

Introduction

Woodrow Wilson was one of the country's most influential presidents. It was under Wilson that the Democratic Party began shifting more aggressively toward a reform-oriented agenda. He initiated social welfare programs that became the hallmark of the Democratic Party political agenda. Wilson's achievements were made possible by his skill in speaking directly to the people and his ability to form coalitions within Congress behind his various policy proposals. The most dramatic event of his presidency was, of course, World War I, and Wilson's position on the issue changed considerably during his time in office. He advocated neutrality during his first term, and ran on that achievement during his second election. When it became clear, however, that America could not avoid the violence in Europe, Wilson's administration essentially invented the American propaganda industry to promote the war effort. It was during and after the war that Wilson became the first chief executive to call for the organization of global governance, international agreements both military and economic that would, in theory, prevent anything like World War I from happening again.



Topics covered in this chapter include:

- Invasion of Haiti
- World War I
- Tariff reform
- League of Nations
- Presidential propaganda

This Chapter Discusses the Following Source Documents:

Message Regarding Tariff Duties, Woodrow Wilson, April 8, 1913

War Message to Congress, Woodrow Wilson, April 2, 1917

Fourteen Points, Woodrow Wilson, January 8, 1918



The Dawn of Internationalism

Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921)

President Woodrow Wilson is one of the most influential presidents in American history. During his presidency, the Democratic Party saw a major shift toward a reform-oriented platform, and Congress enacted one of the most significant economic programs to date. Wilson's presidency helped usher in a social welfare focus for the federal government, and he championed victories for the labor movement. Wilson was also the first president to put his full support behind the idea of collectivism on the world stage as a way to ensure world peace and to spread the perceptive benefits of American democracy. However, Wilson's era also saw the expansion of American imperialism with dramatic humanitarian impact. He authorized violations of civil liberties in wartime, and his prejudice prevented him from perceiving the social justice issues of his era.

Southern Progressivism

Thomas Woodrow Wilson, who later dropped the "Thomas" in favor of his middle name, was born in 1856 in Virginia, the son of a Presbyterian minister. A child during the Civil War, his family lived in Georgia and were southern sympathizers with his mother opening their home to Confederate soldiers. Wilson's racial views were apparent by his decision to screen *Birth of a Nation* at the White House. This film by David Mark Griffith portrays the Ku Klux Klan as heroes, and white actors dressed in blackface portray African Americans as sexually depraved criminals. It has been said that after the screening Wilson stated, "It's like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true."¹





Woodrow Wilson, by Harris & Ewing, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, via Wikimedia.

We the People

Although some historians have questioned the veracity of this quote, Wilson's racism has been documented in other ways, including his embracing eugenics, a false theory of white supremacy, and by turning a blind eye to segregation in the South. When he ran for office, he promised to support civil rights and campaigned for African American voters but did not follow through once in office. Wilson also allowed federal departments to be segregated, causing the removal of African Americans from their federal jobs.

Wilson attended the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University, and then entered the University of Virginia to study law. He set up his own practice in Atlanta before enrolling in Johns Hopkins University to pursue a doctorate in history and political science. Wilson's graduate research and PhD dissertation, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*, provide insights into his presidency. His research criticized the devolution of the presidency and the dominance of Congress in the wake of the Civil War and suggested that a system resembling the parliamentary systems of Europe might be more beneficial. In such systems, the leader of the majority party in the legislature also serves as head of government, which can, in principle, avoid situations where Congress and the presidency are paralyzed by a deadlock.

Wilson was a professor of politics and history at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, and then at Wesleyan University, where he received tenure before transferring to Princeton. During his teaching career, Wilson published more than 10 books, including political histories and biographies and scholarly examinations of major political issues. He became president of Princeton in 1902 and set upon modernizing the institution. This brought him to the attention of the New Jersey Democrats, who asked Wilson to consider running for governor in 1910. Wilson accepted and won, and immediately broke with the Democratic Party platform. He prohibited corporate political contributions, created a system forcing



candidates to disclose financial information, and set limits on political spending. Wilson also engaged in a robust system of labor reforms, passing a worker's compensation law to help families of workers killed or injured on the job, and created a public utility commission to set fair rates for utilities.²

Democratic Party luminary William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, one of the most important figures in the Democratic Party and American political history, is largely forgotten because he lost the presidential election three times. Bryan was a committed populist and championed the direct election of Senators and the income tax and was an early proponent of international law and governance. He is credited as a pioneer of Democratic liberalism and with helping to steer the Democratic Party toward a more progressive agenda. Impressed by Wilson's work as governor, Bryan was one of the Democratic Party leaders who promoted Wilson for the presidency.

