

## **Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House and Political Psychobiography**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Alexander and Juliette Georges' *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* may be counted among the classics in political psychology. First published in 1956, it helped to establish a new methodological standard for psychobiography, signaling a significant step in the discipline's maturation. Additionally, the Georges' account has become a resource for a number of scholars, particularly political scientists, interested in a psychological perspective on Wilson or on the presidency itself. Finally, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House (WWCH)* has remained over the years a vital part of a number of continuing, substantive scholarly debates on Wilson and on the psychobiographical endeavor generally. It is to these that this essay is mainly devoted.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, the scholarly conversation of which the Georges' work is a central voice affords us one the best possible arenas for an examination of psychobiography, for "the most revealing unit for historiographical analysis is the cumulative body of scholarship on a subject" (Ross, 1982, p. 659). While space does not allow a complete discussion of all of the relevant debates, I will attempt to touch on most of them and to go into depth in the areas most pertinent to the legacy of the Georges' study for political psychobiography. The essay will begin

<sup>1</sup>See Glad, 1973; Runyan, 1988c, p. 297; and Kets De Vries, 1990, p. 428, among many others, for comments on the significance of the Georges' work in the history of psychobiography. Even Weinstein, Anderson and Link, in an article dedicated to refuting the Georges' thesis, describe them as "the first authors to attempt to conceptualize the process of applying psychology to biography" (1978, p. 587). The impact of the Georges' work on political scientists is illustrated in Barber, who in his *Presidential Character* (1985) draws heavily on the Georges' version of Wilson. (But see A. George, 1974, for critical comments on Barber). Cf. also Hargrove (1974, p. 74); Greenstein and Lerner, 1971; and Runyan, 1988b, p. 14–15.

with a brief consideration of why coming to terms with Wilson's personality is considered crucial to an understanding of his leadership, proceed to the Georges' particular analysis of Wilson's personality, and then consider the controversies surrounding *WWCH* and their implications for psychobiography.

## THE CASE OF WOODROW WILSON

Being neither mind reader nor psychiatrist, the biographer can only agree with Colonel House that Wilson was "one of the most contradictory characters in history". . . . (Arthur S. Link, 1956, p. 70)

Certainly one of the great puzzles of Wilson's story is the fact that his remarkable talents, ambition and discipline were, on a few significant occasions, disrupted by rigid, unskillful, and self-defeating episodes. At such junctures Wilson might fixate on an opponent, dig himself into an untenable position, become mired in righteous indignation, and develop a seemingly constitutional incapacity to compromise or finesse. This—from the politician who successfully enacted ambitious reform programs in several settings, who showed the flexibility to transform himself, in short order, from a conservative to a progressive in his bid for elected office, and who spoke some of the most eloquent and inspiring words of diplomacy ever to grace the conversations of world politics—has seemed to many to demand at the least a significant degree of psychological explanation.

Undoubtedly, the most dramatic of Wilson's puzzling episodes involved his travails at the Paris Peace Conference in the wake of the First World War, and his subsequent losing battle to gain ratification in the Senate of the League of Nations Covenant. That this was not an isolated and arbitrary incident is well put in the early work of Arthur S. Link, the most prolific and influential of Wilson scholars, and the editor of the 69-volume *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, who draws parallels between Wilson's experience at Paris and earlier crises in his career as president of Princeton and as Governor of New Jersey:

The time came at Princeton, Trenton, and Washington when Wilson did not command the support of the groups to whom he was responsible. Naturally, he was not able to change his character even had he wanted to change it, with the result that controversy and disastrous defeat occurred in varying degrees in all three cases. (Link, quoted in George and George, 1981–82, p. 656)

During the first years of both [the Princeton and presidential] administrations, Wilson drove forward with terrific energy and momentum to carry through a magnificent reform program. . . . Yet in both cases he drove so hard, so flatly refused to delegate authority, and broke with so many friends that when the inevitable reaction set in he was unable to cope with the new situation. His refusal to compromise in the graduate college controversy was almost Princeton's undoing; his refusal to compromise in the fight in the Senate over the League of Nations was the nation's undoing. Both controversies assume the character and proportions of a Greek tragedy." (Link, 1947, pp. 90–91; cf. George and George, 1956, e.g., p. 317)

Whatever one's assessment of Link's feeling that the nation was actually undone by Wilson, such seemingly fated patterns are inevitably psychologically suggestive, most powerfully so to anyone at all influenced by psychoanalysis. In this light, Link's use of the metaphor of Greek tragedy is perhaps more revealing than it was meant to be, for, like the ancient dramas, Wilson's recurring patterns may be telling us as much about the workings of the psyche as of fate.

### **WOODROW WILSON AND COLONEL HOUSE**

No more tempting subject for the exercise of the Freudian method could have offered itself. (Barbara Tuchman, 1981, p. 92-93)

Something of the origins of *WWCH*, as well as its intellectual ancestry, are indicated in the Authors' Note, in which the Georges acknowledge Nathan Leites, in whose class Alexander George began to study Wilson while at the University of Chicago in 1941, and Harold Lasswell, whose "writings on power and personality . . . provided some of the central ideas" for their study (1956). With such intellectual heritage it is not surprising that there are ways in which *WWCH* is recognizable as a work of political science as well as political psychology. There is, for instance, a clearer sense of hypothesis formation and testing than generally comes across in studies by historians with an interest in psychology; and it is more politically sophisticated than would be typical for many psychologists attempting psychobiography. "Subsequently," as Runyan's research has indicated, "the Georges' book has been central within the political science community, often cited as perhaps the most effective political psychobiography . . . , while it is cited substantially less frequently by psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and literary scholars" (Runyan, 1988b, p. 15).

The Georges' approach revolves around the fundamental psychoanalytic concepts of self-esteem and repression: "The basic hypothesis," the Georges write, "concerning the dynamics of Wilson's political behavior is that power was for him a compensatory value, a means of restoring the self-esteem damaged in childhood [by his demanding and perfectionistic father] . . . his desire for power was mitigated by a simultaneous need for approval, respect, and, especially, for feeling virtuous" (George & George, 1956, p. 320; see also, p. 114. The Lasswellian influence is plain here—cf. Lasswell, 1930; 1948). Leadership was for Wilson, that "sphere of authority in which he sought compensatory gratifications" (1964; p. 115; see also p. 117). Furthermore,

His stern Calvinist conscience forbade an unabashed pursuit or use of power for personal gratification. He could express his desire for power only insofar as he convincingly rationalized it in terms of altruistic service, and fused it with laudable social objectives. . . . To convince himself of the reality of his selfless motivation, he must painstakingly carve out a sphere of competence, within which he must perform good works. (1956, p. 117; also, A. George, 1968)

From this starting point, the Georges extended their analysis to attempt to “identify the specific types of situations in which [Wilson’s] behavior was narrowly circumscribed in range and flexibility” (1956, p. 317). It is here particularly that their analysis—whatever one’s assessment of its validity—gains its elegance:

. . . it is necessary to distinguish Wilson the power-seeker from Wilson the power-holder. Once he had rationalized his desire for office in terms of unselfish service to others, Wilson the power-seeker was free to devote every ounce of his intelligence and energy to waging a realistic campaign to attain his goal. For the personal gratifications he sought—to dominate, to do immortal work, to demonstrate his ability and virtue—could be achieved only if he first obtained a specific position of power. . . . However, having attained an opportunity for exercise of power, first as President of Princeton and finally as President of the United States, he was no longer able to suppress his inner impulses toward aggressive leadership. (George & George, 1956, p. 116)

Thus, the Georges contend, after initial, often stunning success in power-seeking and in the honeymoon phase of office, there followed increasingly autocratic and rigid behavior in the face of the inevitable opposition that arises for any political leader, and especially for one as ambitious in his use of office as was Wilson. For Wilson the power-holder, strong opposition evoked, in the Georges’ analysis, his repressed anger at his father’s domination of him as a child (George & George, 1956, pp. 9–10; chapter vii). Thus,

Having legitimized his drive to exercise power by laborious self-preparation and by adopting worthy goals, Wilson felt free to indulge his wish to force others into immediate and complete compliance with his demands. . . . The extraordinary energy with which he applied himself to the task of making his will prevail was supplied, we suggest, by the pent up aggressive impulses which could find expression at last through his leadership tactics.

This demand, so uncontrollably pressed, for unqualified submission to his leadership lay at the root of the most serious crises of his career. (George & George, 1956, p. 117–118)

## RECEPTIONS, CONTROVERSIES AND CONTENDING INTERPRETATIONS

If the Georges’ book itself helped to mark a major step in psychobiography’s maturation as a discipline, they were obviously writing at a time when there had been little to demonstrate the power of psychobiography to historians or to anyone else. (William L. Langer’s call, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, to exploit depth psychology in historical research was not made until the year following *WWCH*’s publication in 1956.) The Georges recently recalled the scholarly situation in the following terms: “We knew that such an interpretation would be anathema to many historians. We also knew that a closely guarded manuscript containing Freud’s own interpretation of Wilson was in the hands of William Bullitt, that it would one day be published and that

we might then find ourselves at embarrassing odds with the master himself” (George & George, 1989b).

A scan of early reviews shows the work was nevertheless well received, certainly among political scientists (cf. Brodie, 1957), but also among at least some historians (e.g., Jellison, 1957; Watson, 1957–58). Over time, criticisms, controversies, and contending interpretations have emerged, some challenging, implicitly or explicitly, the very idea of a psychodynamic approach to Wilson, others disputing some particular biographical or psychobiographical element, and others offering altogether new psychodynamic interpretations. Together, as I hope to demonstrate, these comprise a scholarly legacy of considerable value for furthering our understanding of the limitations and potentials of political psychobiography.

Of all the members of these debates, no more dramatic participant could have presented himself than the already mentioned Arthur S. Link. In a 1977 paper coauthored by E. Weinstein, a neurologist and psychiatrist, and J. Anderson, a clinical psychologist, Link cuts at the very foundations of the Georges’ approach, terming it “an essentially incorrect interpretation of the personality of Woodrow Wilson and its effect on his career” (Weinstein, Anderson, and Link, 1978, p. 585). The Georges acknowledged in response that “If Link finds serious fault with an interpretation of Wilson, it behooves those who advanced it to reexamine their work in the light of his criticisms” (1981–1982, p. 641), a task they have taken on with considerable energy.

Link seems to have been first prompted into the psychobiographical fray by the publication in 1967 of the very same Freudian analysis of Wilson that the Georges, as noted above, had been awaiting with such scholarly trepidation. Most agree that this work (Freud & Bullitt, 1967) was and remains the very exemplar of virtually all that can go wrong with psychobiography. Disparaging in tone, overboard in its application of the most arcane of psychoanalytic concepts, and unconvincing in its marshalling of evidence, the Freud-Bullitt book has been roundly criticized, and a comparison with the Georges’ work has more than once been offered as instruction in the do’s and don’ts of psychobiography. (e.g. Elms, 1976. See Warner, 1988, for background on the writing of Freud’s Wilson, and Warner, 1990, for a discussion of its relationship to more recent analyses of Wilson.) Link, who has written that “It is not pleasant or easy to describe [Wilson’s] personal weaknesses” (1956, p. 67), undoubtedly found Freud’s version unpleasant in the extreme, and in a review at the time he provided a sound critique (Link, 1967). It was an easy target, but it deserved what it got.

*WWCH* (which was only mentioned in passing in Link’s 1967 paper on Freud-Bullitt) was another matter altogether, for “In contrast to the Freud-Bullitt book, the Georges’ study has received wide acclaim. . . .” (Weinstein, Anderson and Link, 1978, p. 586). It may thus well be the ironic fact that Link turned his attention to *WWCH* in part because of the renewed attention it received in the

wake of the Freud-Bullitt book. Now it was getting favorable mention not only among its most natural audience of political psychologists and political scientists, but among psychoanalysts as well, some of them intellectuals of considerable clout. (Most important in this regard is Erikson, 1967, p. 467; see also Roazen, 1970, p. 322; and Coles, 1975, pp. 193–195).

In their essay Link and his coauthors argue that Wilson's childhood was far less traumatic than that pictured by the Georges. They contend that the record reflects a more loving, less ambivalent relationship between Wilson and his father, and that the Georges' psychosomatic hypothesis regarding Wilson's childhood reading difficulties (as an unconscious rebellion against his father) is incorrect, asserting instead a diagnosis of dyslexia in its place. They further contend that Wilson's crisis at Princeton involved, on the one hand, a more rational, political process than is appreciated by the Georges, and on the other, behavioral manifestations of previously undiagnosed strokes. Finally, and most importantly, they feel that likewise the psychological consequences of Wilson's "cerebrovascular disease" explain Wilson's self-defeating behaviors during and after the Paris Peace Conference.

In other words, the psychoanalytically oriented approach to Wilson is refuted at every significant turn, and replaced with other (primarily, physiological) explanations for the behaviors in question. Many elements of the ensuing debates between the Georges and Link et al., as well as with other commentators on Wilson's political personality, speak quite directly to problems of theory and method in political psychobiography, and so merit discussion here. This will be organized around three issues that have dominated the exchanges: the problem of assessing the rationality of specific political behaviors, physiological versus psychological interpretations of irrational behaviors, and contending psychological interpretations of Wilson's personality.

### **ASSESSING THE RATIONALITY OF WILSON'S POLITICAL BEHAVIOR DURING CRISIS**

While the Georges attempt to account for Wilson's personality as a whole, much of their case rests on a view of Wilson as having repeated certain self-defeating patterns of behavior under certain kinds of environmental stresses throughout his career. Some criticisms of *WWCH* have attempted to undercut its argument by questioning, in one way or another, the Georges' view that Wilson, despite his considerable intelligence and political skill, at times was dominated by unconscious psychodynamic factors that led to a less than optimally rational response to his situation. (I am not here using rationality and irrationality in a psychologically technical or diagnostic manner, but in the common usage sense of, for instance, the *American Heritage Dictionary*: Was Wilson acting, at a

given time, with his “normal mental clarity” and “in accord with . . . sound judgment”?) Before turning to the Princeton period, the object of greatest contentions in this regard, I will give some smaller examples in which the question of the rationality of particular behaviors has been disputed.

