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## *The 'Fatal Flaw' of Internationalism: Babbitt on Humanitarianism*

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From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

—James 4:1

In 1915, Irving Babbitt, professor of French literature at Harvard University and architect with Paul Elmer More of the New Humanism, turned his attention to the “breakdown of internationalism” that had plunged the world into the catastrophe of the Great War. Observing the critical situation less than a year into the European conflict, he prepared a lengthy and penetrating two-part essay on internationalism during a brief but busy sabbatical that was otherwise devoted to his forthcoming book, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919)<sup>1</sup>—his important consideration of the origin of the modern temperament. The companion articles appeared in the *Nation* in June 1915, but carried an editor’s disclaimer that they did not entirely reflect the *Nation*’s own views on the war.<sup>2</sup> Babbitt was indeed likely to offend the magazine’s more jingoist readers. By the late spring of 1915, there had already been some loss of American life (most notably on the *Lusitania* in May), and the fighting in Europe

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<sup>1</sup> *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947/c. 1919); George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 232-233.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Babbitt, “The Breakdown of Internationalism, Part I,” *Nation* 100 (17 June 1915), 677-680, and “The Breakdown of Internationalism, Part II,” *Nation* 100 (24 June 1915), 704-706. All page references in parentheses in the following paragraphs are to these two articles.

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had stalemated in the trenches of the Western Front, circumstances pointing to the likely involvement of the United States. But Babbitt's essays for the *Nation* preceded America's "inevitable" decision to join the belligerents and were published when deliberation and restraint were still possible for America's leaders, when an alternative remained open to Rooseveltian "realism" on the one hand and Wilsonian "idealism" on the other, twin expressions of the will to power and both violations, as Babbitt would argue, of humanism's law of measure.

Throughout the war, Babbitt contributed articles to the *Nation* on topics ranging from Rousseau, to Matthew Arnold, to Buddha,<sup>3</sup> making in each essay at least passing reference to the war. But his extended analysis in 1915 of the breakdown of modern internationalism spoke directly to the West's moral crisis that had culminated with such force in the Great War. Babbitt's careful dichotomizing of "true" and "false" internationalism—one the product of humane control, the other the product of humanitarian impulse—led him to consider the cumulative spiritual problem behind the war's more readily apparent material causes and behind the superficial mechanistic explanations for the war then being offered. He sought to disentangle the ethico-religious problem from the build-up of armaments, the political maneuvering, the economic and imperial rivalry, and the headline-grabbing events of the battlefields of Europe. While Babbitt did not deny or even minimize the war's proximate political, social and economic causes, he endeavored especially to discern and explain the condition of the human will and imagination that had allowed a catastrophe of such magnitude—of unprecedented extent in geography, material cost, and loss of human life—the world having recently talked so expectantly of a coming day of peace and brotherhood among nations. Babbitt set out in these articles to uncover, in his words, "the solid background of ideas" and to reveal "how these ideas have actually worked out in life and conduct."<sup>4</sup>

*Humane control vs. humanitarian impulse.*

Babbitt was most concerned with the displacement in international relations of ethical control by an unrestrained will to power, a

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<sup>3</sup> "The Political Influence of Rousseau," *Nation* 104 (18 January 1917), 67-72; "Matthew Arnold," *Nation* 105 (2 August 1917), 117-121; "Interpreting India to the West," *Nation* 105 (18 October 1917), 424-428.

<sup>4</sup> Irving Babbitt, "Humanists and Humanitarians," *Nation* 101 (2 September 1915), 288-289. This brief letter to the editor was Babbitt's response to some of the criticism of his articles on the war.

tendency he found all the more striking, if only seemingly contradictory, in an age that boasted of its democratic, progressive, and humanitarian principles. Some would argue, then and now, that the First World War erupted in spite of these lofty nineteenth-century ideals, that it in fact marked the bitterest betrayal of the humanitarian impulse. Babbitt, in contrast to his age, responded provocatively that the war had come about precisely *because* of this expansive idealism. And he traced the West's "expansive living" to the sentimental Rousseauist temperament that had come to dominate European thought over the past one hundred years, meaning for Babbitt that the current international chaos ultimately derived from the moral chaos raging within individual human hearts. To the degree that modern internationalism failed to recognize the fact of this inner turmoil, it would fail to limit warfare.