Wilson ran on a platform focused largely on controlling big business. Whereas Roosevelt, running through his "Bull Moose Party," focused on eliminating perceptively bad trusts, Wilson believed that all trusts were malignant and that eliminating all corporate monopolies would allow free market forces to correct other issues. He positioned himself as a moderate progressive, forcing Roosevelt's progressives to adopt a more radical platform. In the lead-up to the election, Roosevelt threw his support behind women's suffrage, a minimum wage law for women, and establishing a national social security system and national health service. When the election came, many Republicans simply abstained, unwilling to vote for Roosevelt and realizing that Taft, the more conservative Republican candidate, had little chance. This was enough to give Wilson the advantage, and he won with 41.9 percent of the popular vote, while Roosevelt took 27.4 percent and Taft the remaining 23 percent. Wilson's victory was more convincing on the electoral level, claiming most of the states. Wilson was re-elected in 1916.³



The Reform Agenda

Wilson has been credited with initiating a new kind of activist presidency, by which the president acts as the advocate of the people. His study of parliamentary politics led him to believe that an effective head of government needed to form political coalitions within Congress, and this is how he approached setting his national agenda. Wilson spent considerable time meeting with members of Congress in groups and singly to build support for his national agenda, and his relationship with Congress was perhaps one of the strongest in history. For example, on April 8, 1913, Wilson appeared in a joint session of Congress to personally address the nation's legislators on the issue of tariff reform. This was the first time that a president had appeared before Congress for an address of this kind since John Adams.



MESSAGE REGARDING TARIFF DUTIES

Woodrow Wilson

April 8, 1913

Source Document Excerpt

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Gentlemen of the Congress:

I am very glad indeed to have this opportunity to address the two Houses directly and to verify for myself the impression that the President of the United States is a person, not a mere department of the Government hailing Congress from some isolated island of jealous power, sending messages, not speaking naturally and with his own voice—that he is a human being trying to cooperate with other human beings in a common service. After this pleasant experience I shall feel quite normal in all our dealings with one another.

I have called the Congress together in extraordinary session because a duty was laid upon the party now in power at the recent elections which it ought to perform promptly, in order that the burden carried by the people under existing law may be lightened as soon as possible and in order, also, that the business interests of the country may not be kept too long in suspense as to what the fiscal changes are to be to which they will be required to adjust themselves. It is clear to the whole country that the tariff duties must be altered. They must be changed to meet the radical alteration in the

conditions of our economic life which the country has witnessed within the last generation. While the whole face and method of our industrial and commercial life were being changed beyond recognition the tariff schedules have remained what they were before the change began, or have moved in the direction they were given when no large circumstance of our industrial development was what it is to-day. Our task is to square them with the actual facts. The sooner that is done the sooner we shall escape from suffering from the facts and the sooner our men of business will be free to thrive by the law of nature (the nature of free business) instead of by the law of legislation and artificial arrangement.

We have seen tariff legislation wander very far afield in our day—very far indeed from the field in which our prosperity might have had a normal growth and stimulation. No one who looks the facts squarely in the face or knows anything that lies beneath the surface of action can fail to perceive the principles upon which recent tariff legislation has been based. We long ago passed beyond the modest notion of “protecting” the industries of the country and moved boldly forward to the idea that they were entitled to the direct patronage of the Government.



continued

For a long time—a time so long that the men now active in public policy hardly remember the conditions that preceded it—we have sought in our tariff schedules to give each group of manufacturers or producers what they themselves thought that they needed in order to maintain a practically exclusive market as against the rest of the world. Consciously or unconsciously, we have built up a set of privileges and exemptions from competition behind which it was easy by any, even the crudest, forms of combination to organize monopoly; until at last nothing is normal, nothing is obliged to stand the tests of efficiency and economy, in our world of big business, but everything thrives by concerted arrangement. Only new principles of action will save us from a final hard crystallization of monopoly and a complete loss of the influences that quicken enterprise and keep independent energy alive.

It is plain what those principles must be. We must abolish everything that bears even the semblance of privilege or of any kind of artificial advantage, and put our business men and producers under the stimulation of a constant necessity to be efficient, economical, and enterprising, masters of competitive supremacy, better workers and merchants than any in the world. Aside from the duties laid upon articles which we do not, and probably cannot, produce, therefore, and the

duties laid upon luxuries and merely for the sake of the revenues they yield, the object of the tariff duties henceforth laid must be effective competition, the whetting of American wits by contest with the wits of the rest of the world.

