4

The Rise and Fall of Wilsonianism

Woodrow Wilson arguably influenced U.S. foreign policy more than any other twentieth-century figure. His ideas shaped the country's vision of itself within the international system, stirred international and domestic opinion alike, and offered the language and values that would permeate foreign policy debates for generations to come. Yet Wilson largely failed to put his ideas into practice during his lifetime. This chapter explores this paradox, first by demonstrating some of the major ideas that comprise Wilsonianism and then by showing how those ideas became controversial during and after the peace conference that ended the First World War.

Wilson's ideals—and the stubbornness with which he advocated them—stemmed partly from his religious convictions. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Wilson believed he was God's instrument to bring peace and harmony to the world. But Wilson honed his ideas through a lifetime of academic study and writing. An accomplished political scientist and historian, Wilson came to national prominence as president of Princeton University before turning to politics. He was elected governor of New Jersey in 1910 and then to the presidency of the United States in 1912.

Wilson's moral fervor and dedication to rational problem solving converged first in the domestic policy initiatives that commanded his attention early in his presidency. Under the "New Freedom" banner, Wilson championed an agenda of progressive reform. Before long, however, menacing events beyond America's border led Wilson to turn his reformist energies from the domestic to the international arena. First, political turmoil in Mexico in 1913–14 seemed to demand action from Washington. Then, in July 1914, war broke out among the great powers of Europe. In Mexico, Wilson took action, dispatching troops to occupy the port of Veracruz and to pursue Mexican forces south of the U.S. border. In Europe, Wilson chose studious neutrality. But a common theme ran through both episodes. Wilson insisted that his nation was standing up for morality, decency, justice, and human progress.

As the First World War dragged on, Wilson grew increasingly bold in his contention that the United States had a uniquely benevolent role to play in leading the world toward a new, more peaceful world order. For a time, he argued that the United States could best play that role by staying removed from the fighting. But by early 1917, he had calculated that America should join the war—not simply

to vanquish Germany but also to assure a key role at the peace conference where a new international order would be established. By the end of the fighting in November 1918, Wilson had articulated a remarkable vision of a reformed global order rooted in the principles of self-determination, free trade, disarmament, and collective security.

Those principles inspired considerable enthusiasm among European and American public opinion, as well as among nationalist leaders in colonized territories. But they encountered strong opposition where it counted most: among the governments of the other great powers and within Washington, D.C. Britain and France balked at many of Wilson's ideas about self-determination, free trade, and disarmament. The U.S. Senate balked, in turn, at Wilson's preferred mechanism for establishing international cooperation and collective responses to aggression—the League of Nations. Wary of surrendering America's freedom of action, the Senate rejected participation in the league after Wilson refused to compromise over the terms on which the United States would take part. Thus did Wilsonianism completely collapse in early 1920.

Many commentators praised Wilson as a man of profound vision whose ideals—though they may have seemed hopelessly utopian when first articulated—could provide a sound basis for a harmonious and progressive world order. Others sharply criticized him for promoting ideas with the potential to lead the United States into costly international commitments. These critiques, originating in the debates of 1918–20, have reverberated ever since.

Document 4.1

WILSON'S VISION OF AMERICA'S GLOBAL ROLE

On the Fourth of July 1914, a month before the outbreak of the First World War in Europe, Woodrow Wilson articulated his vision of the United States playing a uniquely progressive and moral role in world affairs. The speech, delivered to thousands of admirers at Philadelphia's Independence Hall, was inspired by an unfolding crisis in U.S.-Mexican relations, but it contained many ideas that would underpin Wilson's thinking in later years about the role the United States might play in a reconstructed world order.

It is one thing to be independent, and it is another thing to know what to do with your independence. It is one thing to come to your majority and another to know what you are going to do with your life and your energies. And one of the most serious questions for sober-minded men to address themselves to in the United States is this: what are we going to do with the influence and power of this great nation? Are we going to play by the old

rule of using that power for our own aggrandizement and material benefit only? You know what that may mean. It may upon occasion mean that we shall use it to make the peoples of other nations suffer in the way in which we said it was intolerable to suffer when we uttered our Declaration of Independence....

If American enterprise in foreign countries, particularly in those foreign countries which are not strong enough to resist us, takes the shape of imposing upon and exploiting the mass of the people of that country, it ought to be checked and not encouraged. I am willing to get anything for an American that money and enterprise can obtain, except the suppression of the rights of other men....