Weinstein, for instance, has noted that “The Wilson correspondence, *like so many family letters of the time*, was filled with fervent expressions of affection. . . . There was a complete absence of any overt expressions of anger or resentment” (1982, p. 14, emphasis added). While this point was not issued directly in response to the Georges’ use of this correspondence as evidence of dependence and repressed hostility, it does raise by implication the question of whether the Georges are sufficiently appreciative of the normal cultural context of the correspondence (and probably the implication was intentional—cf. Weinstein, pp. 104–105). The Georges, meanwhile, have themselves asserted that Weinstein, Anderson and Link falsely interpret certain aspects of Wilson’s behavior at the Paris Peace Conference as an irrational (in this case paranoid) expression of his “cerebro vascular disorder” (1981–82, pp. 658–659). Again regarding Paris, the Georges’ analysis of the Wilson-House “break” is denuded of the psychological meanings given to it in *WWCH* and explained simply as “House’s failure to follow Wilson’s explicit instructions while the latter was in the United States” (Weinstein, Anderson and Link, 1978, p. 597, n. 32). Thus, slippery disputes of the rationality of specific political behaviors have emerged in the service of one or another view of Wilson.

The most detailed discussions along these lines has involved the Princeton period, and Wilson’s crisis in his power struggle over plans concerning the location and nature of the graduate school. For instance, in rebuttal to the Georges’ contention that Wilson became strongly polarized with his principle adversary in the affair (Dean West) for psychodynamic reasons, Weinstein, Anderson and Link hold that, like House in Paris, Wilson simply disagreed, for valid reasons, with his protagonist. It is important here how the *WWCH* position is characterized: “[The Georges] regard the issue of the location of the college as merely an excuse for Wilson to release this unconscious hostility by doing battle with West” (Weinstein, et al., 1978, p. 595). Or, as Anderson puts it in a later article, the Georges portray Wilson as “looking for a way to transfer his repressed hatred of his father to West” (1981, p. 463). Anderson also offers as support for the rationality of Wilson’s behavior at Princeton, the comment that the Georges “overlook the agreement of the majority of the faculty with Wilson’s position” (1981, p. 463; cf. Ross, 1982, p. 665, for a similar comment).

The Georges respond to these points by asking how Weinstein, Anderson and Link can contend that Wilson was acting “from a reasonable assessment of the situation” when they are in the act of refuting the theses of *WWCH*, and then go on to claim that Wilson was during the same period showing behavioral manifestations of “brain damage from the alleged strokes. . . .” “To us,” they

write, “it seems that to the extent that they consider Wilson’s refusal to compromise in the [Princeton] . . . battles a reasonable defense of his principles, they reduce the grounds for arguing the significance of the alleged personality and behavioral changes in consequence of the alleged strokes” (George & George, 1981–82, pp. 656–657).

Certainly it is plausible that recent scholarship has added to our understanding of the Princeton period, but as these points have been brought to bear so far they seem to speak more to nuance than to the heart of the Georges’ argument about Wilson’s personality dynamics at Princeton. For one thing, the presentation in these critiques of the Georges’ thesis is somewhat limited, for it is not the essential point in *WWCH* that Wilson was *looking* for someone to affix his anger to, and was fabricating issues in order to allow him to do so. It is true that at one point, at least, the Georges use language that is fairly consistent with this formulation: “Here at last was an ‘issue,’ something which could be turned into a moral crusade of the sort Wilson required as an acceptable rationalization for the expression of his hostile feelings” (1964, p. 40). But, in the context of the chapter as a whole, the Georges are clearly not suggesting a simplistic search for an excuse to vent, but a more complex political-psychological process, the dynamic of which is conveyed very much along the lines of Link’s original view that “[Wilson] drove so hard, so flatly refused to delegate authority, and broke with so many friends that when the inevitable reaction set in he was unable to cope with the new situation” (Link, 1947, pp. 90–91; cf. George & George, 1956, ch. 3, esp. pp. 35 and 43). The Georges tend to describe Wilson in just this way, adding, of course, their view of the psychological mechanisms involved. Their point, furthermore, has less to do with the merits of the original issue itself than with the fact that Wilson had, as he was wont to do during certain stressful phases of his career, lost his flexibility as far as political process was concerned as the issue heated up (e.g., George & George, 1956, p. 42). That many faculty agreed with Wilson put him in all the stronger position to employ his skills, and either bring Dean West along or isolate him rather than become mired in a personalized tug of war that dissipated his own energies and seemed to work against success.

In any event, one observation that emerges here is that it is harder to arrive at a confident conclusion regarding the rationality or irrationality of a given behavior taken in isolation than it is to do so when viewing a life as a whole and the patterns that emerge from that broadview. That is, it can be argued that “The notion that some sort of dramatic change came over [Wilson], by reason of illness, or whatever, simply doesn’t stand up when you study the man’s career, from the beginning until when he left the White House. His consistency is one of the most striking things. . . .” (J. George, 1983, interview; see also, George & George, 1956, p. 318). Still, it is possible to retort, as some have, that medical, not psychodynamic, explanations account for Wilson’s political lapses through-



out his career. As we shall see below, the question that is raised in turn is why would medical factors translate into Wilson's specific pattern of political behaviors.

### **MEDICAL VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR WILSON'S POLITICAL BEHAVIOR**

The participants in these debates disagree not only on whether a given political behavior should be viewed as rational or irrational, but on how best to explain the latter. For example, many agree that Wilson was acting with significantly impaired judgment in the aftermath of, and perhaps during certain phases of, the Paris Peace Conference. Fewer, however, agree on why this was so. In the following section, contending psychodynamic interpretations of Wilson will be considered. Here the focus will be on the argument that Wilson's irrational episodes are best explained as manifestations of medical problems, and not, as the Georges contend, in terms of psychodynamic, personality variables.

The complex and technical details of Wilson's medical history can only be considered here in rather broad strokes. As early as 1956, Link displayed a sensitivity to Wilson's physical states and their behavioral significance, contending that "a frailness in Wilson's physique . . . proved to be a serious impediment throughout his adult career and ultimately a disaster" (1956, p. 62). This theme, however, did not really begin to heat up until the publication, in 1970, of a paper by Weinstein on "Woodrow Wilson's Neurological Illness." This was followed by the already mentioned essay by Weinstein, Anderson and Link (1978), and Weinstein's 1981 "medical and psychological biography" of Wilson. As noted earlier, where the Georges hypothesize unconscious rebellion to explain Wilson's reading problems as a child, these authors suggest organic dyslexia; where the Georges see psychodynamic manifestations at Princeton and during the presidency, they see medical manifestations. Of particular importance from the standpoint of Wilson historiography—whether psychobiographical or not—is that the retrospective medical diagnoses of early strokes (to explain Wilson's behavior during his Princeton and presidential crises) were presented by Link in the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* as established fact, without reference to their disputed nature.

