

Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner

Charles E. Neu (Oxford University Press, 2014), 720 pp., notes, extensive list of sources, index.

Reviewed by Mark Benbow

In this new biography, historian Charles Neu takes on the challenge of Edward M. House, friend and confidant of President Woodrow Wilson. There have been other biographies of the “Colonel” (the title was an honorific one), including Alexander and Juliette George’s severely flawed *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (1964) and Godfrey Hodgson’s shorter 2006 biography, *Woodrow Wilson’s Right Hand: The Life of Colonel Edward M. House*. There is also *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* by Edward Mandell House (Charles Seymour, ed.), which is an authorized biography with the bias one would expect from such a work. Neu, an experienced scholar of American foreign policy goes much further in-depth on House and his relationship with Wilson than does Hodgson, and avoids the embarrassing psychohistory of the George work. *Colonel House* is a straightforward biography, covering his entire life (1858–1938), with the most attention paid to the critical years between 1911 and 1920, when House was not only Wilson’s closest confidant, but his personal diplomatic representative to the European powers before, during, and after the First World War.

Edward Mandell House was the youngest of eight children (seven of whom were boys) born to a wealthy Houston businessman and his wife. With the family’s wealth, much of which was held in large tracts of land throughout the state, came political contacts, access to the powerful, and influence in state affairs. While his brothers went into business, Edward House found a role as a political kingmaker in the Texas Democratic Party. By the beginning of the 20th century, the support of his political faction, known as “Our Crowd,” was crucial for any would-be Texas Democratic politician to cultivate. House polished his skills at exerting influence not through political office, but by being a useful adviser, an indispensable man to those in elected office. Often in poor health, House decided early on that his place in life was to help other men achieve power and to influence policy through them.

Tiring of Texas politics, House looked for a larger stage, and in 1911 he found that stage with New Jersey governor and former president of Princeton University Woodrow Wilson. The Texas kingmaker was looking for a progressive leader for the national Democratic Party that he could follow. William Jennings Bryan had already lost three races for president by then, and although House and Bryan were friends, he was not the leader House was searching for. Wilson was. House met Wilson in November 1911. The would-be adviser and the would-be president bonded from the start and House began to play a small role in Wilson’s 1912 campaign. Wilson found his new aide’s advice useful, and House was able to help place several members of “Our Crowd” in Wilson’s cabinet. He also helped Wilson choose other members of his new administration. House refused any formal appointments, but became Wilson’s most important confidant and befriended First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson as well. Neu describes how House became a part of Wilson’s family circle, not only the president’s adviser, but one of his best friends.

Wilson’s proclivity for using unofficial diplomatic channels to supplement the State Department’s role has long been a topic of historical analysis (including this reviewer’s own article in a 2007 issue of *Studies*^a). House was perhaps the most important member of Wilson’s unofficial diplomatic team and he fell on his new role with relish. Meeting with prime ministers and hobnobbing with diplomats in London, Berlin, and Paris gave House the place among the powerful that he so desired. Unfortunately, as Neu notes, he “overemphasized person-to-person contacts.” When meeting with Wilson upon his return to the US after European tours in 1913 and 1914 he “exaggerated his accomplishments, and engaged

a. Editor’s note: author refers to his article, “All the Brains I Can Borrow: Woodrow Wilson and Intelligence Gathering in Mexico, 1913–15,” *Studies in Intelligence* 51(4):1–12 (Extracts—December 2007).

in wishful thinking rather than analyze the historical forces” that shaped how the European powers behaved. (136). This was a critical fault that House would display again and again: having achieved success in Texas and on the national stage by using his individual contacts, he thought he could duplicate that success internationally. In this he ignored the larger influences that shaped the European power’s policies, and interpreted polite non-committal diplomatic comments as concrete commitments. Then he would report his successes to Wilson, who lacked enough accurate reporting from his own ambassadors that could have placed House’s reports in a more realistic light.

