George Bush, Meet Woodrow Wilson

By John B. Judis

In May 1915, a year after World War I began, Woodrow Wilson called for establishment of a League of Nations, which, through collective means, would prevent future world wars from breaking out. His proposal — partly embodied in the feeble post-WWII League and then after World War II in the U.N. — never achieved the kind of collective security he hoped for.

In the wake of Iraq's conquest of Kuwait, President Bush seems to have revived Mr. Wilson's proposal. In his address to Congress on Sept. 11, Mr. Bush called for the creation of a "new world order...in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice."

Is this quest for collective security and a new world order a recurring delusion that well-meaning statesmen like Presidents Wilson and Bush use to rationalize their more narrowly conceived actions? Or is it a practical goal that is worth pursuing even if it has eluded us?

As America's place in the world has changed in the last 75 years, the argument for collective security has also changed. In 1915, the U.S. was weaker militarily than Britain and Germany but had become the world's strongest country economically.

Mr. Wilson saw the League of Nations as a means of curbing great-power imperialism, which had caused World War I, and of laying the groundwork for a disarmed world order in which economic strength - the U.S.'s strong suit - would prevail over military strength.

Today, the U.S. remains the strongest military power but lags behind Europe and Japan in key industries. With a decaying infrastructure and educational system and soaring public and private debt, the U.S. could fall behind even further.

It was evident in recent weeks as the Administration tried simultaneously to defend the Persian Gulf and reduce the budget deficit that the U.S. no longer has the funds and resources to act unilaterally in the world. Seventy-five years ago, it sought collective security to insure its economic supremacy; today, it has to seek collective security for the sake of economic solvency.

But collective security possible? President Wilson's proposal founed on the Russian Revolution, which split the West; on the refusal of Britain, France, Italy and Japan to abandon imperial ambitions; and on the opposition in the U.S. of Republican isolationists and progressive.

The imperialists, led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, insisted that the U.S. combining military and economic superiority, had to remain the master of its own fate.

The progressives, led by Senator William Borah, attacked the League as an instrument for maintaining the British-dominated division of the world.

Today, two major obstacles to Mr. Wilson's dream of collective security have been removed: the European and Japanese empires have been dissolved and the cold war has ended. What remains are domestic obstacles, a lack of urgency among the major powers (except, ironically, the Soviet Union) and an absence of inspired international leadership to forge new arrangements.

Mr. Bush's proposal for a new world order has encountered opposition from descendants of Senators Lodge and Borah. Republican conservatives are divided over tactics in the gulf. But they agree that pursuing new collective security arrangements is - as John O'Sullivan, editor of the National Review put it - "bunkum." They want the U.S. to remain militarily supreme and unbound by commitments to a revived U.N. or other supranational body.

Left-wing opponents of Mr. Bush's intervention in the gulf dismiss the proposal for a new world order - "prattle," editor Erwin Knoll's Progressive called it - as a rationalization for imperial ambitions there. Where Senator Borah and the progressives questioned Britain's motives in supporting collective security, today's left questions our Government's motives.

The right ignores not only our country's economic plight but also the diplomatic pitfalls of unilateral action; the left, still reeling from Vietnam, sees our foreign policy through the prism of that era's lies and deceptions.

The Bush Administration has done little to meet these challenges to its policies. After proclaiming a new world order to be their "fifth objective" in the gulf, Mr. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker have been decidedly vague in spelling out what that order entails.

Does it mean a strengthened U.N.? And new regional security arrangements in the gulf and elsewhere? Will the U.S. be willing to put its own military under international leadership? In the gulf, Mr. Bush has rejected a U.N. command outright.

Sometimes, when Administration officials describe their goals, they say the U.S. must reduce its military burden and commitment. Other times, they appear determined to seek new arrangements in order to preserve U.S. military supremacy and to justify new expenditures.

In September, Pentagon officials hinted that even after Iraq was driven from Kuwait, they anticipated keeping 10,000 U.S. troops in the gulf and establishing new bases throughout the region. Mr. Baker has suggested that the U.S. could set up a NATO-like structure in the Persian Gulf.

By sending 230,000 more troops to the gulf, with the result that U.S. forces will outnumber Arab and European forces 4 to 1, Mr. Bush threatens to undermine the concept of a multinational force and has set the stage for what may end up as a unilateral U.S. offensive. Not only Kuwait but also plans for a new world order may perish in the process.

As our involvement in the Persian Gulf deepens and becomes more perilous, it becomes important for Mr. Bush to explain fully why we are there and what larger objectives we hope to fulfill. Taking a first step toward a new world order could be a legitimate goal, but Americans have to understand better what this could involve.