Babbitt refused to blame the German people alone for the war, rejecting the prevailing notion that somehow "in their militarism and lust of empire they differ from other people, not merely in degree, but in kind" (677)—a simplistic interpretation of the war that required no painful self-examination on the part of the other combatants, and that naively supposed that if it were not for German "megalomania" the rest of Europe would be at peace. Babbitt stepped back from this arrogant provincialism to "a truly international point of view" from which to diagnose the real disorder afflicting Europe and to discover why the "existing type" of internationalism had broken down. Babbitt noted with what stunning ease modern nationalism had overrun modern internationalism, crushing even such an avowedly transcendent and unifying movement as Socialism. The behavior of Socialists across Europe in 1914 seemed evidence enough that modern internationalism had not provided a check on nationalism (677). And the ascendancy of this irrepressible nationalism was not, contrary to popular claims, the sole responsibility of such German thinkers as Nietzsche, Treitschke and Bernhardt. Writers in Germany and England alike before the war had praised their nation's expansiveness, indulging in the ubiquitous and dangerous "exaltation of vital impulse over vital control" that Babbitt had warned about even before the war (705).<sup>5</sup> Germany was not the only nation to drift away from civilization in the prewar

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<sup>5</sup> Babbitt offered two examples of prewar attitudes: Bernhardt's *Germany and the Next War* (1912) and J. A. Cramb's *Germany and England* (1914). In 1910, in *The New Laokoon*, Babbitt warned of the consequences of "vital expansion."

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decades and slip the moorings of a sane nationalism and humane cosmopolitanism.<sup>6</sup>

Babbitt traced the emergence of modern nationalism and modern internationalism to the French Revolution and the Romantic temperament, generally following Edmund Burke's interpretation of the events of the 1790s, yet without sharing Burke's degree of trust in traditionalism and conventionality. Unlike the English and their narrowly applied Revolution of 1688, France had exported revolutionary doctrine beyond its borders, intending not merely to reform its own institutions but to transform its neighbors' as well, toppling inherited institutions (monarchy and church, in particular) as impediments to an instinctive international fraternity that needed only to be set free in order to express itself. By spreading "brotherhood," France ironically produced intense nationalism, both within France itself—as the European coalition fought to contain the "Christ of nations" and reverse the revolution—and outside France as its mass army waged an ideological crusade and sparked nationalist resistance among its neighbors. Sentimental brotherhood in the eighteenth century had ended with all of Europe at war; the "will to brotherhood" had been revealed as the "will to power," externally in empire-building and internally in the ideological imperialism of the Reign of Terror. Ultimately, France's quest for radical democracy and its "humanitarian crusade" of liberation had culminated in Napoleon, whose invading armies again spread nationalism. Revolutionary France had followed a path from humanitarian brotherhood, to nationalism, to predatory imperialism, and thus "ceased to be the 'Christ of nations' and became the 'traitor to human kind,' universally denounced by disillusioned radicals at the end of the eighteenth century" (678).

Returning to the situation in 1915—Europe's greatest crisis since the Napoleonic Wars—Babbitt noted the facile and narrow-minded tendency to identify Germany as the latest impediment to peace and the new "traitor to human kind." According to the popular view, Germany, once home to Kant's idealism and faith in brotherhood, had sadly degenerated in the age of Bismarck's nationalism and Nietzsche's superman into its present incarnation as the exporter of a decadent *Kultur*. But again, Babbitt warned that Germany's expansive living pointed to a larger problem that af-

*Sentimental  
"brotherhood"  
brought war  
to Europe.*

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<sup>6</sup> See also "The Political Influence of Rousseau," 71.