It would be unwise to move toward this end headlong, with reckless haste, or with strokes that cut at the very roots of what has grown up amongst us by long process and at our own invitation. It does not alter a thing to upset it and break it and deprive it of a chance to change. It destroys it. We must make changes in our fiscal laws, in our fiscal system, whose object is development, a more free and wholesome development, not revolution or upset or confusion. We must build up trade, especially foreign trade. We need the outlet and the enlarged field of energy more than we ever did before. We must build up industry as well, and must adopt freedom in the place of artificial stimulation only so far as it will build, not pull down. In dealing with the tariff the method by which this may be done will be a matter of judgment, exercised item by item. To some not accustomed to the excitements and responsibilities of greater freedom our methods may in some respects and at some points seem heroic, but remedies may be heroic and yet be remedies. It is our business to make sure that they are genuine remedies. Our object is clear. If our motive is above just challenge and only an occasional error of judgment

We the People

Message Regarding Tariff Duties continued

is chargeable against us, we shall be fortunate.

We are called upon to render the country a great service in more matters than one. Our responsibility should be met and our methods should be thorough, as thorough as moderate and well considered, based upon the facts as they are, and not worked out as if we were beginners. We are to deal with the facts of our own day, with the facts of no other, and to make laws which square with those facts. It is best, indeed it is necessary, to begin with the tariff. I will urge nothing upon you now at the opening of your session which can obscure that first object or

divert our energies from that clearly defined duty. At a later time I may take the liberty of calling your attention to reforms which should press close upon the heels of the tariff changes, if not accompany them, of which the chief is the reform of our banking and currency laws; but just now I refrain. For the present, I put these matters on one side and think only of this one thing—of the changes in our fiscal system which may best serve to open once more the free channels of prosperity to a great people whom we would serve to the utmost and throughout both rank and file.

I thank you for your courtesy.⁴

Wilson's approach to Congress was strategic. His speech drew more media attention than usual because of the novelty, introducing a greater share of the public to Wilson's personal view on tariffs, one of the most controversial economic issues of the era. This was the kind of campaign that a prime minister might run, and it successfully created a cooperative coalition with the legislature while simultaneously promoting his position directly to the people. Legislators who opposed him, therefore, risked appearing to oppose what Wilson cleverly positioned as a fight for the common benefit to eliminate the unfair advantages of wealth.

Utilizing this unique strategy, the Wilson administration's economic reforms were sweeping. Congress created the Federal Reserve and empowered it to control interest rates, which ranks as one of the greatest economic changes in the nation's history. Wilson's administration also



aggressively promoted federal oversight to eliminate unfair business practices, resulting in the creation of a new federal Department of Labor, in March of 1913. His administration also saw the establishment of eight-hour workdays in the industrial sector, and he campaigned against child labor. Wilson's efforts at economic reform were significant and far-reaching.⁵

Wilson and the World

On the global stage, Wilson and Secretary of State Bryan pursued an agenda to promote democracy on a global scale. Through speeches and writings, Wilson and Bryan promoted a new era of peaceful negotiations between nations and international collectivism. In practice, however, the approach had mixed results.

Wilson avoided certain conflicts and followed through on a promise to set the Philippines on a path to independence. He successfully avoided war with Mexico after Mexican forces clashed with American forces near the border, negotiating an end to the conflict, though American troops remained in case the conflict escalated. These comparative successes clash with Wilson's handling of revolutionary conflict in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. These revolutionary movements weakened established governments, and Wilson rapidly authorized occupation. In Haiti, Wilson sent U.S. Marines partly to keep peace after the assassination of President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam and partly to prevent Germany from capturing Haiti and its strategic naval position. Haiti remained under U.S. control until the 1930s and the Dominican Republic until the 1920s. Though ostensibly acting as peacekeepers in the tradition of Roosevelt's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, in both cases the United States asserted its own interests while undermining native freedom and self-determination. In Haiti, for example, U.S. agents manipulated elections to create a pro-American government, introduced racial segregation, censored the media, and created forced labor camps for political rebels.⁶



The most dramatic foreign affairs issue of Wilson's two terms in the White House was World War I. When war broke out in Europe, Wilson promised that he would keep America neutral. This was still Wilson's position in 1916, when he ran for re-election, with supporters touting that Wilson had kept America out of the war. Wilson was committed to peace on a personal level, but it is also true that neutrality was a financial benefit to American businesses who supported neutrality because it allowed them to sell supplies to both sides in the conflict. In fact, U.S. companies continued selling arms to Germany and the other central powers until just before America joined the war.

