

NJS Presents**Research Notes****In This Issue:*****The President and the Plague*****By Michael P. Riccards****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.242>**

Our “Research Notes” section was inaugurated to allow scholars to share their works in progress and solicit feedback from others in the NJ History community. All are welcome to contribute- simply send submissions for inclusion in future issues to the editor (mziobro@monmouth.edu). Beginning with our Winter 2021 issue, we are listing each note individually rather than in one document. In this note, Michael P. Riccards explores how Woodrow Wilson faced similar problems in 1918-1919 with that pandemic, and his response was very different from Donald Trump.

The terrible pandemic waves of 2020 led to a marked decline in the popularity of President Donald J. Trump. Although the virus is overwhelmingly worse in the United States than anywhere else on the globe, the leadership in a variety of countries is clearly under attack for mistakes, confusion, and haphazard treatments.

President Trump started out controlling the American response in daily broadcasts, then delegated the responsibility and the political heat to the governors, and then encouraged citizens to revolt against their own state governments. But pandemics are not new in world history, and over a century ago another president faced a similar challenge, and his response was very different.

In 1918, Woodrow Wilson was president, deeply immersed in the Great War, and helping to compose and then sell the Versailles Treaty to America. But as a scholar who has spent a great

deal of time examining Wilson's behavior as commander in chief, I could find no real evidence that he was preoccupied with the pandemic of 1918.¹ The most respected Wilson scholar alive, John Milton Cooper of the University of Wisconsin, has observed that he could not find evidence in Wilson's massive documents of much discussion of the pandemic. Cooper was one of the associates of Professor Arthur S. Link, the Princeton professor who compiled the massive 69 volumes on Wilson.² What happened?

The so-called Spanish flu of 1918-19 led to a familiar scene: cities were emptied, theaters closed, and business and saloons were shuttered, just like we are witnessing today.³ The flu began in United States near Fort Riley with the arrival of men from all over the nation, each bringing his own immunities and germs with him.⁴ The name came from the fact that Spanish newspapers were not governed by censorship since that nation was not at war. Their newspapers broke the news that a pandemic was running rampant in the European theater. Surely Wilson knew that some sort of epidemic was taking place; he was generally an extremely competent administrator given to detail. Multiple cases developed in military camps through Europe but were not reported. The flu was so deadly that it usually killed its victims in a day. The second wave of the flu was especially widespread and virulent.

¹ Michael P. Riccards and Cheryl A. Flagg, *Woodrow Wilson as Commander in Chief: The Presidency and the Great War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2020).

² Arthur S. Link, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1966–83); Eric Felter, "Woodrow Wilson's Strange Silence in the Flu Epidemic," *RealClearInvestigations*; reprint, *The Daily Signal*, April 15, 2020. <https://www.dailysignal.com/2020/04/15/woodrow-wilsons-strange-silence-on-flu-epidemic-during-great-war/>, accessed September 3, 2020.

³ Conversation with Louisa Finelli, my maternal grandmother.

⁴ John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Greatest Pandemic in History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 145.

American policymakers downplayed the crisis in order to keep morale high among the troops. The Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel, did a splendid job spreading propaganda during the war but ignored the epidemic. Even the *Philadelphia Inquirer* warned “Don’t even discuss influenza. Worry is useless. Talk of cheerful things instead of disease.” This came from Philadelphia, one of the cities most affected by the flu.⁵

The Surgeon General, Rupert Blue, said that “There was no cause for alarm if proper precautions are observed.” Wilson though did express some concern about the Spanish flu. The United States was shipping hundreds of thousands of troops to France, and he wanted to close the ports before such troops would bring infection. But his generals opposed such a step. His competent chief of staff, General Peyton C. March, argued that the “shipment of troops should not be stopped for any cause.”⁶

In April 1919, Wilson traveled to Europe to advance his vision of a peace. The war abruptly ended in November 1918, and he moved to dictate a comprehensive, but humane, peace. He became very ill, with a rising fever, exhibiting flu-like symptoms, and he couldn’t even sit up. There is some disagreement among historians if he had the Spanish flu or some other malady. His assistants said that at times he exhibited paranoia, that he was suspicious of spies near him, and one officer noted that the president had lost “his quickness of grasp, and tired easily.”⁷

A depleted Wilson dutifully returned home from the negotiations. But he suffered a major stroke. He had cerebral incidents in his 30s while a professor, but the stroke in Pueblo, Colorado left him a shell of a man for the rest of his term. His assistant secretary of the Navy, Franklin

⁵ Kaleena Fraga, “Woodrow Wilson and the 1918 Flu Pandemic,” *History First*, March 14, 2020. <https://history-first.com/2020/03/14/wilson-and-the-1918-flu/>, accessed September 3, 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Delano Roosevelt, also seems to have had a sort of flu; when he returned from Europe, he was carried off the ship and rushed to a New York City hospital. He may have had the Spanish flu.

John M. Barry in his definitive study, *The Great Influenza*, has maintained that Wilson could not refocus his efforts after his attack in Europe. Many warriors had the Spanish flu in the overcrowded, unsanitary training camps; and he told the leaders of the Army that the nation was sending contagious and ill men to Europe.⁸

In 1917, Wilson had signed an executive order to put the health services under the military. Wilson's official doctor, Admiral Cary Grayson, actually spoke with the president about confronting March about the pandemic and the troops. The president did so with March and argued, "I have had representations sent to me by men whose ability and patriotism are unquestioned that I should stop the shipment of men to France until the epidemic of influenza is under control." But March argued men died in war, and that the risk was worth the objective.⁹

Wilson thus knew of the disease and its toll, discussed it, but in the end left it to the military. By the end of the Great War, some 45,000 Americans in uniform and 600,000 American civilians died of the disease. Worldwide the Spanish flu killed 50 million people.

In Wilson's time, people did not expect the federal government, and especially the president, to be involved in matters of disease control. But President Trump hit the track running and our expectations of executive leaders have changed, and few would argue that he and Wilson both left much to be desired.

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⁸ Barry, *Great Influenza*; Felter, "Woodrow Wilson's Strange Silence," 3.

⁹ Felter, "Woodrow Wilson's Strange Silence," 4.

fellow at Princeton University, and a Fulbright Fellow in Japan. He is the author of several volumes on the American presidency including The Ferocious Engine of Democracy (two volumes) and Woodrow Wilson as Commander in Chief; eighteen verse plays including Ty Cobb and the Great American Pastime, published in Elysian Fields; a biography of Joe DiMaggio; and a study of the papacy titled The Vicars of Christ, given to Pope St. John Paul II. A study of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a politician is forthcoming.