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fectured all of Europe and beyond. Nietzsche's superman was itself rooted in the habit of mind that had also produced Stendhal's worship of Napoleon, Carlyle's "Great Man" theory of history, and more generally Romanticism's cult of the "original genius." From this wider perspective, the German nation of 1915, while perhaps no less menacing to its neighbors, appeared not as a historical oddity or atavistic throwback to an earlier age, but more understandably as dominated by a widely held naturalistic view of human nature that since the late eighteenth century had displaced traditional Christianity and humanism (678).

*War rooted in  
revolt against  
self-discipline.*

Babbitt identified naturalism's revolt against the dual tradition of Christian and humanistic self-discipline, and its substitution of a new basis of morality, as lying at the heart of the breakdown of internationalism.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, in *Literature and the American College* (1908) and in *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), for example, Babbitt condemned both utilitarian (or Baconian) naturalism and emotional (or Rousseauist) naturalism for rejecting humanism's "decorum" and "law of measure" in favor of a restless and grasping individualism.<sup>8</sup> Humanism, in contrast, maintained the distinction and tension between the "law for man" and "law for thing," and recognized the inner struggle between the individual's "permanent self" and "ordinary self," with happiness possible only through ethical control. Naturalism lost sight of the separate "law for man" in its Baconian quest for power, and cast off restraint in its Rousseauist enthusiasm for "instinct." Babbitt faulted the naturalistic humanitarians for stressing humanity's collective struggle for material progress and well-being while downplaying the struggle between good and evil within the individual heart. The lovers of humanity denied the necessity of this inner struggle, resolving the "civil war in the cave" by rejecting all "convention" as "unnatural" and "artificial." The basis of morality was no longer the disciplinary virtues, but rather sympathy, benevolence, "humanity." Human nature was not inclined to evil and therefore properly restrained by humility or decorum, but was instead inherently pure and benevolent, needing only to be free to express its instinctive inner beauty (678).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For Babbitt's detailed explanation of the distinction between humanism and humanitarianism, see "What is Humanism?" in *Literature and the American College: Essays in the Defense of the Humanities*, Introduction by Russell Kirk (Washington, DC: National Humanities Institute, 1986), 71-87.

<sup>8</sup> *Literature and the American College*, 88-108; *Rousseau and Romanticism*, x-xx.

<sup>9</sup> See "The Political Influence of Rousseau," 69.

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Thus, seeing morality and virtue as matters of the external world, the “beautiful soul” is “expansive,” a key word in Babbitt’s lexicon: “Not having to reform himself, the beautiful soul can devote himself entirely to reforming society.” Babbitt argued, proceeding once again from Burke, that the humanitarians made the one virtue of compassion serve as the sum of all virtues. No longer grounded in self-control, virtue was redefined by the humanitarians as expansive sympathy, creating a volatile mixture of inner rebellion and outer philanthropy. This impulse to change the world was expressed in two ways that on the surface seem contradictory. The rationalistic humanitarian, on the one hand, hoped to change the world by tinkering with institutions. The emotional humanitarian, on the other, hoped to change the world by spreading the spirit of brotherhood. Between them, the utilitarian and sentimental humanitarians combined to form the “Promethean individualism” of the modern age (678).

*Compassion no substitute for self-control.*

Having thus defined the modern individual temperament, Babbitt extended the circle of his analysis from the individual to the nation, finding the national temperament of Germany and the rest of Europe rooted in the same humanitarianism that produced indulgent, expansive chaos within individual souls. And the modern view of human nature, as it was lived out in nations, presented the greatest challenge of all to contemporary international relations. As the individual in the humanitarian age submitted to no “inner check” or “veto” over his own impulses, so too the expansive nation recognized only its own civilizing mission, or its historical imperative to spread *Kultur*, or its divine calling to “uplift” other peoples. Add to this impulse the pressures of population, limited resources, and economic rivalry in an industrializing Europe and it was clear, Babbitt continued, that “the problem of adjusting the relations between highly expansive individuals and nationalities is indeed the modern problem *par excellence*” (679). And this fundamental problem of the “moral anarchy” of expansive living became “all the more dangerous,” he warned in a later essay, as it was “combined with . . . an increasing mechanical and material efficiency.”<sup>10</sup> Europe’s perfection of its destructive capacity, Babbitt seemed to say, had arisen from the meeting in the modern world of the Rousseauist lack of control over the inner man with the Baconian in-

