the center of that presidency.

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An Excellent Biography of House: With A Few Limits

By Dr. Terrence McGarty

"Colonel" House, an honorary title, is one example of the several Presidential "advisers" over the years since Washington. Some Presidents had quite visible ones such as Roosevelt and Hopkins and others had some more deeply in the background like Nixon and Rebozo. House was such to Wilson.

The book by Neu is a biography of House, it is not an analysis of House and Wilson but it is a document focusing on House and relying on many of the House records. Before commenting further, it appears that the House records are somewhat prepared to support House and his actions.

The book is a temporally linear biography. It begins with his family and birth in Texas and proceeds through his years with Wilson (1912 through 1920) and then discusses the years after the Wilson period where he played the role of an eminence grise. The presentation of the early period and the post-Wilsonian period have had little attention in the past works that included House but this work serves that period well. The Wilsonian period is covered from the perspective of House with limited analysis from the perspective of other people involved.

One of the key challenges in understanding of House is the relationship between him, Wilson, and Wilson's second wife Edith. It is clear from many previous works that Edith had a significant influence in setting the Wilson agenda and also sought to isolate Wilson from any influence that was in any way counter to her desired goals. This book, since it is from the House perspective, does not shed a great deal of insight on that key relationship.

What is useful in this book is the flow of relationships House developed in Europe prior to, during, and shortly after the War. House was an experienced business man and he had developed extensive high level relationships in Europe including Clemenceau. House, unlike Wilson, spent time understanding the European situation by being there. His experience was the basis for the advice he gave Wilson over that period.

To fully understand Wilson and House one needs to understand House and Texas. The son of a wealthy Texan, with land and banks, House had experience and interests that were significant well before he met Wilson. He had extensive experience in Texas politics, albeit not Washington, but an exposure on the areas of political give and take. House understood politics and business on a visceral basis and he used both his influence and his insight to influence many Texas political figures. He was drawn to Wilson and the relations was struck and blossomed in a very short period. Understanding this almost instantaneous bond was not provided any enlightenment in this book however.

The War years with Wilson, as noted, are depicted from the perspective of House. His style with Wilson was through written and telephonic communications and meetings at a less frequent basis. Until Wilson married Edith, they seem quite cordial. After the Edith marriage, Wilson slowly eliminated almost all his other contacts.

In the book's discussion of the post Wilson period there is a discussion on House trying to improve his image and reputation as well as his continued, but less visible influence in Democratic politics. He was a supporter of FDR in 1932 but as noted did become disillusioned with the New Deal.

Now as to several issues:

1. As has been noted on the very first page of the Preface there is an error about the time of House's father's

death, 1880 nor 1980. Frankly a good editor should have caught that but they did not. I have not found many more and none I could see of as significant an error.

2. On p xi the author states that House was not the "intellectual equal of Wilson". Frankly Wilson was not that much of an intellectual. His education was spotty, it was late 19th century in nature and despite the fact that he did get a PhD awarded from Hopkins his career thereafter was a collection of astute political moves often with disenchantment soon afterwards. One need look at Princeton and see that he was appointed as a President to a school which at the time was focused on educating the "sons of the elite" and his battles with his Board and the Alumni led to his leaving. As Governor of New Jersey he soon abandoned his initial supports and moved on to the Presidency. Thus the "intellectual" career was at best opportunistic, one of Wilson's most famous works being his book demeaning the US Constitutional form of Government for one similar to the Parliamentary system of England.

3. On p 385 there is one of the best descriptions of the collapse of the relationship with Wilson. The one paragraph puts the break in total perspective. However the impact of Edith would have been quite useful here as well.

4. This book relies heavily on the House record. As a reflection of House qua House perhaps that is fine but as a reflection of House the individual more balance is warranted. The study of Edith and House must hold some fascination. She seems to be the catalyst that resulted in the break. One wonders why?

5. One may ask; what value does a House like character have? It can be argued that in the case of Hopkins, he clearly knew his place but at the same time it was Hopkins that got FDR to appoint Marshall, King, Nimitz. House did have insight that went well beyond Wilson, and perhaps that became an element of the breaking point. Again some insight into these events in a balanced manner would be helpful.

House was a 19th century pragmatist in many ways. It was that pragmatism that may very well have clashed with Wilson's idealism. In addition as the book so aptly states the relationships that House built with the Allied leaders became a catalyst for understanding the nature of the negotiations.

This book is an exceptionally good biography of House and is well written and complete as regards to House. However as in any such work the other characters in the action often need to be understood in context as well and this is failing in my view. However if one had read the other works on Wilson then they clearly fill many of the gaps.

The benefit of this book is the laying out of a U.S. Presidents dealing with international powers when the President has little international experience. It also is a tale of the pragmatic versus the idealistic. As such it has sustaining value and very worth the read.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

This is a masterpiece. Neu is absolutely sagacious and ...

By A Reader

This is a masterpiece. Neu is absolutely sagacious and incorruptible in his assessments of both Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House. He defeats the archive and cuts through all illusions. I deeply envied him.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars

By David Lamphere

Excellent book and great biography.

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