The Georges sought a second medical opinion (e.g., Marmor, 1982; George, Marmor, & George, 1984), and others have weighed in over time as well (e.g., Post, 1983; Parks, 1986). Interestingly, and tellingly, both Weinstein (1988), and Link (1988, pp. 638–639) have accepted medical scenarios for Wilson other than the one they had together so boldly put forward earlier on, which lends strong support to those who have challenged the way in which the

diagnoses were portrayed, that is as established facts and not as controversial hypotheses (e.g., George & George, 1981–82; Post, 1983). However, as both Link and Weinstein still emphasize a primarily medical orientation to explaining much of Wilson's problematic political behavior, the question of medical versus psychodynamic causation remains.<sup>2</sup>

The most persuasive and insightful voice in this discussion has been that of Post (1983), who argues that the psyche and soma perspectives are best viewed as potentially complementary, rather than as necessarily exclusive. Thus, for Post, the question is not whether Wilson's reading difficulties as a child should be attributed to organic dyslexia or to psychodynamic causes, but how, even if one were to accept the dyslexia hypothesis (which Post himself leans toward), it tends to reinforce the Georges' view that Wilson's childhood was one that created in him considerable insecurity and frustration. Thus: "Weinstein grudgingly acknowledges that the reading disability may have led Wilson to fear that he was stupid or lazy and that it probably led Dr. Wilson 'to be more pedagogic and insistent on drilling his "lazy" son' . . . . Indeed the record is replete with references confirming this point" (Post, 1983, p. 292).<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Wilson's crisis at the Paris Peace Conference, Post applies the same well-reasoned perspective:

Weinstein has asserted that the explanation for Wilson's destructive behavior in his later years lies in the sequelae of strokes associated with arteriosclerosis *rather than* the psychodynamic formulation offered by the Georges.

But the political behavior of Wilson which had such devastating consequences for his national and international goals is not what we usually would associated with strokes per se. . . . these are not "stroke" symptoms but characterological personality features.

I would suggest alternatively that cerebral arteriosclerosis may well have affected Wilson's behavior by *magnifying* the psychodynamic features spelled out by the Georges. (Post, 1983, p. 303)

A consideration of the ways in which Wilson's undisputed later illnesses may have interacted with his psychology, especially during the peace conference period, is indeed rich with possibilities. Consider that it was a time for Wilson of

<sup>2</sup>Weinstein would not agree to being viewed as a physical determinist. He describes his medical-psychological approach as "a model of adaptational dynamics which includes the state of brain function, the nature of the subject's disability . . . , his premorbid personality, and the meaning of illness in terms of his social and cultural values . . ." (1983, p. 314). Nevertheless, the weight he gives to medical diagnoses as explanatory variables is so substantial, and the psychological dimension of his analysis so "lacks a cohesive unifying theme" (Warner, 1988, p. 488), that it is fair to view Weinstein on the medical side of the mind-body divide (Post, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>For the Georges' defense of their interpretation of Wilson's reading difficulties, see George and George, 1981-82. Also, note that the Georges' thesis was actually originally put forth very much in the manner suggested by Post. That is, it is presented as a possibility, not a certainty, and is followed up by this crucial point: "*In any case, the significant fact is that coming from a home in which reading was an important daily activity, Tommy's [young Woodrow's] reading proficiency was retarded; in a home saturated in a religious atmosphere, he had difficulty learning the catechism; in a family of scholars, he was a conspicuously poor student*" (1964, p. 7, emphasis added).

the utmost urgency and intensity, both politically and psychologically: He was experiencing mass adulation of the most heady sort, and his supreme achievements were within his reach. Yet all of this was occurring at the very moment when the potential for mortality to interfere with life goals and purposes would have been dramatically apparent, for Wilson was clearly in the final phase of his career and of his life. In this context, any physically disabling episodes may well have felt threatening in the extreme, especially for one who had experienced himself as limited by his body in several ways, at several points, throughout his life. Thus, just as for the dyslexia question of Wilson's boyhood, it is as relevant to ask how his physical condition may have been interacting with his psychodynamic propensities as it is to ask how his physical conditions may have been more directly causing Wilson's political behavior.

At this point, the participants in this debate may be converging somewhat along the lines suggested by Post. For instance, a recent addendum to the *Wilson Papers* refers, regarding Wilson's medical condition during the peace conference, to "the accentuation of what might be called [Wilson's] temperamental defects by his stroke during the recovery period" and to a "disease-induced accentuation of his personality" (Parks, 1991, pp. 527–528). Such convergence may never be complete, however, for we may well be witness here to that most difficult to resolve of scholarly disputes: clashing worldviews in debate over inherently inconclusive evidence. In any event, it is a debate that echoes quite directly current arguments within both the clinical community and within academia regarding physical versus psychological bases of not only psychopathology but consciousness itself. In this light it is perhaps not surprising that the *Wilson Papers* addendum quoted above ends with the words, "illness was one of the prime causes of the defeat of the Versailles Treaty" (1991, p. 528).

### CONTENDING PSYCHODYNAMIC INTERPRETATIONS OF WILSON'S POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

A further line of debate, rather than challenging a psychodynamic interpretation of Wilson, accepts such a perspective and asks which *specific* psychodynamic theory to apply.<sup>4</sup> As the Freud-Bullitt and Weinstein versions of Wilson have already been discussed, and as the former is so methodologically weak and

<sup>4</sup>Of course, not all psychobiography need be of the psychodynamic variety (cf. Bruggert, 1981; Runyan, 1988a). But much psychobiography to date does draw on some version of psychoanalytic personality theory, and this is definitely the case for Wilson psychobiographies. On this point, historians have been known to throw up their hands when confronted with the fact that not only do many contending schools of psychology exist, but many contending schools of psychoanalytic/psychodynamic psychology exist as well. However, as Ross points out, it should be remembered that "the range of difference and convergence [among personality theories] is not unlike that range of difference and convergence between different schools of historical interpretation" (1982, p. 660).

theoretically outdated, and the latter is so heavily weighted toward the medical emphasis, they may be set aside for the purposes of the present section. Here, I will restrict myself to commenting on several shorter, but still substantial, treatments representing distinct psychoanalytic schools of thought. As these post-*WWCH* psychodynamic treatments of Wilson all rest on a reasonably sophisticated base as far as historical methodology and psychological theory goes, they offer the possibility of addressing more subtle issues of political psychobiography than is possible, for instance, in comparing *WWCH* with Freud-Bullitt.

As a prelude to examining the more purely psychological interpretations of Wilson that have been offered since the publication of *WWCH*, it is interesting to consider some of the Georges' reflections on their own theoretical choices. Starting with the then available literature on compulsiveness, which seemed to fit Wilson in some respects but which they ultimately found too "static" (George & George, 1964, p. 317; cf. A. George, 1971, pp. 81–86), they progressed to the elaboration of Lasswell's concept of power as a compensation for low self-estimate, which I described earlier. The Georges, however, have seemed ambivalent about the diagnosis of compulsiveness, at times treating it as a heuristic stepping stone, and at other times supporting it as key to their view of Wilson (cf., 1964, pp. 317–318, and A. George, 1968, p. 37, respectively). This has clouded the issue somewhat, for it has opened the work up to criticism that is essentially off the point. For example, Ross, as late as 1982, notes that

Psychohistorians who wish to explore the role of oedipal dynamics in Wilson's personality would be well advised, I think, to abandon the Georges' view of Wilson as a stubborn, "compulsive" personality, whose central goal was power. Wilson's cognitive style, his defensive reliance on denial, his dramatic flair, emotional intensity, and pattern of sexual relationship all suggest a dominant hysterical component in his personality. (Ross, 1982, p. 667, n. 10)

Without commenting on Ross's counter-diagnosis (which is offered as a footnote, and not developed), the main point here is that the Georges themselves found the formal diagnosis of compulsiveness unsatisfactory and offered instead a "shallow" theoretical stance built on such fundamental psychodynamic concepts as low-self esteem, compensatory behavior, and repressed hostility:

. . . "self" and "self-esteem" are important concepts in all psychodynamic theories.