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<sup>10</sup> “Matthew Arnold,” 118.

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crease of control over physical nature, what he later would call “that singular mixture of altruism and high explosives that we are pleased to term our civilization.”<sup>11</sup> But if this lethal combination was indeed modern civilization’s most pressing challenge, where did the solution lie? Was humanitarianism, whether sentimental or utilitarian, equipped to meet this challenge and to “adjust” the relations among expansive nations, as it claimed? Babbitt, returning to a constant theme in his work, argued that humanitarianism “will have to be judged . . . not by its theory and its professions, but by its fruits” (679). Considering himself to be a thoroughly critical modern, Babbitt demanded that these schemes for peace produce tangible results, that they actually produce peace.<sup>12</sup>

Neither  
utilitarian nor  
emotional  
humanitarian-  
ism brought  
peace.

By this accounting, both utilitarian and romantic humanitarians had failed dismally. The rationalist counted on “enlightened self-interest” to limit war, while the sentimentalist offered to manage conflict through a growing sympathy for abstract “Humanity.” Babbitt found the first, and the more utilitarian, view to be prevailing over the nineteenth century’s sentimental infatuation with the idea of a “brotherhood of nations.” The world at the moment seemed to place more confidence in arbitration treaties, the Hague conferences, and the reasoning of those, like the widely read British author Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion*, who argued that when nations were confronted with the statistical evidence of the costs of modern war they would abandon it as futile. Supposedly, once it could be demonstrated that the profits of war were an illusion, the impulse to fight would wither. But these rational appeals had gone unheeded in August 1914: “Unfortunately, whatever uses the various humanitarian devices may have in lessening international friction on minor occasions, it is only too plain that on supreme occasions they fail” (679). Babbitt held out little hope that utilitarian mechanisms could ever prevent war in the absence of an inner check on appetite.

Likewise, emotional pacifism had also proven incapable of restraining nationalist ambition in 1914, and this sentimental regard for “Humanity” had an even longer record of failure. From the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s *Project for Perpetual Peace* (1712-1717), to Kant’s treatise on “Perpetual Peace,” down to the great peace movement of the late nineteenth century—pacifist efforts had been fol-

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<sup>11</sup> “The Political Influence of Rousseau,” 70.

<sup>12</sup> See also, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, xvi.

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lowed by war. Babbitt called this pattern “the monstrous irony that dogs the humanitarian.” Moreover, this irony indicated something wrong in the sentimental basis for peace itself, an inherent flaw that the humanitarians would not admit. They argued instead that their ideas simply had not yet been tried the right way, or that their transforming, regenerative spirit had not yet penetrated deeply enough. Continuing failure pointed only to some remaining impediment to peace, to some enduring interference with natural goodwill and brotherhood, and not to any fundamental error in the proposed humanitarian solution. Germany was the current impediment to world peace. Or perhaps it was the arms manufacturers who conspired to postpone the golden age. Remove these obstacles and peace would flow. International peace was only a matter of the proper arrangement of things in the natural, external order. Babbitt supposed that “nothing short of the suicide of the planet would avail to convince the humanitarians that anything is wrong with their theory—and even then, the last surviving humanitarian would no doubt continue to moan conspiracy” (679).