My dream is that, as the years go on and the world knows more and more of America, it will also drink at these fountains of youth and renewal; that it will also turn to America for those moral inspirations which lie at the basis of all freedom; that the world will never fear America unless it feels that it is engaged in some enterprise which is inconsistent with the rights of humanity; and that America will come into the full light of the day when all shall know that she puts human rights above all other rights, and that her flag is the flag, not only of American, but of humanity.

Document 4.2

WILSON FORESEES A PEACEMAKING ROLE FOR THE UNITED STATES

Ten months into the war, millions lay dead on Europe's battlefields, and German submarines had sent numerous allied ships to the ocean floor. No end to the conflict seemed in sight. Across the Atlantic, Wilson defended his neutrality policy, attacked those who would use the war to divide Americans, and developed his vision of America as a peaceful example—and potential peacemaker—for the world. He laid out his evolving views in a speech in New York City on April 20, 1915.

Do you realize that, roughly speaking, we are the only great nation at present disengaged? ... Therefore is it not likely that the nations of the world will some day turn to us for the cooler assessments of the elements engaged? I am not now thinking so preposterous a thought as that we should sit in judgment upon them—no nation is fit to sit in judgment upon any other nation—but that we shall some day have to assist in reconstructing the process of peace. Our resources are untouched; we are more and more becoming, by the force of circumstances, the mediating nation of the world in respect to finance. We must make up our minds what are the best things to do and what are the best ways to do them. We must put our money, our energy, our

enthusiasm, our sympathy into these things, and we must have our judgments prepared and our spirits chastened against the coming of that day.

So that I am not speaking in a selfish spirit when I say that our whole duty, for the present, at any rate, must be summed up in this motto: "America first." Let us think of America before we think of Europe, in order that America may be fit to be Europe's friend when the day of tested friendship comes. The test of friendship is not now sympathy with the one side or the other, but getting ready to help both sides when the struggle is over. The basis of neutrality, gentlemen, is not indifference; it is not self-interest. The basis of neutrality is sympathy for mankind. It is fairness, it is good will at bottom. It is impartiality of spirit and of judgment. I wish that all of our fellow citizens could realize that. There is in some quarters a disposition to create distempers in this body politic. Men are even uttering slanders against the United States as if to excite her. Men are saying that if we should go to war upon either side, there would be a divided America—an abominable libel of ignorance! America is not all of it vocal just now. It is vocal in spots, but I, for one, have a complete and abiding faith in that great silent body of Americans who are not standing up and shouting and expressing their opinions just now, but are waiting to find out and support the duty of America. . . .

Document 4.3

ANTI-INTERVENTIONIST SENTIMENT

Americans found many reasons to avoid rushing headlong into the war. For some the key motive was disagreement with European policies; for others, it was opposition to war itself. One of the most popular songs of 1915, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier," embodied a strain of antimilitarism prevalent in American thinking since the country's founding, coupled with reference to the growing movement favoring international arbitration that swelled in influence in the years before the war. Former president William Taft was one such prominent proponent of arbitration, for example, and President Theodore Roosevelt had used the mechanism numerous times during his own White House tenure to resolve international disputes. Neither man had faced a crisis such as confronted Wilson in 1915, however, and, as the song demonstrates, Americans were far from unified on the war.

I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier

Ten million soldiers to the war have gone
Who may never return again.
Ten million mothers' hearts must break,

For the ones who died in vain.
Head bowed down in sorrow in her lonely years,
I heard a mother murmur thro' her tears:

Chorus:
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy,
Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?

Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away,
There'd be no war today,
If mothers all would say,
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier.
(Chorus)

What victory can cheer a mother's heart,
When she looks at her blighted home?
What victory can bring her back,
All she cared to call her own?
Let each mother answer in the year to be,
Remember that my boy belongs to me!
(Chorus)

Document 4.4

WILSON CALLS FOR "PEACE WITHOUT VICTORY"

With reelection under his belt, Wilson turned his full attention to foreign policy in 1917. As the war dragged on, the United States supplied growing amounts of credit and war materiel to the Western powers. German leaders believed an unbridled submarine campaign might strangle France and force Britain from the war. Berlin would announce such a policy only eight days after Wilson gave this speech to the Senate on January 22, 1917. The address, one of Wilson's most famous and oft-quoted, elaborated his ideas about the central role to be played by the United States in constructing a durable peace.

