

**Woodrow Wilson and the Explosive  
Growth of Presidential Power I**

**Lead: The power of the American President in theory had few limits. It grew slowly over the decades. That changed drastically when Woodrow Wilson entered the White House.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Considering his roots, Thomas Woodrow Wilson would hardly have seemed a champion of overweening Presidential power. Born in Staunton, Virginia in the years before the Civil War, he emerged from**

**the Jefferson/Jackson tradition which placed high value upon state sovereignty, limited government, and confirmed trust in the wisdom of the people and its representatives in Congress.**

**Yet, his father was a minister and Wilson came to his majority out of the strict Calvinism of Old School southern Presbyterianism. He was attracted to progressive reform politics, but because of his religious inclinations, by adulthood heavily modified by liberal Christianity, he assumed any human progress was a gift from God. He also approached his politics with a sense of divine mission with an unfortunate and attending disdain of any who opposed him.**

**Early in his academic career he reflected a clear Jeffersonian bias. Writing in his first book, *Congressional Government* (1885), Wilson suggested that the role of the President was mere administrator, that real Federal power was exercised in congressional committees and by Congress. His thinking obviously had begun to change by the time politics was exerting its siren call after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908) Wilson declared that “the president is at liberty ...to be as big a man as he can...if Congress be overborne by him, it will be...only because the President has the nation behind him and Congress does not.”**

**Perhaps in part because he was a minority President, elected with less than a popular majority because of divisions in Republican ranks, Wilson made increasingly extravagant claims of power for the executive branch over all domestic and foreign affairs, and claimed the right to directly influence the legislative process.**

**In a sense, Wilson was also reaching out to the American people, circumventing congress and reaffirming a presidential connection with the citizenry. He saw himself as the chosen voice of the entire people, granted power approaching the absolute to carry out their mandates. He was the first president to hold**

**regular press conferences, and re-established the practice of delivering messages personally before Congress, a tradition that had fallen out of use since the days of Washington and Adams.**

**Wilson's brother-in-law summed up the president's theory of American government as this: "because democracy is free, it is the more necessary to be *led*. His faith in the people has never been a faith in the supreme *wisdom* of the people, but rather in the capacity of the people to be led right by those whom they elect and constitute their leaders." This elitist inclination had momentous consequences once the nation was drawn into World War I.**

**Next time: Warlord. Research assistance by Timothy Litzenberg.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

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