This observation brought Babbitt to what he called humanitarian internationalism’s “fatal flaw.” The humanitarians assumed, *contra* Hobbes, that the state of nature is not a war of all against all brought on by man’s continual lusting after power, but rather a Rousseauist Arcadia. The French Revolution had proved Hobbes correct, Babbitt argued; the “will to power” had overwhelmed the “will to brotherhood.” The removal of customary restraints had brought anarchy, not peace. The emotional humanitarian’s appeal to sympathy and the utilitarian humanitarian’s appeal to self-interest had manifestly not ended warfare. The flaw in current internationalism was the assumption that the modern expansive temperament could be contained by sympathy or self-interest apart from a reevaluation of human nature. It seemed obvious to Babbitt, then, that despite Norman Angell and his disciples, “the great illusion is not war but humanitarianism.” And humanitarianism was an illusion at every level of human experience. It failed to reconcile nations, or factions within nations, or the war raging within the human soul: “[the expansive view of life] does not establish peace and unity among different nationalities, it does not establish peace and unity among members of the same nationality, it does not establish peace and unity—and this is the root of the whole matter—in the breast of the

*Centrifugal living incompatible with social harmony.*



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individual" (679). Centrifugal living, as it might be called, could by definition never lead to social harmony or international peace.

*True spirituality based on self-discipline, not emotional expansiveness.*

But if sympathy and self-interest failed to restrain national ambition, and failed to build a new commonality among peoples to replace the lost Christendom of the Middle Ages, did humanity have no alternative to the present anarchy brought by expansive impulse other than a Hobbesian despotism or rule by a Nietzschean superman? Babbitt offered hope, but a hope requiring a monumental act of will and imagination to reverse the course of the past century, heading away from the "sham spirituality" of humanitarian expansiveness and toward the true spirituality of the self-discipline that was central to both humanism and Christianity. As he wrote, "true spirituality insists that men cannot come together in a common sympathy, but only in a common discipline." Rather than yield to impulse and expand, individuals had to concentrate on "a common center" beyond themselves, whether that limiting, disciplining center be the example of Christ or the humanist's law of measure. For nations, likewise, concentration on the "common center" could alone produce true internationalism, an internationalism built on control, not impulse. The catastrophic slide could be reversed, Babbitt argued, but only through the restraining, disciplinary rigors of religion or humanism, by consciously submitting to the "human law" of moderation and decency: "it may well be that the present imperialistic drift can be checked only by a quieter and saner view of life, only by a recovery of the disciplinary virtues, the virtues of concentration" (705). In opposition to restless, centrifugal living Babbitt offered a humanistic principle of control.

Historical experience made it clear that this self-discipline would not be easy. Ancient Greece, for instance, had become restless and had passed from democracy to imperialism, heeding leaders who elevated "vital impulse" over "vital control" and choosing not to refrain from "decadent" and "irrational imperialism" (704). But despite past failure—or rather because of past failure—Babbitt called in 1915 for resistance to the appetite for empire and glory. Of course, he recognized that the spirit of the times said otherwise. Intellectuals and statesmen were busy urging their peoples on to expansion (whether to material or ideological empire). But the survival of the West required discriminating between true and false, and then rejecting false and dangerous notions, no matter how popular. "The task of breaking with convention—that is, with the organized com-

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mon-sense of the community in which one lives—is indeed formidable” (705). Babbitt longed for the recovery of a “commoner sense,” not mere traditionalism or conventionality, but an apprehension of “inspired and imaginative good sense,” a “positive and critical” alternative to the prevailing wisdom and circumstances of the moment (705).