We did not want to develop a model that lacked discernible links with the available empirical data; hence . . . we were willing to settle for, and in fact preferred, a relatively "shallow" personality model. . . . (George & George, 1989b; and see A. George, 1968)

Although Kohut's work—and even Erikson's—came to prominence only after we had finished our study of Wilson, there certainly were in the late 'forties and 'fifties a number of schools of psychoanalytic thought. . . .

What to do? We decided to cast our analysis so far as possible in *non-technical* language. We were attracted to Lasswell's very general hypothesis of compensatory power-seeking because, for one thing, we felt that it illuminated, and provided a very good empirical fit with, so much of the available biographical material on Wilson. Lasswell's hypothesis also had the virtue of cutting across and being at least compatible with many systems of psychoanalytic thought. . . . Our hope was that we could present the historical data . . . in such a way that proponents of the various "schools" of analysis

would have the salient available data at their disposal and could, if they wished, supply more technical interpretations in their own preferred theoretical terms. (J. George, 1987; see also A. George, 1971)

Given the use of broad and basic psychoanalytic constructs (such as “self-esteem”) and the choice of a “shallow” personality model (which assumes that it is not necessary to have insight into the most buried and primitive layers of Wilson’s unconscious in order to sufficiently understand his political dynamics), it is not surprising that the Georges’ analysis has helped inspire a series of further interpretations of Wilson based on more specific theoretical perspectives.

For instance, Tucker explains Wilson’s bouts with self-defeating behavior as an expression not of repressed aggression, but of a driven “quest for glory” based on Karen Horney’s depiction of one of the variants of neurotic personality. In contrast to the Georges’ picture of Wilson determined never to be dominated again as he was by his father, and transferring this complex of feelings on his relationship with his chief opponent of the moment, Tucker posits that

he would be driven by his compulsive need for glory, reinforced now by the initial leadership success, to press for further dramatic and acclaim-producing leadership projects despite the inevitable growth of resistance to further change; or else, as in the governorship [of New Jersey], he would lose interest after exploiting the potentialities of the post for his purposes and thus allow the success in the legislative session of 1911 to give way to failure of that in 1912. (Tucker, 1977, p. 617)

Tucker’s use of Horney’s theory of neurosis is partly motivated by his theoretical concern with the limitations of the old Lasswellian conception of a power drive compensating for a low self-estimate, which he rightly views as rather too limited to account for the complexity of any actual personality. (It should be noted, however, that the Georges would contend, and I would agree, that *WWCH* represents a refinement of Lasswell’s concepts, and not a direct application of them). Tucker is concerned, for example, with “the paradox of low self-estimates co-existing with high ones” (1977, p. 609), and turns to such concepts as Horney’s “idealized image” to help illuminate it, a point which the Georges attempt to come to terms with through the concept of Wilson’s developing a “sphere of competence” in his life in which he could be free of, or at least compensate for, his low self-image. (See especially A. George, 1968, on Wilson’s experiences of superiority.)

More recently, studies of Wilson have been offered by students of more contemporary analytic theory than that of Horney. For example, there are ways in which the Georges’ portrayal of Wilson, developed though it was within a classical psychoanalytic conceptual context (drive theory, oedipal issues . . .), fits quite well with one of the most modern of psychodynamic theoretical offshoots, the self psychology of Heinz Kohut.<sup>5</sup> As an example of such theoretical

<sup>5</sup>For the application of Kohut to political leadership, see Kohut, 1985; Strozier & Offer, 1985; and Post, 1993. (It was the interesting fit between the Wilson of *WWCH* and Kohut’s theory that first drew me to this topic—Friedman, 1988.)

updating (whether an improvement has taken place is a more complex question to which we will return) consider Bongiorno's Kohutian recasting of Wilson's relationship with his father:

One major question is the meaning of the obvious idealization [Wilson had for his father]. The Georges maintain that idealization arose from reaction-formation against his unconscious aggression toward his father. When the Georges wrote their book, this meaning of idealization was almost axiomatic, but idealization is now recognized to have other possible meanings. Woodrow revealed the meaning of his. When he wrote that his father stirred more life into his brain than a whole year's study at John Hopkins, he meant more than intellectual stimulation, he also meant psychological stimulation. His father vitalized him. Woodrow contrasted this to the "narrowed"—less vital, less complete—inner experience he had at other times. (Bongiorno, 1985, p. 162)

Similarly, Stern comments from a self psychology perspective on Wilson's difficulties with his advisor, Colonel House, at the Paris Peace Conference:

[The Georges'] suggest . . . that the break with House came in large part because of Wilson's sense of House as competitor. . . . This essentially oedipal level interpretation is less convincing than one which stresses Wilson's sense of betrayal: a part of himself was no longer reliable or constantly available. (Stern, 1987, p. 19)<sup>6</sup>

In the above reformulations, we have shifted out of the historiographical set of debates discussed earlier and into the realm of pure psychodynamic interpretation. These psychobiographical disputes about an ex-president display current paradigmatic tensions within a theoretical community, in this case between the classical, "oedipal level" psychoanalytic orientation represented by the Georges, and more contemporary psychoanalytic conceptualizations and sensibilities, here represented by the application of Kohut. How are we to judge the results of such efforts, and what are their implications for psychobiography?

The Georges feel that efforts to examine their work on Wilson from alternative theoretical perspectives should indicate whether they are attempting, as they put it,

(1) to advance alternative hypotheses that are in effect a translation of our non-technical psychodynamic formulations into the more technical language of their particular preferred psychodynamic theory; or (2) to advance alternative hypotheses that *add to and enrich* our model without undermining it; or—most interesting of all—(3) to invalidate some important part of our model of Wilson's personality, or the entire model, and to argue in behalf

<sup>6</sup>The Colonel House element of the Georges' book is sometimes dismissed, perhaps because the title suggests a sort of dual psychobiography, while House actually has a much smaller role and is used specifically for his value in understanding Wilson. Two points should be noted here: One is that the main purely historiographical contribution of *WWCH* was that the Georges were the first to publish certain significant excerpts from the House diaries (George & George, 1981–82, pp. 643–644). And the second is that the relationship is indeed a psychologically rich and suggestive one. For example, the Wilson-House relationship, as depicted in *WWCH*, is quite evocative of narcissistic personality dynamics as portrayed by such clinical theorists as Kohut (1971) or Masterson (1981). Consider: [Wilson] attributed to House, as he had done in the past to other friends who had therefore inevitably disappointed him, an ability to sense his opinions, even on complex technical matters, without his having to articulate them. He further assumed that . . . they would naturally always find themselves in essential agreement. (George & George, 1956, p. 129)

of the superior explanatory power of an alternative psychodynamic model. Each of these efforts, if well-done, can be useful. It is our impression, however, that sometimes those who have offered alternatives have engaged in (1) but claimed to have succeeded in (3). (George & George, 1989a)

