Wilson, Woodrow

By Mark E. Benbow

Wilson, Woodrow
American President
Born 28 December 1856 in Staunton, USA
Died 03 February 1924 in Washington, D.C., USA

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was the twenty-eighth President of the United States (1913-1921). Wilson unsuccessfully attempted to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table, but in 1917 reluctantly concluded that the U.S. should join the war as an “Associated Power.” His attempts to create a lasting peace created the League of Nations, but failed to prevent another world war.

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1. Neutrality

As the European powers declared war on one another in the beginning of August 1914, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) declared America’s neutrality while sitting at his wife’s deathbed. He asked Americans to be neutral “in thought” as well as in action. U.S. public opinion was divided along both regional and ethnic lines; German Americans tended to support the Central Powers, while pro-Allied sentiment was strongest in the Northeast, which had the closest economic and social ties to Britain.
Neither the Allies nor the Central Powers fully respected the rights of neutral nations, especially when it came to trade. Britain controlled the Atlantic Ocean, blocking most American trade with Germany. Berlin resorted to the use of submarines to blockade the Allies, and Wilson increasingly found himself dealing with both sides’ violations of U.S. trade rights. The key difference between the parties however, was that although Britain’s seizing of American cargoes and black-listing American companies for trading with Germany violated America’s neutral rights, it did not cost American lives. German submarine warfare, in contrast, not only destroyed U.S. cargo, but often also killed U.S. citizens. The most notable example of this was the sinking of the British luxury liner Lusitania in May 1915. Torpedoed by a German submarine off the southern Irish coast, the massive ship sank in minutes, killing 1,200 people, including 128 Americans. The American public was outraged, but Wilson refused to lead his divided nation into war. He demanded that Berlin obey international laws governing commerce raiding, including protecting civilian lives. Wilson eventually received the reassurances he demanded and Germany momentarily changed how it conducted submarine warfare.

While dealing with German submarines, Wilson was simultaneously handling the “preparedness” campaign at home. The U.S. had only a small army and was unprepared to join the war in Europe. In response Wilson supported increasing the size of the U.S. military as well as an accelerated naval building program. Wilson’s preparedness efforts were not wide-ranging enough to satisfy his critics, but they alarmed those opposing a U.S. entry into the war. This balancing act would continue through the election of 1916. The war was an issue in the presidential campaign, but Wilson focused on his domestic accomplishments. The American economy was booming from arms sales to the Allies, and Wilson had supported an impressive list of domestic reforms. However, the slogan “He kept us out of war” struck a chord with the public and became the theme of Wilson’s campaign. It was not meant to be a promise to keep the U.S. out of the war in Europe, only a reminder that the U.S. had avoided war thus far. Republican Charles Evans Hughes (1862-1948) ran a poor campaign and Wilson won a narrow re-election.

2. Attempts to Mediate

After his re-election Wilson turned his energies to peace-making. He sought to convince the Allies and the Central Powers to reach a negotiated peace, one that would include an international organization. Neither side responded favorably to his request that every belligerent nation assert what it wanted from the war. By the end of 1916 the war had gone on too long, too much blood had been spilled, and too much money had been spent for either side to agree to a negotiated peace, or a “Peace Without Victory,” as Wilson phrased it in a peace plan he proposed in January 1917.

3. U.S. Entry and Home front

By early 1917 Wilson was torn between two contradictory desires: to keep the U.S. out of the war, and to negotiate an end to the fighting. Neither the Allies nor the Germans wanted the U.S. to act as
mediator, but as a belligerent Wilson would earn a place at the table. Finally, Berlin’s decision to restart unrestricted submarine warfare and the Zimmermann Telegram convinced the Wilson administration that the U.S. should enter the war. On 2 April 1917 Wilson reluctantly asked a special joint session of Congress to declare war on Germany. Wilson famously called for the war “to make the world safe for democracy.” Wilson prophetically told a friend that if the U.S. entered the war he feared the American people would abandon tolerance. Ironically, at home, the war to protect democracy was indeed marred by a growth of repression. Many forms of political dissent were banned as impediments to the war effort.

4. Fourteen Points and Peace

American troops began to reach the front in late 1917. In January 1918 Wilson presented his “Fourteen Points,” which echoed his “Peace Without Victory” proposal. They included an independent Poland and a League of Nations to prevent wars in the future. The Fourteen Points became the basis for what Wilson hoped to achieve at the post-war peace talks. When the fighting ended the Allies quickly began to prepare for a peace conference to be held at Versailles. Wilson decided to personally attend the conference. He was greeted as a hero by huge cheering crowds inspired by his idea of national self-determination, which seemed to suggest independence for new nations. The leaders of the other powers, however, were not as enthusiastic about the plan. Wilson had to compromise to win support for the League, although he had little sympathy for Germany, and so did little to moderate the Allies’ demands. Finally he supported an imperfect treaty as the best possible outcome under the circumstances. The League would, Wilson thought, be able to fix any remaining injustices.

The treaty was met by a hostile U.S. Senate. A majority supported it, but it needed a two-thirds vote to pass. While the “Irreconcilables” refused to vote for the treaty, the “Reservationists” were willing to support the treaty with some addendums. Wilson’s stubborn streak resurfaced, and he refused to make any changes. With the treaty stalled he went on a public speaking tour across the U.S. The strain of giving long speeches, however, took its toll, and Wilson neared collapse. Returning home Wilson suffered a major stroke. There was no clear mechanism for removing an ill President, and his administration was left adrift. Wilson continued to refuse to accept any reservations, and the Senate rejected the treaty.

Wilson’s legacy is a chaotic mixture of realism and idealism. He entered the war in part to create an international organization. The League was founded, and Wilson even received the Nobel Prize for its creation. However, Wilson’s own stubbornness prevented the U.S. from becoming a member and the League was unable to prevent future wars. He declared that the war was fought to protect democracy, but his administration’s repressive policies at home stifled dissent. Wilson’s idealism and the hopes it engendered also made him the central figure in how the Versailles Conference is remembered, even though he was but one of the major leaders responsible for the treaty. His legacy is thus of being one of a group of all-too fallible leaders who were overwhelmed by the task before
them; that of reconstructing a new world that would not repeat the mistakes of the past. His ideals nonetheless continued to animate American foreign policy throughout the 20th and 21st century.

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Selected Bibliography


Citation


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