Version 1.0 | **Last updated 08 October 2014**

Fourteen Points

By Chris Thomas

The Fourteen Points were U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's post World War I blueprint to end territorial disputes in Europe, promote international commerce, and make the world safe for democracy. They were based on the ideas of open trade and collective diplomacy, and introduced the concept of national self-determination.

Table of Contents

Ideological Background

President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was a champion of democracy and saw the First World War as the consequence of a Europe that was governed, not by the people, but by power-hungry monarchs. America's participation in the war was, for Wilson, an opportunity to "make the world safe for democracy." A few years prior to the United States' entrance into the Great War, Wilson had intervened in the Mexican Civil War in an effort to "teach them how to elect good men." Nine months after the U.S. entry into the war, Wilson introduced the Fourteen Points in a speech to Congress on 8 January 1918. The points were presented as a platform upon which global peace and prosperity could be built. Along with his desire to spread democracy, Wilson was also motivated by his fear of communism spreading westward from the newly born Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In his own writings, Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) had championed disarmament, an end to making treaties without parliamentary approval, an international forum for diplomacy, and no changes in territorial boundaries without the consent of the people affected. While Wilson may have shared these political views, he staunchly opposed communism's economic policies, as well as its atheism. The Fourteen Points offered Europe many of Lenin's ideas, but on a liberal-democratic and capitalist foundation rather than a communist one.

The Fourteen Points

Points one to four introduced general ideas that Wilson expected the nations of the world to adhere to in conducting foreign policy. The first point, open diplomacy, called for what today is referred to as transparency rather than secret alliances and partnerships for war. Wilson encouraged "open covenants of peace." The next two points, freedom of the seas and free trade, argued for greater freedoms in commerce and trade and was certainly prompted by the United States' wartime problems involving German U-boat attacks on American merchant ships. The fourth point, military disarmament, advocated a reduction in the peacetime armed forces of the world. In Wilson's view the war broke out so quickly because European countries had armies at the ready. Future wars could thus be avoided by preventing nations from having armies prepared to go to war.

Point five introduced the concept of national self-determination. To Wilson, European empires were the antithesis of democracy; people have the right to determine who governs them and empires had taken away that right. The goal of point five was to dismantle European empires and to create new states organized along national-cultural lines. Points six to thirteen were specific steps for putting point five into action; for example, the monolith Austro-Hungarian Empire would be dismantled and out of it the nations of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and parts of Yugoslavia would be created, each new nation sharing a common language, customs, and culture.

The fourteenth point was Wilson's pride and joy. Wilson wanted a "general association of nations" that provided a forum for solving international crises with diplomacy instead of bullets. The realization of this point was the League of Nations. The League was to create a system of collective security that monitored world peace.

Reception in Europe and Internationally

In 1918, with the failure of the St. Michael Offensive, Germany's situation looked bleak. Its armies were defeated and its people were starving, while the rumblings of German communists grew louder in the cities. Fearing both revolution at home and total collapse at the front, the government requested an armistice using the Fourteen Points as its foundation. Under pressure, Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941) abdicated on 9 November 1918, and the Weimar Republic was established. The new government hoped that the gesture would ingratiate Germany with Wilson, and make him an ally of the new republic in the forthcoming peace negotiations.

Wilson's vision was met with cheers from the masses – in Paris the crowds screamed "Vive Wilson!" when he arrived for the peace conference – but ran into colder receptions from world leaders. Wilson's dreams of democracy, free trade, and self-determination clashed with Europeans leaders' goals of territorial gain and revenge against Germany. Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), Prime Minister of France, upon hearing of Wilson's Fourteen Points supposedly said, "God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see." [1]

The finished product of the conference, the Treaty of Versailles, contained only a fraction of the Fourteen Points. To ensure the realization of his association of nations, Wilson had to betray self-determination and its associated points. Japan, for example, wanted Chinese territory previously in German hands and threatened to quit the conference (and also the League), if not given what it wanted. Thus in the interests of his League of Nations, Wilson acquiesced and placed millions of Chinese in the control of the Japanese government. Point three – the removal of economic barriers - also suffered under the imperial ambitions of the victors. Wilson hoped, however, that the league, once functioning, could adjust these compromises.

Wilson only intended self-determination and the consent of the governed to apply to Europe. His upbringing in the American Jim Crow South made him oblivious to including non-whites in any discussion of political and social rights. However, despite his focus on Europe, the ideas of self-determination and public consent found fertile soil among nationalists and intellectuals in the colonies of European and American empires. These ideas gave subject peoples an ideological weapon to wield against the racism and ethnocentrism of the "White Man's Burden." This "Wilsonian moment" marked the beginning of decolonization, as nationalist leaders in China, Vietnam, Korea, Egypt, and India applauded the general principle and criticized the western powers for limiting it to Europe.

Reception in the United States

Back in the United States, Wilson ran into staunch resistance in the Senate. Isolationists rejected the idea of belonging to a League of Nations that could entangle the country in European affairs once again. The leader of the Senate stonewall was Republican Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924), who presented Wilson with Fourteen Reservations that Congress wanted Wilson to address before they would ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The President, already having made compromises with European leaders, refused to discuss a single point with the Senate, and inseparably welded the League Covenant to the Treaty of Versailles, forcing Republicans to either accept or reject both. Ironically, the United States never ratified the treaty and therefore did not join the League of Nations, Wilson's most beloved of his points.

Despite its immediate failures, the impact of the Fourteen Points, particularly self-determination, shaped the remainder of the 20th century. European colonies in Asia and Africa used self-determination as a weapon to demand their independence, and, with the help of the Second World War, led to decolonization in the latter half of the century. At the same time, the next world

war itself was brought on in large part by the idea of self-determination. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and imperial Japan used the principle of self-determination to justify their plans of expansion and conquest.

The Fourteen Points did not make the world safe for democracy, nor did they prevent future conflicts. Most of the conflicts of the 20th century were fueled by nationalism, as were the genocides and atrocities that accompanied those wars. Nevertheless, the ideas set forth in the Fourteen Points set a new standard of national identity, and the League of Nation's successor, the United Nations, remains with us to this day.

Chris Thomas, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

Section Editor: Lon Strauss

Notes

1. ↑ As quoted in Bailey, Thomas: Woodrow Wilson Wouldn't Yield, in: American Heritage, 8/4 (1957), online: http://www.americanheritage.com/content/woodrow-wilson-wouldn%E2%80%99t-yield (retrieved: 3 April 2014).

Selected Bibliography

Bailey, Thomas Andrew: **Woodrow Wilson and the lost peace**, New York 1944: Macmillan.

Cooper, John Milton, Jr.: **Woodrow Wilson. A biography**, New York 2009: Alfred A. Knopf.

Cooper, John Milton, Jr.: **Breaking the heart of the world. Woodrow Wilson and the fight for the League of Nations**, Cambridge; New York 2001: Cambridge University Press.

Ferrell, Robert H.: **Woodrow Wilson and World War I, 1917-1921**, New York 1985: Harper & Row.

Knock, Thomas J.: **To end all wars. Woodrow Wilson and the quest for a new world order**, New York 1992: Oxford University Press.

MacMillan, Margaret: **Paris 1919. Six months that changed the world**, New York 2002: Random House.

Manela, Erez: **The Wilsonian moment. Self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism**, Oxford; New York 2007: Oxford University Press.

Mee, Charles L.: **The end of order, Versailles, 1919**, New York 1980: Dutton.

Wilson, Woodrow: **President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points**, 1918.