On one level this seems valid enough, and one can see the Georges' point here particularly well in Tucker's essay, in which it is noted that "the evidence will be drawn from the Georges' study itself" (Tucker, 1977, p. 612). This, then, is a good example of the Georges' relatively nontechnical formulations being translated into a preferred theory. And yet, on another level, it should be noted that *WWCH* can only be considered relatively, not absolutely, non-technical. That is, the juxtaposition of *WWCH* with the more recent interpretations of Wilson illustrates that even the use of seemingly all-purpose psychodynamic concepts as self-esteem, idealization, and even repression reflect a particular theoretical orientation—in the Georges' case a somewhat more classical psychoanalytic orientation than a, for instance, Kohutian one. (More precisely, the Georges' work emerged in the post-classical psychoanalytic era of mid-century ego-psychology). The connotations, the emphases, and indeed, the conceptualizations are significantly different in these related but distinct theoretical and clinical orientations. Only a Kohutian could wonder, as Bongiorno does, if Wilson's father's biting sarcasm toward young Wilson's efforts was a means for him to "modulate and defend against his own pleasure and excitement in Woodrow's development" (Bongiorno, 1985, p. 162). By the same token, it is the mark of a more classically oriented psychoanalytic theorist to see in Wilson's unremitting, lifelong sentimental praise of his father evidence of powerful, and repressed, anger.

In effect, then, these various theoretical takes on Wilson are an opportunity to not only understand the man but to reflect on the merits of various theoretical stances. In either pursuit, however, a number of points must be kept in mind. The first is that various psychobiographies, even of the same subject, can be serving a number of different scholarly purposes. Thus, as I read the literature, the Georges seem most interested in understanding Wilson psychodynamically and are willing to use whatever theoretical constructs seem to work best. Bongiorno is trained in Kohut's theory, and has already decided which is the most advanced psychological theory, and is using Wilson as an exercise in applied self psychology. Tucker (as is true of myself) is more interested in psychobiography than Wilson per se. (Note that Tucker's piece is subtitled "An Essay on Psychobiography.") All of these are valid, and all are related, but not identical, enterprises.

To complicate matters further, it is probably fair to say that, in addition to scholarly judgment, there are myriad factors that make particular psychological theories "ego-syntonic." (One's mentor is associated with a particular school of thought, it is more affordable or convenient or prestigious to study at one institute rather than another, one's own psychology comes into play, etc.) And even

leaving the grosser manifestations of these elements aside, there are subtle ways in which theoretical favoritism can color a particular argument. For example, in Bongiorno's excellent paper, in the several places where he compares oedipal level interpretations to self-psychological ones, it is clear that his scholarly passion is in the latter. The former are not presented in a distorted manner, but they are bland, without creative juice, and this casts a particular tone to the comparison. (See, e.g., Bongiorno, 1985, pp. 139–40, 145, 151, and 162. Compare this to Allison's more wholehearted renditions of three interpretations of the Cuban Missile Crisis—1971).

Also to be borne in mind is that a given scholar's skill at psychobiographical method may obscure his or her use of a weak theory, just as a given scholar's lack of psychobiographical skill may obscure a theory's attributes. Thus, the Freud-Bullitt Wilson not only displayed some of the weaknesses of classic psychoanalytic theory, it seemed to magnify them as well. The Georges' book, on the other hand, remains useful well beyond Lasswell's historically important, but now somewhat limited, concepts of political personality.

Finally, one other factor suggests itself as deserving reflection when applying new theoretical constructs to earlier ones: In psychodynamic theory, one can plausibly argue that the theory is evolving, and this implies a kind of automatic rationale for re-interpreting phenomena. However, even if, for the sake of argument, we were to accept as a given that Kohut's theory is superior to classical analytic theory, a problem still exists in applying it to a figure like Wilson. As Wheelis explains, "There is . . . [a] limitation of psychoanalysis as a science. . . . the clinical problems to which it addresses itself are in a process of change. They will not stay put" (1958, p. 46).

The hysteria of the last century has mysteriously disappeared. . . . The . . . psychoanalyst of today deals rather with vague conditions of maladjustment and discontent. . . . This is within the personal experience of older psychoanalysts. Younger analysts become aware of it from the discrepancy between the older descriptions of neuroses and the problems presented by the patients who come daily to their offices. The change is from symptom neuroses to character disorders. (1958, pp. 40–41).

Contemporary theory, then, is not simply the result of the cumulative intellectual effort of succeeding theorists, nor of a Kuhnian paradigm shift, in which a new paradigm displaces an old explanation for the same phenomena. Contemporary theorists are, rather, producing new theory appropriate to a contemporary client population. (Cf. Horney, 1937; May, 1969, pp. 24–27; Lasch, 1979, pp. 87–90; Kohut, 1977; Eagle, 1987, pp. 73–74.)

This means neither that Freud's theory is meaningless today (his patients weren't of another species) nor that contemporary theory has gained nothing in sophistication *as* theory, and is simply "different" (today's theorists are operating on a broader base of much more refined and careful developmental and clinical data than Freud had available to him, and it would be an absurdity if there had



been no advance, as Freud would surely agree). It does mean that we should be careful when claiming superiority for a newer interpretation, especially for a figure like Wilson, who, it should be remembered, was a contemporary of Freud's, and of the Victorian era, and not a contemporary of ours in our "culture of narcissism" (as Lasch, 1979, would have it).<sup>7</sup>

Post, who we saw earlier building a bridge between the medical explanations and the psychodynamic ones, manages to do more of the same on this question of classical versus contemporary psychoanalytic interpretations of Wilson. He zeroes in particularly on the importance in Weinstein's book of the picture drawn of Wilson's mother, based on materials not available at the time of the writing of *WWCH* (cf. also Bongiorno, 1985; and Stern, 1987). Consistent with the contemporary psychodynamic emphasis on the role of the mother and the pre-oedipal phases of development, Post argues that "one cannot begin to understand the effect of the father without putting it in the context of the parental emotional environment to which the mother made a vivid contribution." "However," Post continues, "in correcting the imbalance, I would suggest Weinstein over-corrected in the opposite direction" short-changing the role of the father that the Georges emphasize (1983, p. 293). The upshot is "an amalgam of both his parents . . . [which] contributed to Wilson's driving ambition and reaching for highest achievement [and] which were to play out in destructive fashion throughout his career" (1983, p. 298).<sup>8</sup>

Post also offers an important reformulation that refines and adds to the Georges' thesis that Wilson saw in certain figures in his career (West, Lodge) the image of his father, and defied them as he wished he could have defied the

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Runyan, 1988d, and Loewenberg, 1988, for comments on the significance of this issue for psychobiography. On the question of narcissistic types in history, Lasch raises the possibility that

The reported increase in the number of narcissistic patients does not necessarily indicate that narcissistic disorders are more common than they used to be, in the population as a whole, or that they have become more common than the classical conversion neuroses. Perhaps they simply come more quickly to psychiatric attention. (Lasch, 1979, p. 90)

I tend to doubt this could be wholly true, but it may be partially so; it is a hard point to determine. If it does represent the better explanation of the changing nature of clinical patients, it would strengthen the argument for a reinterpretation of Wilson based on the clinical perspective of narcissism. In any event, note that psychobiography of public figures of different eras is one of the ways to research this very question, a point to which I'll return in the conclusion.

