

100 YEARS ON!

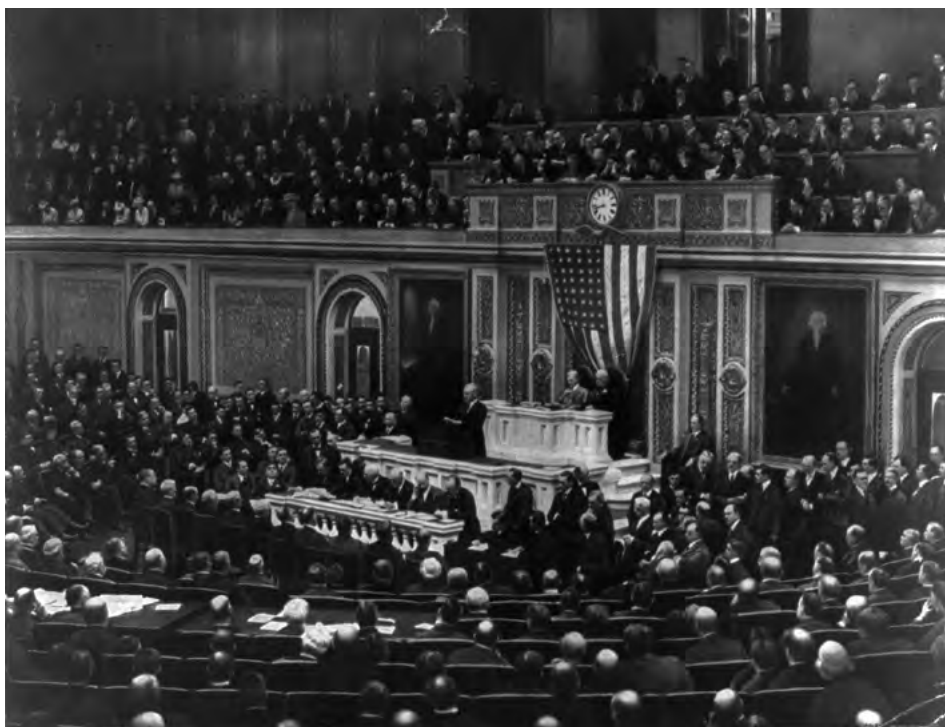
'The World's Peace' - Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points

On January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson delivered his famous fourteen points to a joint session of Congress setting out his plans for peace and reform of a world broken by war. The United States had entered the conflict the previous April as an 'Associate' power and now the president was keen to set out his nation's blueprint that he hoped would define the terms of the coming peace negotiations. For Wilson, it was evident that the current system of world order had allowed small conflicts to spiral out of control with devastating results. He saw an epochal struggle between the forces of the past and future. A new order based both in idealism and practical politics would be necessary to replace the old system of imperialism and balance of power if humanity was ever to avoid a repeat of the tragic war. The ideas Wilson put forward that January day were not new, indeed only a few days previously, the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, had expressed many of the same ideas on lasting peace, self-determination, arms limitation and a league of nations in his speech at Caxton Hall. Nevertheless, posterity far better recalls Wilson's speech. Timing and specificity to the problems at hand, not novelty, gave it immediate significance. Yet the Fourteen Points have reverberated in the years since as a key moment in the history of United States internationalism and the birth of a Wilsonian foreign policy tradition.



President Woodrow Wilson in 1918 (Library of Congress).

It is difficult to discuss Wilson's speech without first saying a little about the twenty-eighth president who held office from 1913 to 1921. He was born in Staunton, Virginia in 1856 and so was a southerner with all that entailed for his racial beliefs. Perhaps his first defining memories were of the defeated Confederate soldiers returning from the Civil War and the great 'lost cause.' He was also a deeply religious and moral man. His father and grandfather were Presbyterian ministers



President Wilson requests a declaration of war from Congress, 2 April 1917 (Library of Congress)

and his family expected him to follow them into the ministry. Whilst he did not quite have a messiah complex, he was convinced that he, and the United States, were working out God's plan on earth. A belief evident in the detached, morally superior attitude he adopted towards the war in Europe and the belligerents.

As it happened, Wilson chose a different path by completing his PhD in History and Political Science and then pursuing an academic career that saw him rise to be president of Princeton. After a number of internal academic battles and frustrations at the institution, Wilson felt called to enter the world he had only written about as a Democratic politician. After a brief stint as a reforming Governor of New Jersey in 1910, his meteoric political rise continued when he won the 1912 presidential election against a badly divided Republican Party. The Wilson who entered the White House in 1913 was an enigmatic, intellectual man who would rather focus on domestic policy and once even said 'it would be an irony of fate' if his administration dealt chiefly with foreign affairs. Such was the fate that also befell the other two great reforming Democratic presidents of the twentieth century, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon D. Johnson.