Babbitt was emphatic that the fashionable ideas of his day did not hold the key to international peace and goodwill, nor to producing the kind of leaders essential to that end. Neither progress, nor humanitarianism, nor idealism, nor democracy—none of the sacred but ill-defined words of the current chaotic age—held the answer. And as he later lamented, “nothing is more characteristic of such an era than its irresponsible use of general terms.”<sup>13</sup> It was not enough to be “progressive,” for example; one had to know what one was progressing toward. It was not enough to talk of peace and liberty and humanity; one had to define these terms or risk wandering endlessly in the dream world being spun by the humanitarians. In the case of the meaning and limits of democracy, this sort of misunderstanding had done particular damage, Babbitt feared. Democracy had become a politician’s conjuring word, and only through careful definition could the valuable qualities of democracy be salvaged. Simply more democracy, mere quantitative democracy, was not the cure for social strife or international war. There was nothing inherently peaceful or unifying about pure democracy. In fact, Babbitt thought he discerned within quantitative democracy an unmistakable historical tendency toward imperialism; an internally “undisciplined” democracy would become a “grasping and dangerous” democracy, he later wrote.<sup>14</sup> Any democracy that abandoned internal institutional constraints on political will would soon grow impatient with checks on its external imperial will as well. Any democracy, including America, that abandoned its established “veto powers” in favor of a capricious popular will, would only hasten its decline into social anarchy and precipitate its plunge toward an impulsive foreign policy (705-706).

While Babbitt feared that America would follow democracy’s fatal tendency toward empire, he believed that such a decline could be arrested. And the solution lay in the wisdom and virtue of individual citizens and their leaders. To begin with, citizens themselves

*Democracy  
absent  
institutional  
constraints  
tends toward  
imperialism.*

<sup>13</sup> *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> “Matthew Arnold,” 119.

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*Multiplication  
of laws  
indicates moral  
failure.*

had to be law-abiding, and this would come about only by cultivating the critical spirit, by developing the Socratic ability to define and measure, by submitting to self-scrutiny and self-discipline. This inner discipline would not result from the endless multiplication of laws to regulate behavior—a temptation that Babbitt saw America succumbing to, and a sign of moral failure rather than true control. Nor would it come through the muckraking journalist's habit of pointing an accusatory finger at everyone else, and thereby encouraging an attitude the very opposite of the truly critical spirit. Nor through print media that seemed to prevent reflection by trivializing every issue, and certainly not through a modern educational system that did not teach critical reading and reflection. Babbitt found hope—a realistic expectation, in his view—in education for wisdom and virtue rather than for power and service. The future of the American republic lay in “a genuinely human point of view,” in an authentic “cosmopolitanism,” in the cultivation of a true internationalism (706).

*Peace among  
nations  
requires peace  
within  
leaders.*

But America's will to power also had to be restrained by the kind of leader that only humane education could produce. While the humanitarian pursued peace through elevating the world's material condition, the humanist, Babbitt countered, would rather “make sure first that our society has leaders who have imposed upon their impulses the yoke of the human law, and so have become moderate and sensible and decent” (706). Traditional Christianity—prior to its reconfiguration into sentimental humanitarianism—also taught that peace in the human heart was a prerequisite to peace among men. Buddhism as well, he would note elsewhere, understood the link between the restlessness of infinite desire in the individual and turmoil in the world.<sup>15</sup> The whole testimony of humanism and the world's religions warned that the character of leaders mattered, because character would be translated into policy. Peace among nations, therefore, was possible only as a by-product of peace, whether religious or humanistic, within the heart of the leaders themselves:

To suppose that men who are filled individually with every manner of restlessness, maddened by the lust of power and speed, votaries of the god Whirl, will live at peace either with themselves or with others, is the vainest of chimeras. Whatever degree of peace is ever achieved in international relations in particular will be due to the fact that the responsible leaders in the countries concerned are not

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<sup>15</sup> “Interpreting India to the West,” 426.

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mere imperialist expansionists, but, whether as a result of religious or humanistic discipline, have submitted vital impulse to no less vital control; there will then be hope that they may even get within hailing distance of one another, even hope that they may subordinate to some extent the private interests of their respective states to the larger interests of civilization (706).