<sup>8</sup>It is also the case that our picture of Wilson's father has been fleshed out somewhat by recent scholarship, showing him to have, along with his towering impressive aspect (emphasized by the Georges), his own share of insecurities (Mulder, 1978; Weinstein, 1981). The point is made in this regard, for example, that the Georges may have been exaggerating to depict Wilson as dependent on his father throughout his life, in that in later life they engaged in something of a role reversal. However, that Wilson's father had strong inner insecurities probably strengthens the Georges' thesis, although it is sometimes claimed to do the opposite (Mulder, 1978, p. 27). For this greater insight into Joseph Wilson helps to psychologically explain the driven, demanding, unempathic attitude that the Georges depict in a significant portion of his interactions with his son, a depiction for which the Georges found further support in their review of new materials, on Wilson's family life, that became available after the publication of *WWCH* (George & George, 1981-82, pp. 651-652).

original. Post adds to this—reflecting, a contemporary “object relations” orientation, rather than the “drive theory” of classical Freudian analytic thinking—the concept that Wilson was not just reacting *against* his experience of his father, but was acting out his identification *with* him (cf. Bongiorno, 1985; and Stern, 1987, for other comments on Wilson’s identifications with his parents). To this the Georges respond that “[Post’s] discussion of the nature of Wilson’s identification with his father . . . strikes us as having captured the truth. It accords with everything we know of the data and illuminates them” (1983, p. 309). While, as Post notes, this does not negate the Georges’ original formulation, it is actually a significant refinement of it, the implications of which have yet to be fully explicated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing discussion of *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* and the scholarly disputes in which it has played a central role show that productive lines of inquiry can emerge from both the historical and the psychological “wings” of the psychobiographical endeavor: Each can lead to cross-disciplinary tensions and dialogues that can result in progress not only for psychobiography, but potentially as well for history, for psychology, and possibly, by extension, for some current issues in the social sciences more generally. In conclusion I will consider this potential in terms of the agenda that this material suggests for psychobiography.<sup>9</sup>

### History and Psychobiography

Methodologically, weak historical analysis defeats psychobiography, reducing it to little more than a reflection of the theoretical biases, ideology, and/or countertransferences of the writer, or at the very least leaving it too vulnerable to being seen as such. Strong historiography, on the other hand, both disciplines psychobiography and legitimizes it. Thus, whereas the Freud-Bullitt Wilson could be summarily and wholly dismissed on historiographical grounds (Link, 1967; Tuchman, 1981), *WWCH*, reflecting a much stronger respect for historical methodology and political context, could only be challenged on specific points (Weinstein et al., 1978). The Georges’ jargon-free style (applauded even by Weinstein, Anderson and Link, 1978) and their historical rigor (among psychobiographers at least—they do not consider themselves full-fledged historians) have no doubt contributed significantly to the resiliency of the work.

<sup>9</sup>For general discussions of the question of progress in psychobiography and psychohistory, Runyan, 1982; 1988a; 1988b; and Strozier & Offer, 1985, are all useful.

Obviously, this issue is particularly acute for nonhistorians practicing psychohistory. It should also be noted, however, that even within historical study, "The issue of subjectivity in history is an old one . . . [and] historians who have been critical of the inferential leaps characteristic of psychoanalysis and psychohistory have failed to observe how vulnerable to this kind of criticism any history is that acquires depth and force by the interpretation of subjectivity . . ." (F. Weinstein, 1988, p. 168). And Strozier and Offer add that "Usually historians make extraordinary leaps of psychological intuition without the slightest quiver, while simultaneously holding psychohistorians to the strictest standards of empirical validation for any statement of motivation" (1985, p. 62).

Thus, psychobiography is dealing with fundamental problems of subjectivity and interpretation that bedevil history and other social sciences as well. It has most often faltered on these issues on methodological grounds, but this problem is diminishing as psychobiography has become more sophisticated. At this point, then, the weaknesses of psychobiography may well become less apparent than its strengths. For instance, the issue of countertransference, so well examined in its clinical dimension, may be considered in the context of biography as well (e.g., George & George, 1964, p. xi; Erikson, 1969; Kets De Vries, 1990, pp. 427–428). The further development of such clinical concepts as historiographical tools could be as useful to history as to psychohistory.

Another theoretical problem that is raised by history for psychobiography is that of the individual in history—that is, what is the broader historical relevance of psychobiography? It is expressed within the Wilson literature by Tuchman, who asserted that "it was not only Wilson's psyche that failed . . . , nor his fault alone that the Treaty of Versailles was less than ideal. The fault was humanity's, . . . [Freud and Bullitt] are addicted to the oversimplified single explanation of great events" (1978, pp. 156–7). While *WWCH*, because of its political sophistication, is less vulnerable on this issue, the theoretical problem remains.

One response to this issue is Greenstein's, who attempts to analyze the conditions under which leadership can have a causal impact on events (1987). This approach asks whether conditions were ripe for individual impact, and, if so, what role the psychology of the individual in question played in the impact that actually took place. Applied to Wilson, while Tuchman is indeed convincing that the entire responsibility for the fate of League of Nations cannot be laid upon his shoulders alone, it can be strongly argued that a real potential existed for United States participation, that Wilson was in a strong position to affect the outcome of the Senate's ratification process, and that his political behavior—and personality—adversely affected his leadership on the issue. One can, from there at least speculate as to whether United States participation in the League might have affected the dynamics of post-War international politics. The Wilson case suggests, therefore, that it is worth looking at ways in which efforts such as Greenstein's can be further developed for psychobiography. (Other literatures

can contribute to this, an example being the political movement literature—cf., e.g., Tarrow [n.d.] on “political opportunity structure”.)

Psychobiography and psychohistory have themselves contributed ways in which to consider the question of the individual in history: For example, Erikson’s concept of a psychohistorical link between a leader’s resolution of his or her psychological conflict and the resolution of a community’s social-political conflict is a potentially rich, still underdeveloped, perspective. (Cf. Erikson, 1958; 1969; 1975; Bushman, 1981.) Applied to Wilson, it would undoubtedly begin with the ways in which his moralistic solution to his psychological problems resonated with the “historical moment” (as Erikson would put it) of progressivism, in domestic politics, and idealism, in foreign affairs (cf. George & George, 1956, p. 320). Also potentially relevant here are Lifton’s innovative approaches to studying leaders and groups involved in shared historical “themes” (e.g., Lifton, 1986). In this area, psychobiography and broader psychohistory intersect in a theoretical domain that has only been tentatively outlined and that has potential implications for history as well.