It is inconceivable that the people of the United States should play no part in that great enterprise [establishing a new peaceful order among nations]. To take part in such a service will be the opportunity for which they have sought to prepare themselves by the very principles and purposes of their polity and the approved practices of their Government ever since the days

when they set up a new nation in the high and honourable hope that it might in all that it was and did show mankind the way to liberty. They can not in honour withhold the service to which they are now about to be challenged. They do not wish to withhold it. But they owe it to themselves and the other nations of the world to state the conditions under which they will feel free to render it. . . .

The present war must first be ended; but we owe it to candour and to a just regard for the opinion of mankind to say that, so far as our participation in guarantees of future peace is concerned, it makes a great deal of difference in what way and upon what terms it is ended. The treaties and agreements which bring it to an end must embody terms which will create a peace that is worth guaranteeing and preserving, a peace that will win the approval of mankind, not merely a peace that will serve the several interests and immediate aims of the nations engaged. We shall have no voice in determining what those terms shall be, but we shall, I feel sure, have a voice in determining whether they shall be made lasting or not by the guarantees of a universal covenant; and our judgment upon what is fundamental and essential as a condition precedent to permanency should be spoken now, not afterwards when it may be too late. . . .

I do not mean to say that any American government would throw any obstacle in the way of any terms of peace the governments now at war might agree upon, or seek to upset them when made, whatever they might be. I only take it for granted that mere terms of peace between the belligerents will not satisfy even the belligerents themselves. Mere agreements may not make peace secure. It will be absolutely necessary that a force be created as a guarantor of the permanency of the settlement so much greater than the force of any nation now engaged or any alliance hitherto formed or projected that no nation, no probable combination of nations, could face or withstand it. If the peace presently to be made is to endure, it must be a peace made secure by the organized major force of mankind. . . .

[I]t must be a peace without victory. It is not pleasant to say this. I beg that I may be permitted to put my own interpretation upon it and that it may be understood that no other interpretation was in my thought. I am seeking only to face realities and to face them without soft concealments. Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand. Only a peace between equals can last, only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit. The right state of mind, the right feeling between nations, is as necessary for a lasting peace as is the just settlement of vexed questions of territory or of racial and national allegiance.

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. Equality of territory or of resources there of course cannot be; nor any other sort of equality not gained in the ordinary peaceful and legitimate development of the peoples themselves. But no one asks or expects anything more than an equality of rights. Mankind is looking now for freedom of life, not for equipoises of power. . . .

I am proposing, as it were, that the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but that every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the great and powerful.

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 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.

Document 4.5

WILSON'S REQUEST FOR A DECLARATION OF WAR

With U.S. ships under threat from German submarines, Wilson took the podium in Congress to ask for war on April 2, 1917. Most of the packed crowd cheered and clapped; critics such as Senator Robert La Follette angrily chewed his gum with arms folded in opposition. The final votes were 82–6 in the Senate, 373–50

in the House. America was going to war not against the German people, Wilson declared, but against German leaders and on behalf of the interests of humankind.

The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination.

The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgement befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion. . . .

There is one choice we cannot make, we are incapable of making: we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our Nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.

With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am talking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves, but in unhesitating obedience to what I deem my constitutional duty, I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States; that it formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon it; and that it take immediate steps not only to put the country in a more thorough state of defence but also to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war. . . .

Our object . . . is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles. . . .

We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval.

It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools....

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.

Document 4.6

THE "FOURTEEN POINTS"

By the time American soldiers began arriving in Europe with the hope of breaking the bloody stalemate on the western front, Wilson faced a new problem. In November 1917, a radical movement led by Vladimir Lenin had seized power in Russia. The Bolsheviks threatened to pull their country out of the war against Germany—a move that would deal a crushing blow to the Western military effort. But the president also worried that the Bolsheviks' bold calls for worldwide communist revolution threatened to undermine his simultaneous calls for a new global order based on liberal conceptions of self-determination and free trade. Feeling pressure from his new competitor, Wilson delivered his "Fourteen Points" speech to Congress on January 8, 1918. After a preamble that echoed much of his earlier idealist rhetoric, Wilson laid out an unprecedentedly specific plan for the postwar international order.

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.

APUSH – Modified DBQ

To what extent did United States foreign policy as articulated by Woodrow Wilson represent a turning point for both national identity as well as America's role in the world?

- **Essay will be graded using APUSH DBQ Standards (Thesis, Content, Evidence, Outside Information, Synthesis)**
- **Use any knowledge you have acquired in class, from the textbook (chapters 29 and 30 would be especially helpful) or other research (use citations if necessary)**
- **Due to turnitin.com before class on Monday, 2/23. Bring a paper copy to class on Monday 2/23.**