

**GREAT WAR (1914-
1918): WILSON'S 14
POINTS: AMERICAN
IDEALISM AND THE
TREATY OF VERSAILLES
1919**



GREAT WAR (1914-1918): WILSON'S 14 POINTS: AMERICAN IDEALISM AND THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES 1919

Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic facts behind Wilson's "Fourteen Points", how they spelled out the ideas of self-determination and equality among nations, why Allied representatives to the Peace Conference in Paris objected to many of the president's ideas, what role the League of Nations was supposed to play in Wilson's mind and how ultimately the Treaty of Versailles (1919) contained clauses contrary to both the spirit and the language of the Fourteen Points.

Subjects

European History
World History
US History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- [Museum of the Great War, Peronne](#)
- [Palace of Versailles](#)
- [Palais des Nations, Geneva](#)
- [Avenue Woodrow Wilson, Paris](#)

Essential Questions

- Who was Woodrow Wilson? What role did he have in the Peace Conference of Versailles (1919)?
- What were the basics of Wilson's "14 Points"? Were some points more important than others to Wilson? What was the centerpiece of the points?
- Why did Wilson's allies push back against some of the points?
- Which of Wilson's Fourteen points made it into the final Treaty of Versailles (1919)?

Academic Summary

President Woodrow Wilson

Short Version of his Speech before a Joint Session of Congress, 08 Jan 1918

(known as the “14 Points” speech)

It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for moment to upset the peace of the world. It is this happy fact, now clear to the view of every public man whose thoughts do not still linger in an age that is dead and gone, which makes it possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view.

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.

VII. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

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, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.

IX. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

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.

XI. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.

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, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.

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, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

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.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end. For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does

remove. We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing. We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world, -- the new world in which we now live, -- instead of a place of mastery.

**French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau
Excerpts from the Opening Speech at the Paris Peace Conference
1919**

I come now to the order of the day. The first question is as follows: "The responsibility of the authors of the war." The second is thus expressed: "Penalties for crimes committed during the war." ... [The task at hand] is a very vast field. But we beg of you to begin by examining the question as to the responsibility of the authors of the war. I do not need to set forth our reasons for this. If we wish to establish justice in the world we can do so now, for we have won victory and can impose the penalties demanded by justice.

We shall insist on the imposition of penalties on the authors of the abominable crimes committed during the war. Has anyone any question to ask in regard to this? If not, I would again remind you that every delegation should devote itself to the study of this first question, which has been made the subject of reports by eminent jurists, and of a report which will be sent to you entitled, "An Inquiry into the Criminal Responsibility of the Emperor William II."

After sitting on the sidelines watching the horrors of a war for almost three years while Europe tore itself apart, the United States finally entered the Great War reluctantly in April 1917. At least publically, President Woodrow Wilson of the US was no war hawk. The US had quickly declared its neutrality when the conflict erupted in August 1914, but when the German empire opened up unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean that previous February, Wilson felt that America had no choice but to enter the war on the side of the allies. (Historians have debated for decades whether Wilson actually wanted war and therefore in essence baited the Germans into an untenable position – one that would help the administration in swaying public opinion towards entering the war on the Allied side – but that's a discussion for another lesson.)

In official foreign policy statements coming out of the White House, President Wilson stated that he saw a future where the nations of the world would be able to solve their problems through debate and compromise rather than using trenches and mustard gas. An idealist with progressive roots (although, ironically, not in terms of his domestic policies on race relations), Woodrow Wilson envisioned American troops riding like old-style western sheriffs into the war as saviors of everything good and decent. American "doughboys" would go "over there", fight hard and win the war quickly because they were fighting for what was right rather than for land or power. When peace came, it would then be based on the idea that America had saved the world from itself. Perhaps Wilson might even be seen as the savior of civilization itself.

In early January 1918, before most of the American troops even arrived in France,

Wilson addressed a joint session of Congress and outlined American war aims. In what became commonly known as the "14 points" speech (because of the number of specific points the president outlined), Wilson stated specifically that America was fighting not for itself or to gain land across the globe, but instead for the good of all mankind. Dismissing the old European notions of secret treaties and colonial possessions, Wilson instead outlined a plan for peace whereby all the nations of the world, including those of the Central Powers and also the colonial peoples across the globe, would be treated as equal and separate entities (again, a rather ironic stance since the US held colonies like the Philippines at the time). Individual nations of people across Europe and around the world would be able to determine for themselves how their own governments would look and what the new boundaries would be. The plan showed an enlightened idealism never before seen on the world stage. Holding everything together was Wilson's crowning jewel: a League of Nations.

The League was to be an international body where representatives from nations across the globe could sit down, discuss their differences, compromise when necessary for the good of humanity and then hammer out open treaties. If it worked, there would be no need for war ... no more trenches ... no more gas attacks ... an idealistic society based on peace.

Unfortunately for Wilson, his ideas were probably too idealistic. Although common people across Europe (including the Germans) were ready to accept the ideas in theory, many Allied leaders wanted revenge. France's Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau had watched his country lose millions of its best and brightest over the span of the previous four years. French industry was in ruin. The French countryside was scarred from the horrors of trench warfare and gas attacks. Over the course of his lifetime, France had seen German troops on its soil twice and Clemenceau was determined to cripple Germany to such an extent as to prevent the same from happening again. British leaders, led by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, demanded that Britain retain its colonial empire and control of the seas. Both Britain and France wanted Germany to pay reparations for the war. In their minds, while it was true that Germany's imperial government was ultimately responsible for the decisions leading up to war in 1914 and thus had to go, it was also true that the German people themselves had supported their government's decision to pursue an aggressive stance against the rest of Europe. The German people then needed to be taught a lesson in humility so that they would never again threaten humanity.