Politically, neutrality was a prudent course for Wilson because the diverse origins of the American people meant that they were conflicted about the war. Many Americans of German descent supported neutrality because they believed that German aggression was justified. By contrast, many Americans of British descent actively promoted intervention, wanting America to help Britain stand up to Germany's imperialist expansion. The U.S. press was undecided on the issue as well. While some journalists and publications clearly advocated for neutrality or intervention, much of the coverage was detached. As late as 1916, for instance, the *New York Times* published a friendly interview with a German U-Boat captain who visited the U.S. coast to gather supplies.⁷

When German submarines torpedoed the British ship *Lusitania* near the coast of Ireland in 1915, resulting in the death of 128 American soldiers, it marked the beginning of the end of American neutrality. Wilson warned Germany to allow safe passage of merchant ships and Germany refused, forcing Wilson into an uncomfortable position. In 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare war. His message to Congress on April 2, 1917, famously set the stage for modern military diplomacy in Wilson's stated belief that America should function so as to make the world "safe for democracy":



WAR MESSAGE TO CONGRESS

Woodrow Wilson

April 2, 1917

Source Document Excerpt

I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices of policy to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making. On the 3d of February last, I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German Government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel that sought to approach either the ports of Great Britain and Ireland or the western coasts of Europe or any of the ports controlled by the enemies of Germany within the Mediterranean.

...

The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters

in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.

When I addressed the Congress on the 26th of February last, I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence. But armed neutrality, it now appears, is impracticable. Because submarines are in effect outlaws when used as the German submarines have been used against merchant shipping, it is impossible to defend ships against their attacks as the law of nations has assumed that merchantmen would defend themselves against privateers or cruisers, visible craft giving chase upon the open sea.



War Message to Congress continued

It is common prudence in such circumstances, grim necessity indeed, to endeavor to destroy them before they have shown their own intention. They must be dealt with upon sight, if dealt with at all. The German Government denies the right of neutrals to use arms at all within the areas of the sea which it has proscribed, even in the defense of rights which no modern publicist has ever before questioned their right to defend. The intimation is conveyed that the armed guards which we have placed on our merchant ships will be treated as beyond the pale of law and subject to be dealt with as pirates would be. Armed neutrality is ineffectual enough at best; in such circumstances and in the face of such pretensions it is worse than ineffectual; it is likely only to produce what it was meant to prevent; it is practically certain to draw us into the war without either the rights or the effectiveness of belligerents. There is one choice we can not make, we are incapable of making: we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.

With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in

unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States; that it formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it, and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defense but also to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the government of the German Empire to terms and end the war.

...

While we do these things, these deeply momentous things, let us be very clear, and make very clear to all the world what our motives and our objects are. My own thought has not been driven from its habitual and normal course by the unhappy events of the last two months, and I do not believe that the thought of the nation has been altered or clouded by them. I have exactly the same things in mind now that I had in mind when I addressed the Senate on the 22d of January last; the same that I had in mind when I addressed the Congress on the 3d of February and on the 26th of February. Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against



continued

selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth ensure the observance of those principles. Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances. We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.

...

We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a government, following such methods, we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to

accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic governments of the world. We are now about to accept [the] gage [the challenge] of battle with this natural foe to liberty and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power. We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience.

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.⁸

We the People

American intervention in the war shifted the tide, gave a serious advantage to the allies, and resulted in the defeat of Germany and the central powers. When the war ended, Wilson was set to lead the peace negotiations and delivered a now famous speech in Congress on January 8, 1918, calling for a “new diplomacy” to govern American foreign affairs:

FOURTEEN POINTS

Woodrow Wilson

January 8, 1918

Source Document Excerpt

It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for moment to upset the peace of the world. It is this happy fact, now clear to the view of every public man whose thoughts do not still linger in an age that is dead and gone, which makes it possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view.

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once for all against their

recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The programme of the world's peace, therefore, is our programme; and that programme, the only possible programme, as we see it, is this:

I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.



continued

II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.

V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of

her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.

VII. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

VIII. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.



Fourteen Points continued

IX. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

X. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development.

XI. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.

XII. The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.

XIII. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end.