With this conclusion about the quality of leadership, Babbitt ended for the time being his diagnosis of the breakdown in thought and behavior that had culminated in the Great War. Much of the material in this essay for the *Nation* Babbitt later reworked and elaborated in the chapters of his more famous *Democracy and Leadership* (1924)—a book that, significantly, was originally to be entitled *Democracy and Imperialism*.<sup>16</sup> The book benefited from the additional insights gained from three more years of costly warfare including the slaughter of Verdun and the Somme and from America's crusade to make the world safe for democracy. But after the war he returned to the same conclusion he had drawn nearly a decade before: "behind all imperialism is ultimately the imperialistic individual, just as behind all peace is ultimately the peaceful individual."<sup>17</sup>

While Babbitt said nothing directly in his two *Nation* articles about Woodrow Wilson as a national leader, his call for a certain quality of leadership for the sake of peace and limited government raises the unavoidable question of what Babbitt thought of his fellow Ivy League academic, especially since Wilson enjoyed a reputation then and since as a man of peace. Did Wilson exhibit restraint, or did he succumb to the "fatal flaw" of humanitarian internationalism by relying on sympathy and self-interest to establish peace? Later, in *Democracy and Leadership*, published in the year of Wilson's death, Babbitt commented at some length on whether Wilson fitted his criteria for humanistic leadership. Babbitt was most critical of Wilson's sentimentalism, and from his comments throughout *Democracy and Leadership* on Wilson's temperament, it is clear that he found in the war President elements of both the emotional and utilitarian humanitarian. While Wilson talked incessantly of "Humanity," he worked to ensure world peace through the mechanism of the League of Nations, which Babbitt expected to turn out to be merely another "humanitarian chimera"—the kind of futile substi-

*Wilson an emotional and utilitarian humanitarian.*

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas R. Nevin, *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Democracy and Leadership*, 160.

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tute for self-control that historically often had been a means to imperialistic ends, as in the case of France's Henry IV and his "Grand Design."<sup>18</sup> Both impulses—sentimental and utilitarian—revealed Wilson's will to power through "world service."

It is important to note that Babbitt did not condemn Wilson for intervention in the European War *per se*. He seemed more concerned with the expansive temperament behind intervention than with the fact that the United States had gone to war. As much as he desired peace within the individual and among nations, Babbitt was no pacifist. In fact, he criticized Wilson for his famous pronouncement "that a nation may be 'too proud to fight.'" Rather than the evidence of Christian humility and humane control that such a statement may appear to be on the surface, this declaration struck Babbitt as a prime example of the "humanitarian confusion of values." "An individual may be too *humble* to fight," Babbitt conceded, "but a nation that is too proud to fight may, in a world like this, be too proud to survive as a nation." Babbitt preferred that Wilson had spoken up for justice: the greatest virtue in the secular order, he wrote. This does not mean, however, that Babbitt sided with the belligerent Teddy Roosevelt, whose wartime crusade for an ill-defined and universal justice was potentially just as abstract and unlimited as the Wilsonian war for Humanity. Both Roosevelt and Wilson advocated wars of service.<sup>19</sup>

*"Service"  
an excuse  
for power.*

More pointedly, Babbitt criticized Wilson's wars of service, whether in Mexico or Europe, as imperialism by another name and as likely to be as direct a threat to democratic institutions as any conventional imperialism. World service was merely sentimental imperialism and would lead to world empire and to the death of the American republic. In the World War, Wilson had helped turn America into the world's latest version of a crusading nation, the role France had occupied in the 1790s. And the crusading passion of the "uplifters" for domestic reform and world service, if unchecked, would culminate in an empire under the impulsive rule of an unrestrained executive—all in the name of human betterment. Babbitt was unsparing in his characterization of progressive interventionism, whether domestic or foreign: "If we attend carefully to the psychology of the persons who manifest such an eagerness to serve us,

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<sup>18</sup> *Democracy and Leadership*, 314; "The Political Influence of Rousseau," 70-71.

<sup>19</sup> *Democracy and Leadership*, 296.