At the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson got his League of Nations, but he had to abandon the rest of his Fourteen Points in order to get it. The final treaty contained over 400 separate clauses that spelled out the terms of peace. Self-determination and the creation of new states in Eastern Europe was at least included, but only to the extent where it hurt Russia, Austria and Germany. The Hapsburg lands, united under an Austrian ruler since the Middle Ages, was blown apart into separate states loosely based on national lines, but Germans in the old empire were not allowed to form a "Greater Germany" (something Hitler would exploit in 1938 and 1939). Poles were given an independent homeland, but their new country also industrialized parts of Eastern Germany. South Slavs were allowed to form Yugoslavia, but the new country was controlled by Serbs (at the expense of Croats, Albanians and others). Colonial lands around the globe were treated even worse, with most remaining in the hands of their imperial masters. Germany's colonies were divided up among the victors. As for reparations, Germany was handed a bill that called for crippling the new Weimar economy and ultimately helped lead to hyperinflation in the decade to come, a "domino" that eventually led to the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. Ironically, Wilson's League, the crowning jewel of the treaty, was created, but the US never joined the

organization because the US Senate failed to ratify the treaty (signing a separate peace with Germany in 1921).

President's Wilson's theoretical idealism as spelled out in the "Fourteen Points" speech and his call for the establishment of the League of Nations earned him the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize, but unfortunately his drive to get the treaty ratified also led to physical exhaustion and a stroke in early October of that year. Protected by his wife, Wilson managed to regain enough strength to return to public office after Christmas, but the remainder of his term was one where he was largely ineffective. He died four years later at his home in Washington after suffering another stroke. Today most historians see Wilson's fourteen points as an unrealistic and impractical idea that was a generation before its time. Many of the president's points would form the basis of the next peace, a time when millions more lay dead and the world was again in chaos. Unlike 1919, by 1945 America would be both powerful enough and mature enough to dictate terms.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students here will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic facts behind Wilson's "Fourteen Points", how they spelled out the ideas of self-determination and equality among nations, why Allied representatives to the Peace Conference in Paris objected to many of the president's ideas, what role the League of Nations was supposed to play in Wilson's mind and how ultimately the Treaty of Versailles (1919) contained clauses contrary to both the spirit and the language of the Fourteen Points.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain basic ideas in Wilson's "Fourteen Points".
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the "14 Points" spelled out the ideas of self-determination and equality among nations.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Allied representatives to the Paris Peace Conference objected to many of Wilson's ideas.
4. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain what role the League of Nations was supposed to play in Wilson's mind.
5. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how ultimately the Treaty of Versailles (1919) contained clauses contrary to both the spirit and the language of Wilson's Fourteen Points.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How does America see its role in the world today? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the Treaty of Versailles 1919 (20 min)
- Video – Wilson’s 14 Points (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the Treaty of Versailles 1919, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Group Activity – Discussion on Wilson’s Fourteen Points (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the basic facts behind Wilson’s “Fourteen Points”, how they spelled out the ideas of self-determination and equality among nations, why Allied representatives to the Peace Conference in Paris objected to many of the president’s ideas, what role the League of Nations was supposed to play in Wilson’s mind and how ultimately the Treaty of Versailles (1919) contained clauses contrary to both the spirit and the language of the Fourteen Points.

Extension

On tour: Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles (France)

While on tour, students at Versailles will see the Hall of Mirrors, where they can see for themselves the room chosen by French Prime Minister Clemenceau as the place for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 Jun 1919 (exactly 5 years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo).

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp
President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points (primary source) – from the Avalon Project at Yale University
- www.historyplace.com/speeches/wilson-points.htm
Woodrow Wilson: The Fourteen Points (primary source) – long (complete) version of the speech
- www.firstworldwar.com/source/parispeaceconf_wilson.htm
Wilson's Opening Address at the Paris Peace Conference, 18 Jan 1919 (primary source)
- <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/fighting-peace-fate-wilsons-fourteen-points>
Fighting for Peace: the Fate of Wilson's Fourteen Points (website) – from the National Endowment for the Humanities
- <http://connect.umpi.maine.edu/~terry.chalou/Webquests/07-08/World%20War%20I/task.htm>
Web quest: The Treaty of Versailles – from Terry Chalou, professor at the University of Maine Presque Isle
- www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/PowerpointPresent/WW1.ppt
World War I PowerPoint from Susan Pojer, history teacher at Horace Greeley High School (NY)
- www.lancaster.k12.oh.us/userfiles/353/classes/617/14points-0.pdf
Wilson's 14 Points (PDF version of PowerPoint) – from the Lancaster City Schools (OH)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMElagkUBmY
Woodrow's Wilson's Fourteen Points (video) – this 16-minute video contains a good deal of primary source video and is appropriate for all classes.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ-T--Z4oEc
WWI Fourteen Points (video)
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8uWgbRd8So
The Treaty of Versailles (video) – from the BBC, this 60-minute documentary is probably too long for most in-class showings, but is highly recommended as an out-of-class assignment for background information.

Background Information

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourteen_Points
Fourteen Points – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodrow_wilson
Woodrow Wilson – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Versailles
Treaty of Versailles 1919 – Wikipedia article

Other Relevant Lesson Plans from Passports Educational Travel

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen
England and the Great War – Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles
Great War – Treaty of Versailles 1919
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles
Great War – France: Clemenceau
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

Key Terms

- Clemenceau
- Fourteen Points
- German War Guilt
- Great War
- League of Nations
- Reparations
- Self-Determination
- Treaty of Versailles 1919
- Woodrow Wilson