Wilson expressed his inner idealism during the early years of his administration. In a speech at Mobile, Alabama in October 1913, he had renounced further overt US imperialism (that his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt had been so keen on).⁽¹⁾ He also famously sought to teach the Mexicans to 'elect good men' in 1916 and had even talked about a 'league of nations' in the abstract many times (both as a domestic idea,

a hemispheric idea with the Pan American League and as a source of European peace at the suggestion of British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey). All struck a chord with his support among domestic progressives and the political left in the US and reached its apotheosis in his 'peace without victory' speech of 22 January 1917 with its critique of European imperialism, militarism and balance of power politics and his call to make the world 'safe for democracy' in April of the same year.⁽²⁾ The transition to war for the US in 1917 only heightened the need for a statement of some kind on war aims and this increased as the year progressed. The US had entered the war as an 'Associate' power to avoid long-standing European Great Power tensions and unlink the war from nationalistic disputes and ambitions. Only a unilateral declaration of aims would differentiate the US from allied nations.

As the war in Europe dragged on, there was a decline in allied morale and so a clear statement of American aims might serve to bolster their nerve and undermine German support for the war. More particularly, there was despondency towards the war among the political left in the US and Europe following the fall of Russian government to the Bolsheviks in November 1917 and the subsequent disclosure of secret allied treaties that illuminated questionable Allied diplomatic practices. The Sykes-Picot of 16 May 1916 had aimed to divide-up southwestern Asia among the Allies. The Treaty of London 26 April 1915 between Triple Entente and Italy promised large swathes of territory to the north of Italy and across Adriatic along with funding from the British in return for Italy joining the war.

- 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... This was a direct appeal to Soviet Russia and attempt to keep them in the war.
- VII.** Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty. The original reason Britain had gone to war and a red line for the Allies.
- 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.
- IX.** A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.
- X.** The peoples of Austria-Hungary... 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;
- 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...
- 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.⁽³⁾

While the Constantinople Agreement of 18 March 1915 promised Constantinople and Dardanelles to Russia in the event of an Allied victory. A firm statement of ideals and moral direction by the US president might therefore rally a disenchanted political left back to the cause.

The Bolshevik revolution in Russia also provided a more direct stimulation for Wilson to make a statement of war aims. The US and the Allies needed a persuasive response to the Bolshevik's charges that both sides were sacrificing their people to capitalism and imperialism in a seemingly unstoppable carnage. Lenin's 'Decree on Peace' of 8 November 1917 proposed an immediate Russian withdrawal from the war threatening to undermine the Allied war effort. A statement of aims by Wilson might therefore counteract this and keep Russia in the war by convincing Bolsheviks they would receive a much better peace from Allies.

It was against this background that Wilson's speech of 8 January 1918 set out suggested guidelines for both a practical settlement of territorial questions in Europe and Middle East and his idealistic principles for maintaining world peace in the future.

Practical Politics

Despite Wilson's reputation for idealism, it is surprising that some eight of his fourteen points actually deal with specific territorial disputes. The complex arguments of Europe over land meant that Wilson had no choice but to practice a degree of power politics. To guide him, Wilson set up a team of 150 advisers known as 'the Inquiry' in September 1917, led by his close political aide Colonel Edward M. House. Their job was to anticipate the questions that would arise at the peace conference. House was a 'southern Colonel' from Texas with no military service but a good deal of experience as an influential state politician who had hitched a ride on Wilson's rising political star and helped shape his presidency. [Photo 3 Here] The Inquiry was stuffed full of other eminent intellectual talent such as Walter Lippmann (later famous as a journalist and commentator) Isaiah Bowman, Sidney Mezes and David Hunter



Wilson's close advisor, Colonel Edward M. House
(Library of Congress)

Miller to help advise on a broad range of issues. As a mark of its importance to Wilson, twenty-one of the Inquiry went on to join the American Commission that travelled to Paris with the President in 1919.

Wilson tasked the Inquiry to look at Allied intentions, including the recently exposed secret treaties, and sort out what the Americans could support in the peace to remove the poison from the entangled situation and what would be intolerable for them. The eventual 2000 reports and over 1200 maps generated by the Inquiry eventually boiled down to eight points in Wilson's final speech.

