



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on December 31, 2014

A Year of Anniversaries

2014 has been a year of anniversaries. It was the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War — a war which many at the time saw as madness, and predicted that it would be the harbinger of a Second World War a generation later.

2014 was also the 70th anniversary of the fateful landing at Normandy that marked the beginning of the end of World War II.

2014 was likewise the 60th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that marked the beginning of the end of racial segregation, the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and of the beginning of President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" programs.



Anniversaries are opportunities to look back at historic turning points, compare the rhetoric of the time with the reality that we now know unfolded — and to learn hard lessons about the difference between rhetoric and reality for our own time.

A hundred years ago, the President of the United States was Woodrow Wilson — the first president to openly claim that the Constitution of the United States was outdated, and that courts should erode the limits that the Constitution placed on the federal government.

Today, after a hundred years of courts' eroding the Constitution's protections of personal freedom, we now have a president who has taken us dangerously close to one-man rule, unilaterally changing laws passed by Congress and refusing to enforce other laws — on immigration especially.

Like Woodrow Wilson, our current president is charismatic, vain, narrow and headstrong. Someone said of Woodrow Wilson that he had no friends, only devoted slaves and enemies. That description comes all too close to describing Barack Obama, with his devoted political palace guard in the White House that he listens to, in contrast to the generals he ignores on military issues and the doctors he ignores on medical issues.

Both Wilson and Obama have been great phrase makers and crowd pleasers. We are still trying to cope with the havoc left in the wake of Woodrow Wilson's ringing phrase about "the self-determination of peoples."

First of all, it was never "self-determination." It was the arbitrary determination of the fate of millions of people in nations carved out of empires dismembered by the victors after the First World War. Neither the Irish in Britain nor the Germans in Bohemia were allowed to determine who would rule them. Nor was anybody in Africa.

The consequence of fragmenting large nations was the creation of small and vulnerable nations that Hitler was able to pick off, one by one, during the 1930s.



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Minorities who protested that they were being oppressed under the Austro-Hungarian Empire got their own nations, where their own oppression of other minorities was often worse than they had experienced in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

We are still trying to sort out the chaos in the Middle East growing out of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. How long it will take to sort out the havoc left behind by Barack Obama's foreign policies only the future will tell.

It should be noted that, after the charismatic Woodrow Wilson, none of the next three presidents was the least bit charismatic. Let us hope that the voters today have also learned how dangerous charisma and glib rhetoric can be — and what a childish self-indulgence it is to choose a president on the basis of symbolism. Woodrow Wilson was the first Southerner to be elected president since the Civil War, as Obama was to become the first black president. But neither fact qualified them to wield the enormous powers of the presidency. Nor will being the first woman president, the first Hispanic president or other such firsts.

Since 2014 has been the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty," we should note that this was another war that the Johnson administration lost. Both President Johnson and President John F. Kennedy before him said that the purpose of the "war on poverty" was to help people become self-supporting, to end dependency on government programs. But 50 years and trillions of dollars later, there is more dependency than ever.

Let's hope we have learned something from past debacles.

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