

Fourteen Points for Peace (1918)

Woodrow Wilson

Historical Background

After the Spanish-American War in 1898, Americans largely reverted to a belief in isolationism, meaning that the United States should avoid what George Washington called “passionate attachments to,” and Thomas Jefferson called “entangling alliances with” other nations. When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the majority of congress and the American public thought America should stay neutral, although France and England were requesting American intervention against Germany. President Woodrow Wilson, through diplomacy and economic measures, kept America out of the war, and he was reelected in 1916 by promising “Peace and Prosperity.” In 1917, however, British intelligence discovered a coded telegram that told of German plans to ally with Mexico and attack the US – a direct threat. Moreover, German submarines called U-boats began unrestricted attacks on American ships. The US declared war on Germany and her allies, and mounted a large-scale military intervention. Wilson, calling it “the war to end all wars,” hoped that this war would “make the world safe for democracy,” and that world peace could be achieved. In 1918, after reviewing reports from a group of political and economic experts in world policy, he crafted a plan for peace. In January of 1918, he delivered his speech to congress, outlining fourteen specific points that he believed should govern negotiations at the Versailles peace conference.

Historical Significance

Wilson’s stated goal both in going to war and in entering into peace negotiations was unprecedented: to establish a lasting world peace. Wilson hoped that the days of wars fought for territorial expansion and empire could be ended once and for all, and he felt morally bound to place the United States in a leadership role to achieve this. By providing support to France, England, and their allies, he hoped to win the war, dismantle the remaining European empires, welcome Germany back into the family of nations as an equal partner, and create a world where self-determined nations would embrace peaceful relationships with each other on a basis of mutual respect. Although few of his ideas ultimately prevailed at the Versailles peace conference, he was successful in establishing the League of Nations, and although his efforts to persuade the United States to join the league and to remain actively engaged in international affairs were unsuccessful in the short run, his principles did guide the subsequent creation of the United Nations and have had a powerful influence on American foreign policy since World War II.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: National Self-Determination, freedom of the seas, free trade, collective security, League of Nations.

At the conclusion of this unit, students will be able to

- state Wilson’s argument for national self-determination and against empire;
- describe Wilson’s vision of the role the United States should play in international affairs as the world’s leading democracy;
- identify the key components of Wilson’s vision of international affairs, including open dealings between nations, freedom of the seas, free trade, and disarmament;
- identify the intended purpose and character of the League of Nations.

Questions to Explore

Did Wilson have the right to create this plan? Why or why not?

Does Wilson’s plan seem realistic? What potential problems can you identify in it? What are some of the most powerful political forces that Wilson’s ideas would have to contend against?

What are some of the possible advantages and disadvantages of open negotiations? Of free trade? Of international organizations for resolving disputes?

In article 6, Wilson argues that Russia should be allowed “an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development.” What was going on in Russia in 1918? Is there a tension between Wilson’s call for national self-determination for all peoples and his attachment to democracy? Why do you think he did not say that Russia should become a democracy? What are the potential costs and benefits of this choice? Should we follow it today?

In the final paragraph, Wilson denies any intention of hurting Germany. Why did many people think in 1918 that Germany should be harmed? Who was right?