For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this programme does remove. We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this



continued

programme that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade if

she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing. We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world,—the new world in which we now live,—instead of a place of mastery.⁹

The importance of Wilson's "fourteen points" cannot be overstated as the beginning of international government, a movement that resulted in the establishment of the United Nations (UN). Wilson proposed a similar organization, the League of Nations, which would accept membership of all democratic states and would lead the effort to disarm global offensive militaries and to end global colonialism. Wilson's perception of the Civil War may have informed his approach to the peace that would end the First World War. He believed, as many southern Americans did, that the punitive treatment of the South after the Civil War was morally flawed. In place of punishing the people of the central power states, Wilson promoted "peace without victory," the idea of moving ahead, forgiving the offenses of the war, and working toward building a coalition to promote peace and prevent future wars.

However noble the idea of the League of Nations might have been, it was unrealistic. Prejudice and self-interest dominated government and ultimately, most of Wilson's fourteen points were abandoned in the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles. Back home, Wilson faced a Republican majority in the Senate, many of whom were committed to isolationism and believed that deeper involvement in foreign affairs would hurt American independence and economic freedom. Wilson tried



to bypass Congress by taking his ideas directly to the American people in an ambitious tour that involved speeches in 29 cities, the exertion of which contributed to his declining health. In Colorado, on September 25, Wilson suffered a major stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He returned to Washington essentially immobilized and remained that way for the rest of his term.

Opponents in Congress won, and the United States did not join the League of Nations. Historians have wondered what might have occurred if Wilson's vision of the League of Nations became a reality—would a robust international government have been able to forestall the Second World War? It is likely that the more ameliorative conditions favored by Wilson would have left the former central powers nations in better economic condition and thus prevented the rise of militant nationalism in Germany and Russia.

Writing for the CATO think tank in 2014, historian Jim Powell suggested that Wilson's greatest mistake was entering the war in the first place. Had this not happened, Powell believes there would likely have been a negotiated settlement. With America's participation, however, the central powers were thoroughly crushed, and vengeful politicians proceeded to disadvantage aggressor nations to the point that radicalism emerged again, in the form of the Nazi Party, resulting in the Second World War.¹⁰



America's First Woman President

During his second term Wilson shifted his political stance on the topic of women's suffrage and promoted passing the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote. Though Wilson, therefore, occupies an important position in the history of women's rights, the decision to support suffrage was a practical political decision based on the fact that Wilson was attempting to convince the nation that intervention in the war was the best course for the nation. He was facing considerable resistance, and his efforts were further diminished by the increasingly radical protests of women's suffrage activists. The women's suffrage movement, which began in the 1840s, had reached a new stage in which a new generation of women activists, frustrated by years of little political gain, decided to try new tactics. These included the first protest in front of the White House, and eventually months-long protests at the White House and other demonstrations of civil disobedience. Wilson promoted women's suffrage to end this very visible new wave of opposition to his presidency, and thus it was the radical activists of the women's rights movement who turned the tide of history, demonstrating popular power to influence the president.

Wilson's presidency was a landmark moment in women's history in a darker, more tragic sense as well. After he suffered his stroke in 1919, Wilson was confined to his bed. At the time, his wife, Edith Bolling Galt, maintained that her husband was still well enough to make important decisions and that she would act as his secretary, an intermediary between Wilson and his cabinet and between the executive and Congress. The public and most government representatives never learned how disabled Wilson was or the degree to which his physical and mental faculties remained intact. Even when Edith Wilson later wrote her autobiography in 1938, she maintained that she was simply a messenger delivering Wilson's directives to the nation. Historians, however, have found that this was not the case. In fact, rather than acting in a secretarial capacity, Edith Wilson made most if not all executive decisions between her husband's stroke in 1919 and the end of his second term, in 1921, on her own. She was, in effect, president of the United States for the remainder of her husband's time in office. Though Edith Wilson wasn't forced to make any major executive decisions during this time, she did on



America's First Woman President *continued*

occasion exercise authority. One of the most notable examples came when the Secretary of State conducted a cabinet meeting without Wilson's approval. Edith Wilson called this a breach of duty and had him removed from his position.

It would be many years until a woman would be considered for the role of chief executive, but Edith Wilson, in secret, occupied the office for more than a year and was, unbeknownst to nearly everyone, the most powerful woman in the nation for a brief moment in history.^a

Works Used

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Edith Galt holding a document steady for Woodrow Wilson to sign. Historians believe that she took over all of Wilson's executive duties after his stroke. By Harris & Ewing, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, via Wikimedia.