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we shall find that they are even more eager to control us.”<sup>20</sup> “Service,” no matter how sincere, was a symptom of the modern will to power, and, by his disregard for constraints, Wilson failed the test of leadership:

Woodrow Wilson, . . . more than any other recent American, sought to extend our idealism beyond our national frontiers. In the pursuit of his scheme for world service, he was led to make light of the constitutional checks on his authority and to reach out almost automatically for unlimited power. If we refused to take his humanitarian crusading seriously we were warned that we should “break the heart of the world.” . . . The truth is that this language, at once abstract and sentimental, reveals a temper at the opposite pole from that of the genuine statesman.<sup>21</sup>

In condemning Wilson’s leadership in such blunt terms, Babbitt was not questioning Wilson’s moral circumspection or his sincerity. Babbitt never offered in print a full assessment of Wilson’s life and character. He was concerned, rather, with a few observable qualities of leadership exhibited at a vital moment in the nation’s history. He found in Wilson not a statesman of virtue but a romantic of mere temperament and sympathy. Babbitt lamented Wilson’s indiscriminate use of general terms, his flights into the idyllic imagination of “Humanity” and “service,” and his failure to exercise the “will to refrain,” a quality of leadership that Babbitt found indispensable to any enduring civilization. Thus, Babbitt’s search for the error in first principles behind the international anarchy of the twentieth century brought him to the failure of leadership. And here his argument came full circle. As he later remarked, “we are living in a world that in certain important respects has gone wrong on first principles; which will be found to be only another way of saying that we are living in a world that has been betrayed by its leaders.”<sup>22</sup>

*Wilson did not exercise “will to refrain.”*

Babbitt did not live to see the Second World War. But already in 1924 he feared for a civilization that had not yet unmasked and contained the deadly combination of Baconian power and Rousseauist impulse. Even before the Great War ended, Babbitt foresaw that the postwar order would not be peaceful. In his 1915 essay he concluded that the war would only exacerbate the animosity seething among the European powers, and he feared, rightly so, “the almost inexorable hatreds it will leave behind” (706). How, he wondered in

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-222, 295-296, 313-314.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

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another wartime essay, “are European nations, when each has attained to the highest degree of self-assertion, to live at peace with one another?”<sup>23</sup> After having waged an unlimited war to destroy each other, where would nations turn next? Without a corrective to expansive living, the modern drift toward moral anarchy and physical destruction so unmistakable in the First World War would only accelerate as humanity’s power over the natural world continued to increase. The predictive power of Babbitt’s insight into the dangers of the modern temperament could not have been clearer than in his prophecy in 1924 concerning the development and use of atomic weapons. From that early date—more than twenty years before the first atomic bomb was dropped—he saw that as the imagination had already conceived of the possibility of atomic warfare, the knowledge would be uncovered, the technology created, and the power used:

The results of the material success and spiritual failure of the modern movement are before us. It is becoming obvious to every one that the power of Occidental man has run very much ahead of his wisdom. The outlook might be more cheerful if there were any signs that Occidental man is seeking seriously to make up his deficiency on the side of wisdom. On the contrary, he is reaching out almost automatically for more and more power. If he succeeds in releasing the stores of energy that are locked up in the atom—and this seems to be the most recent ambition of our physicists—his final exploit may be to blow himself off the planet.<sup>24</sup>

Empty reassurances about mankind’s rationality and compassion would not avert catastrophe; foolishly, Babbitt continued, “We are told that our means of destruction are growing so terrible that no one will venture to use them—the same argument that was heard before the War.”<sup>25</sup> Obviously, something other than self-interest and sentiment were needed to preserve order among nations, especially when the costs of war had become so terrible. Both humanism and humanitarianism claimed to be able to limit war, but humanism looked past abstractions and mechanisms to address the condition of the human heart, the ultimate source of war and disorder.

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<sup>23</sup> “The Political Influence of Rousseau,” 70.

<sup>24</sup> *Democracy and Leadership*, 167.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-168.