### Psychological Theory and Psychobiography

Turning to the psychological wing of psychobiography, it is not surprising that some of the greatest limitations of *WWCH* are those that reflect the theoretical limitations of psychoanalysis itself, especially the psychoanalysis of the time when the book was written—although the careful use of a “shallow” approach has minimized the consequences. For example, it is indicative of the state of psychodynamic theory, especially then but even now, that Wilson’s neurotic difficulties are much more amenable to rich analysis than are his psychological strengths. That is, while most of the psychobiographies acknowledge that Wilson internalized strengths as well as weaknesses from his parents, not much more seems able to be said (e.g., George & George, 1964, pp. 12–13; Bongiorno, 1985, pp. 134 and 164).<sup>10</sup>

The Georges have recently reflected on this point as follows:

The fact is we consider Wilson to have been one of our greatest Presidents. . . . Perhaps this point did not come through sufficiently [to some] because we did indeed in *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* focus on the supreme crisis of Wilson’s political life. . . . (George & George, 1989b)

This is probably the case, but the problem of dealing with psychological strengths, particularly extraordinary ones, as well as the complexity of human values, has always been difficult within psychoanalytic psychology. For in-

<sup>10</sup>The organizational device of the Wilson literature used in this essay—the question of the rationality versus irrationality of behaviors, and the various ways of explaining the latter—reflects the emphasis of the psychodynamic literature on pathology.

stance, the Georges are more or less required by traditional psychoanalytic theory to in large measure reduce Wilson's "altruistic service" to a "rationalization" of the somehow more authentic drives of the unconscious (1956, p. 117). And, while I have emphasized the strengths of a shallow theory approach (while also arguing that a purely nontechnical formulation is not possible), the downside of shallowness—its lack of depth and specificity—is reflected in the Georges' buttressing of their power/self-esteem model with such statements as, "In the case of someone like Wilson, certainly a multi-valued political personality, the task of establishing motivational forces is difficult and complex. . . . Thus, for example, Wilson also sought [in addition to power] satisfaction in the political arena for his pronounced need for affection and approval" (George & George, 1964, p. 319). Are there really any singly-valued political personalities? Of course, the key to Wilson's political behavior does not have to account for everything, but in places like this, even a refined and expanded Lasswellian approach seems stretched a bit thin.

The turn to contemporary theory does not automatically help here, for much of the increase in sophistication in the modern theoretical era has been in the direction of earlier and earlier developmental insights (pre-oedipal), which has been clinically useful but continues to leave us with the potential for reductionism. On the other hand, some crucial, if underexploited, intellectual terrain was clearly opened up by Erikson in applying his life-cycle theory to historical figures. Theories of adult psychological development (cf. Levinson, 1978, as well) offer additional ways of thinking about the tasks and attributes of political leaders that complement those psychodynamic theories which confine themselves (as most of them continue to do) to the adult consequences of snags in early childhood development.<sup>11</sup> Along these lines, Renshon, in a paper on "Political Learning in Adulthood" (1989) includes some useful comments on Wilson, narcissism, and adult development. We can also look to nonpsychoanalytic psychological approaches for ways of coming to terms with human values as primary psychological phenomena rather than only as compensations or epiphenomena or as somehow superficial in comparison to primal forces of the unconscious. (E.g., Maslow, 1954; May, 1969; Kohlberg, 1981; Eisenberg, et al, 1989; cf. Runyan, 1988a.) If psychological theory has a long way to go in this domain, so, obviously, does psychobiography.

Clearly, then, there is potential for new accounts of Wilson, stimulated by

<sup>11</sup>Erikson's [1969] term for the psychobiographical error of attempting to explain too much of an entire career and life through childhood trauma is "originology." And cf. Eagle, 1987, for a critique of the tendency in recent psychoanalysis to see adults as underdeveloped children. The Georges do attempt to come to terms with Wilson's adult functioning and development, particularly through their "sphere of competence" concept. But this still, it seems to me, places more emphasis on compensation for childhood injury and the working out of old problems of the unconscious, in contrast to Erikson's model of specific emerging and ongoing developmental tasks that build on the pre-existing psychological foundation, but have psychological imperatives of their own.

new theory, to add to our picture of him in important ways. As we have seen, the process raises a variety of theoretical issues about the psychobiographical endeavor, including that of choosing theoretical perspectives, comparing one to another, and possible problems in applying to a historical figure personality constructs that may be most applicable to contemporary character types. Furthermore, if this literature illustrates that developments in psychological theory will lead to developments in psychobiography, it also suggests that psychobiography is one of the better forums in which to argue out theoretical disputes of psychological theory per se. That is, in certain respects, there are advantages for theory development, and not just theory application, to discussing alternative interpretations of a public figure (cf. Carlson, 1988).

For instance, while the clinician does have greater access to a subject's unconscious, the psychobiographer is able to consider an entire life history, and, data permitting, from a variety of perspectives (cf. Runyan, 1982, p. 204; George & George, 1964, p. viii). Furthermore, psychobiography offers the research advantage of allowing all parties equal access to the subject and the data. One need not be a strict positivist to question the difficulties of an adherent of a theory using his or her own application of it as data to test and develop it. The problems of theoretical bias and cross-theoretical dialogue are rather daunting when based primarily on clinical case studies, and the use of public cases may well be a useful corrective (cf. Runyan, 1982, p. 48; and Eagle, 1984, pp. 42 and 216, n. 20).

The differences in purpose and context of the psychobiographical, as opposed to the clinical, endeavor also make it a potentially helpful partner to clinical experience and data in psychodynamic theory development. For in a clinical setting, psychological healing is the primary consideration, while comprehension, in a very real sense, is secondary. (Ask any clinician whether it is preferable to see good therapeutic results without crystal clarity of diagnosis or whether it is preferable to have virtual diagnostic certainty and no therapeutic progress, and you will see what I mean). In contrast, the sole purpose of psychobiography is comprehension. Quite possibly this is one of the reasons that the Georges have recently commented that "it is our impression that written versions of psychodynamic theories generally do not yet explicate very well the methods sophisticated clinicians use to assess hypotheses in the therapeutic setting. As a result, political scientists and historians who attempt to apply psychodynamic theories to biography get very little help from the psychological literature itself as to how to make responsible, disciplined use of the theory for purposes of assessing the hypotheses it (all too) easily generates for their use" (George & George, 1989b, p. 6; this recognition of the complexity of psychological assessment is in contrast to the more confident tone the Georges convey on this issue in their preface to the 1964 edition of *WWCH*.) Thus, in addition to the oft-noted disadvantages of not having "analytic" contact with a subject, there are advan-

tages as well not only for psychobiography, but for the development of psychological theory as well.

In conclusion, the psychobiographical literature on Wilson provides a rich source of material to draw upon in considering the state, and potential, of political psychobiography. It raises productive questions not only for Wilson scholarship and for psychobiography, but for history and psychology as well. Furthermore, in light of the current "interpretive turn" in the social sciences, this body of qualitative, interpretive, and sophisticated literature might well be instructive to many beyond these more obviously "implicated" disciplines. As to the legacy of the Georges' book itself, that it still sparks dispute and still instructs is impressive indeed.

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