We the People

The Power of Information

While Woodrow Wilson has been given ample credit for his progressive economic policies and forward-thinking views on globalism, his use of presidential power was somewhat controversial. To gain public support for American intervention in the war, Wilson enlisted the help of George Creel, a writer for the tabloid press. Creel was the early-twentieth-century equivalent of a writer for Breitbart or InfoWars, crafting what we call “fake news” today. Wilson and Creel created the Committee on Public Information, ostensibly to disseminate information about the war effort, but which was essentially America’s first federal propaganda department.¹¹

The committee created posters, handouts, newspaper and magazine articles, and funded propaganda films by some of the nation’s most prominent filmmakers. The committee trained actors to pose as citizens, striking up conversations with other citizens to deliver scripted stories to inspire patriotic interest in American intervention. The committee hired fiction writers to craft novels and short stories demonstrating virtues of Americanism and evils of German imperialism. Posters featured illustrations of Germans as monstrous creatures, and fabricated stories told of enemy soldiers raping and murdering women and children. The 2016 allegations linking Hillary Clinton to a child sex trafficking ring is a modern example of this technique.

Wilson’s propaganda machine did successfully increase public support for American intervention but also encouraged prejudice and violence. Some states passed laws prohibiting Americans from speaking foreign languages or banning the playing of German music, including Bach or Beethoven. Libraries burned books by German authors or by Americans of German descent. People with Germanic-sounding names were often attacked and even killed. In one instance, German immigrant Robert Paul Prager was hanged by an angry mob in Missouri after being forced to march down the street while draped in the American flag and singing patriotic songs.¹²



Creel and his propagandists attacked the American socialist and communist movements as well, portraying them as un-American and cowardly subversives plotting to undermine the government. This led to widespread police oppression of socialists and communists and, in some cases, to mob violence. The Wilson administration passed the Espionage and Sedition Acts, which made it illegal to criticize the government or the war effort under penalty of imprisonment or hefty fines. Further, Wilson directed the Post Office to censor the public mail, leading to hundreds of publications being banned or not distributed.¹³

With the aid of propagandists, the legislature, and the courts, Wilson dramatically curtailed First Amendment rights, leading to widespread persecution and governmental oppression. Wilson's efforts raise questions about the use of presidential authority. Is it acceptable for a president, or any other elected representative of the people, to purposefully encourage bigotry and violence? Should an elected representative be limited to promoting accurate information to the public, or is it permissible to use questionable methods to accomplish political goals? On a more fundamental level, does the power temporarily afforded to a president or other leader, but ultimately residing with the people, include the power to mislead the people?

Whether a president should be allowed to misinform the public is, again, in the news with the presidency of Donald Trump, who has frequently put forward false claims designed to promote the idea that he is a successful and beloved leader or to downplay criticism. Trump's critics argue that this damages public trust and undermines public welfare. Trump's frequent use of false information has engendered widespread opposition to his presidency and has caused him to be faced with record levels of criticism. Wilson suffered little of this during his time in office. The relative paucity of reliable information and the authoritarian tactics taken by Wilson's regime meant that Wilson was more or less unopposed. The fact



that Trump has been unable to achieve similar levels of success reflects the fact that Trump does not have Wilson's public appeal or Wilson's capability to form effective congressional coalitions. Further, today, Americans have greater access to information, and many view the government skeptically. Nonetheless, governmental use of propaganda remains controversial, and historians have suggested that Wilson's complicity detracts from his legacy.



CONCLUSION

While Wilson's accomplishments were significant, much of what he hoped to achieve, with the League of Nations and his view for America's place on the world stage, did not come to pass. In looking back on his presidency, there are several areas in which Wilson's performance raises questions about presidential power. First, Wilson's propaganda machine raises questions about whether it is appropriate for a president to willfully misinform the populace. Second, the fact that Wilson withheld from the American people his debilitating injury, with his wife essentially serving as his stand-in for months of his presidency, raises questions about whether a president has the right to withhold vital information about his or her health that might impact their effectiveness in office. On the domestic stage, Wilson began a change in Democratic Party politics that ultimately saw the Democratic Party become the more progressive, humanitarian party in American politics. This left the Republicans to become the more conservative, business-oriented party, as shown by the discussion of Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover in the next chapter.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Did Wilson's propaganda department violate presidential power? Why or why not?
- ◆ Are Wilson's "Fourteen Points" still relevant today?
- ◆ Was the Wilson Administration justified in its occupation of Haiti? Why or why not?
- ◆ Does Wilson's racial prejudice detract from his legacy? Why or why not?

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