

Woodrow Wilson and Wilsonianism

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Introduction:

Very few leaders get an “-ism” attached to their name. The phrase “Wilsonianism” emerged toward the end of Wilson’s presidency (1913-1921) and rose in popularity during the early Cold War. By the 1950s, Wilsonianism had come to refer to U.S. foreign policies that pursued the spread of democracy and internationalism (cooperation between nations through organizations like the League of Nations or the United Nations). The actual policies of Wilson were more complicated than this two-fold emphasis on democracy and internationalism. As you read the timeline and the two primary sources, think about these questions:

1. To what extent did Wilson’s actual words and actions conform to the common definition of “Wilsonianism”? Is there a more accurate definition of Wilsonianism we should use instead?

2. How did Wilson continue earlier patterns of thought and action in U.S. international relations? What new features did he introduce?

Timeline:

1913: Wilson, a native of Virginia and a Democrat, entered the White House after serving as governor of New Jersey and earlier as president of Princeton University. Among his administration’s first major acts was the introduction of **Jim Crow segregation** in federal office buildings, which had earlier been integrated.

1914-1917: Under Wilson, the United States intervened politically and militarily in the Mexican Revolution to limit radical movements in Mexico. That revolution had started in 1911 with the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz, a dictator who supported the development of business ties between Mexico and the United States.

1914 (June): **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**, the heir to the empire of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated in Sarajevo (now the capital of **Bosnia**). His assassin was a Serbian nationalist, seeking to take Bosnia from Austro-Hungarian rule and add it to the nation of **Serbia**.

1914 (July/August): Start of the war: Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia. Russia came to the defense of Serbia, a fellow Slavic nation. As part of its alliance with Austria-Hungary, Germany declared war on Russia and France. Soon the United Kingdom (Britain) entered the war on the side of its allies, Russian and France.

1914 (August): Wilson called on Americans to remain neutral during the war. At the time, almost nine million Americans had **German and Austrian roots**. Another five million Americans had **Irish heritage**. The Irish traditionally disliked Britain because of Britain’s colonial rule over Ireland. At the same time, larger numbers of Americans whose families had been living longer in the United States, like Wilson himself, identified strongly with Britain.

1915: Britain established a **naval blockade** on Germany, restricting the ability of the United States and other neutral nations to trade with Germany. This blockade was a violation of international laws of the time. Germany responded by using submarines (**U-Boats**) to sink civilian ships carrying supplies to Britain, also a violation of international law.

1915 (May): A German submarine sank the British civilian ship **Lusitania**. Over 1,100 died, including 128 U.S. passengers. Although a civilian ship, the *Lusitania* was carrying military supplies from New York to Britain.

1916: Wilson and Congress passed legislation to increase the U.S. Army, Navy, and National Guard. To pay for the bills, Congress passed a **new income tax**, which at first affected only wealthy citizens, and an estate tax, as well as new corporate taxes.

1916: By this point in the war, **U.S. bankers** had loaned \$2.5 billion to Allied Powers, mainly to Britain. In contrast, U.S. bankers had loaned only \$250 million to the Central Powers such as Germany and Austria-Hungary.

1916 (November): Wilson won reelection to the White House using the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.”

1917 (17 January): The **Zimmerman Telegram** from Germany to the German Embassy in Mexico. After Britain intercepted this telegram, Wilson learned of it in February 1917. The telegram described German hopes that Mexico would enter the war on the side of Germany.

1917 (31 January): Suffering under the British blockade, Germany declared a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare that targeted any armed vessel, whether neutral or enemy.

1917 (March): A German submarine sank a U.S. merchant ship, the *Algonquin*.

1917 (March): Russian Czar Nicholas II lost power as the **Russian Revolution** began.

1917 (April): At Wilson's urging, Congress declared war against Germany. The vote was 373 to 50 in the House and 82 to 6 in the Senate.