House’s downfall was slow to come, but it came at an especially inopportune time. Ellen Wilson had died in August 1914, just as Europe was going to war. House became the single most important friend and confidant to the grief-stricken president. In March 1915 Wilson met a pretty, local, wealthy Washington widow, Edith Bolling Galt. The meeting had been arranged by members of Wilson’s family and friends, not including House, in hopes that Edith might alleviate the grieving man’s loneliness. She did. Wilson fell madly in love, and he soon proposed marriage. House approved of the president’s new romance, but advised him to wait until after the 1916 election to get married. Wilson and Edith instead married in late 1915. The president’s new wife joined his ranks of advisers, a role to which she was ill-suited. Neu describes her well, she was “lively and stylish, but poorly educated and intolerant of the president’s closest advisers.” (200) She began to resent House and denigrated him to her husband, once writing “I can’t help feeling that he is not a very *strong* character.” (201, emphasis in original) Edith would eventually manage to alienate and separate Wilson from some of his most loyal counselors, including House.

At the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, House would play an even bigger role than he had before, but it would be a Pyrrhic success. He accompanied Wilson to Paris for the talks, supplanting Secretary of State Robert Lansing as the president’s most important foreign policy advisor. House set up The Inquiry, a group of over 100 academics and other experts who gathered information and wrote briefings for Wilson to help plan the peace for the end of the war. It was, in effect, a temporary intelligence agency, a precursor in many ways to the CIA’s own Directorate of Intelligence.

When Wilson left the conference to return to the United States, he left House to take his place among the Council of Ten to negotiate as the American representative. House feared that growing impatience for a peace treaty among some of the European peoples might lead to increased instability and provide an opening for Bolshevism. Accordingly, he rushed to quickly complete a final treaty to present to the Germans. In doing so, House seemed to agree with France’s demands for a harsh treaty, including the creation of a Rhenish buffer state between France and Germany. Instead of being pleased that so much had been decided, Wilson was appalled when he returned, telling a friend, “House has given away everything I had won...I will have to start all over again...” (406). To make matters worse, the *London Times* had printed a story that praised House’s role at the conference, which was picked up by an American newspaper. The reporter was close to House so it looked to Edith as if her husband’s advisor was pumping up his own reputation at the expense of the president. She made certain that Wilson saw the story. When she confronted House over the matter he fled the room and the two never met in person again, validating her opinion of him as a “weak vessel.” (412). In the end there was no sudden final break between Wilson and House. They continued to meet and to exchange letters, but the president grew noticeably cooler and House found himself firmly shunted out of Wilson’s circle of advisors. The “grandiose expectations” that Neu notes both men shared for the peace agreement collapsed. (511). House lived for another 14 years after Wilson died in 1924, and he spent much of that time defending his own—as well as Wilson’s—legacy.

House’s failures were, at least in part, the president’s as well. In Neu’s estimate, Wilson sent House “abroad with only vague instructions and carelessly monitored his negotiations on the capitals of Europe.” He left “a void for [House’s] self-importance to fill.” (511). House was positioned to accomplish much more than he did. He was skilled at negotiation and was happy to act outside of the spotlight. Given specific instructions and kept on a tighter leash, he could have been a trustworthy adviser who might have provided Wilson with perceptive insights into European leaders’ personalities and priorities. When he moved from policy advisor to policy creator in Paris, however, House overstepped both his role and his skills.

The book reflects the author’s long experience as a researcher familiar with the relevant sources. House

destroyed most of his personal documents dealing with his earlier career as a king-maker in Texas politics, but he left a detailed diary of his years on the national political stage. His diary, however, is a potential minefield for historians, as House used it to reassure himself of his own intelligence, influence, and wisdom—all of which he often embellished. Neu noted how House developed “a streak of vanity...an exaggerated sense of his own importance.” (510). Ironically, House need not have inflated his influence and historical importance: he actually did play a crucial role during a critical point in American history as the United States began to wield its influence as a world power, and Neu expertly captures both House’s strengths and his weaknesses. Neu’s work deserves to remain the

standard work on Colonel House for years to come. He mined the relevant archives, knows the secondary literature as well as anyone in the profession, and has been gathering material for this book for years; however, for the intelligence professional, the book is very light on details about *The Inquiry*. Lawrence E. Gelfand’s book remains the standard work for that subject.^a Nonetheless, *Colonel House* is a worthy capstone to a long, distinguished career and a welcome addition to the bookshelf of anyone interested in this pivotal era in American foreign policy.

a. Editor’s note: author refers to Lawrence E. Gelfand’s *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919* (Yale University Press, 1963).