Idealism

Intervention in the war transformed Wilson's idealism into a war aim because he took many of his domestic progressive policies and translated them into an approach to international relations. The first five and fourteenth point were therefore the beating heart of his proposals. The Europeans, Prime Ministers Georges Clemenceau, David Lloyd George and Vittorio Orlando were sceptical of his approach. Wilson made his speech without any prior consultation of the Allies and Clemenceau famously scoffed on reading the Fourteen Points that the 'Good Lord had only ten!' [Photo 4 Here]

Wilson struck at what he saw as the systemic causes of the present war and, by implication, at much of what the Allies accepted as international diplomacy. Point I on open covenants was a clear stab at the secret treaties of the Allies that had been so controversial. Point II covering freedom of the seas took a swipe at the British blockade that had been their major war strategy to starve Germany to defeat. Some historians have seen Point III's call for the removal of economic barriers as a sinister dark side to Wilson's internationalism. They argue for an economically driven policy to increasingly dominate and control access to markets and raw materials in the world economy.⁽⁴⁾ Point IV's disarmament appeared an obvious route to peace through the avoidance of the dangerous arms races that had occurred prior to the war.

Point V's call for self-determination of peoples would ultimately prove one of the two key pillars of a Wilsonian worldview in

- 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
- 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.
- 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.⁽⁵⁾



The Big Four at Paris - left to right Orlando, Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Wilson (Library of Congress)

the years to come. Peoples allowed to choose their own destiny would operate a democratic control on autocracy by never consenting to their leaders spending blood and treasure on wars with other democratic nations. While the intended result would be a more peaceful world, Wilson clearly only meant it to refer to European nations. This was no wider anti-imperial scheme in Wilson's mind at this time and he famously refused to grant a young Ho Chi Minh an audience after he travelled to Versailles to plead Indochina's case to the inspiring American president. Point XIV provides the other famous pillar of the Wilsonian outlook. A collective security organisation via the League of Nations would bring an end to balance of power diplomacy and spheres of influence. Nations would instead pool their sovereignty (though Wilson never fully specified how) in a transnational organisation to guarantee and protect everything else detailed in the speech.

Legacy of the Fourteen Points

With hindsight, we know Wilson's idealistic scheme was doomed to failure. By mid-1918 Allied leaders were girding up to fight their corner in the coming diplomatic struggles while in the US, isolationist and nationalist opposition to Wilson's scheme was growing. Colonel House worked hard to get the recalcitrant Allied leaders to accept the Fourteen Points as the basis for peace negotiations. France and Italy did so finally on 1 November 1918 while Britain eventually signed off on them all except on freedom of the seas. Wilson realised the limitations of his power over the Allies now looking to protect their own positions and guarantee their future security. He was therefore prepared to sacrifice much of what he had set out in his Fourteen Points in diplomatic horse-trading to secure the project dearest to his heart, the League of Nations.

The eventual Treaty of Versailles placed war guilt squarely with the Germans in Article 231. It also initially called for 269

billion marks of reparations eventually reduced to 192 billion in 1921. A decision John Maynard Keynes famously damned in his book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* for virtually guaranteeing another European war. The Treaty also further limited Germany by denying them an air force and limiting their army to 100,000 men. Attempts to resolve the intractable territorial disputes with Polish corridors, demilitarised zones on the French borders and even the creation of states such as Czechoslovakia failed to solve the deep-seated territorial tensions permanently. The victorious Allies also shared out the colonies of the defeated powers under the euphemism of 'mandates' in trust for the League of Nations. The Europeans had clearly sidestepped Wilson's notion of 'peace without victory' and to some had duped a naïve Wilson.

Much to Wilson's regret, the US did not join the League of Nations and so his grand scheme never received its keystone. Isolationist and political opposition coalesced around the Republican Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Henry Cabot Lodge who made it his personal mission to halt Wilson's idealism. The President's unwillingness to broker a deal and, some argue, his poor health also contributed to the defeat. US membership of the League came up twice for consideration by American legislators who dismissed it in November 1919 and again in March 1920. By that time, Wilson had suffered a collapse and serious stroke and he remained a distant and detached invalided figure in the White House until he left office the following year.

Wilson's scheme set out in his speech of January 1918 did not die. It survived in modified form after a revival by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940s with the United Nations (though with a Security Council with five permanent members as a concession to balance of power diplomacy). Historians have since traced many strands of what they call a 'Wilsonian' foreign policy emanating

from the US.⁽⁶⁾ In a string of interventions since World War II, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Americans have used a language of idealism rather than pragmatism to justify their involvement in the world. One hundred years from its first promulgation, the visible hand of Wilson is still there to varying degrees in claims to be defending self-determination and democracy in a pluralistic world that still refuses to conform to American ideals.

Graham Cross

Lecturer in American History, Manchester Metropolitan University

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- (4) See N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics – America's Response to War and Revolution* (Oxford, 1968).
- (5) Woodrow Wilson: 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress on the Conditions of Peace, January 8, 1918' Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65405>.
- (6) See Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century – U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1900* (Chicago, 1999) and Tony Smith, *America's Mission – The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton, 1994).