1917 (November): The Bolsheviks (Russian Communists) took control in the Russian Revolution. This new **Bolshevik Revolution** transformed Russia into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (**USSR**). The Bolsheviks, weary of a war that was unpopular with the Russian people, negotiated a separate peace with Germany and pulled out of the Allied war effort in March 1918. The Bolsheviks then attempted to consolidate control over the Russian Empire, where many anti-Bolshevik forces still operated.

1917-1918: **U.S. Military Action in World War I**: U.S. troops fought in France from June 1917 until the end of the war in November 1918. U.S. battle deaths numbered 53,000. The battle deaths for other nations were much greater: Germany 1.8 million, Russia 1.7 million, France 1.4 million, Austria-Hungary 1.2 million, and Britain 1 million.

1918 (January) Wilson issued his **Fourteen Points** to Congress, outlining his vision for the postwar world.

1918-1920: Wilson sent U.S. troops into Russia to keep Allied military supplies out of the hands of the Bolsheviks. In some cases, U.S. troops allied with anti-Bolshevik Russians (known as "White Russians") who were fighting a civil war in Russia. U.S. deaths in this **anti-Soviet intervention** numbered 222.

1919: Wilson traveled to Paris to negotiate the postwar settlement. His largest proposal, a **League of Nations** that would provide collective security against military aggression, failed to gain support in Congress. The strongest opposition to the League came from Republican senators who feared that the League would reduce U.S. sovereignty and endanger traditions such as the Monroe Doctrine.

Source 1: Woodrow Wilson, address to U.S. Senate, 22 January 1917 (a.k.a. the "peace without victory speech")

source: http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/peace_without_victory.htm; and Michael H. Hunt, *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 47-48.

...In every discussion of the peace that must end this war, it is taken for granted that that peace must be followed by some definite concert of power which will make it virtually impossible that any such catastrophe should ever overwhelm us again. Every lover of mankind, every sane and thoughtful man must take that for granted.

...

It is inconceivable that the people of the United States should play no part in that great enterprise. To take part in such a service will be the opportunity for which they have sought to prepare themselves...ever since the days when they set up a new nation in the high and honorable hope that it might...show mankind the way to liberty... But they owe it to themselves and to the other nations of the world to state the conditions under which they will feel free to render it.

...

The equality of nations upon which peace must be founded if it is to last must be an equality of rights; the guarantees exchanged must neither recognize nor imply a difference between big nations and small, between those that are powerful and those that are weak. Right must be based upon the common strength, not upon the individual strength, of the nations upon whose concert peace will depend... Mankind is looking now for freedom of life, not for equipoises of power.

...No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property.

...

So far as practicable, moreover, every great people now struggling toward a full development of its resources and of its powers should be assured a direct outlet to the great highways of the sea. ...No nation need be shut away from free access to the open paths of the world's commerce.

And the paths of the sea must alike in law and in fact be free. The freedom of the seas is the *sine qua non* of peace, equality, and cooperation.

...There can be no sense of safety and equality among the nations if great preponderating armaments are henceforth to continue here and there to be built up and maintained. The statesmen of the world must plan for peace, and nations must

adjust and accommodate their policy to it as they have planned for war and made ready for pitiless contest and rivalry.

...

I am proposing that all nations henceforth avoid entangling alliances which would draw them into competitions of power, catch them in a net of intrigue and selfish rivalry, and disturb their own affairs with influences intruded from without. There is no entangling alliance in a concert of power. When all unite to act in the same sense and with the same purpose, all act in the common interest and are free to live their own lives under a common protection.

I am proposing government by the consent of the governed; that freedom of the seas which in international conference after conference representatives of the United States have urged with the eloquence of those who are the convinced disciples of liberty; and that moderation of armaments which makes of armies and navies a power for order merely, not an instrument of aggression or of selfish violence.

These are American principles, American policies. We could stand for no others. And they are also the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail.

Source 2: Woodrow Wilson, address to joint session of Congress, 8 January 1918 (a.k.a. the “Fourteen Points speech”)

source: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp

.... 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 program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, 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.

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.

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.

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.