

Wilson, Woodrow (28/29 Dec. 1856-3 Feb. 1924), the twenty-eighth president of the United States, was born Thomas Woodrow Wilson in Staunton, Virginia, the son of Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson, Presbyterian minister and director of the Augusta Female Seminary, and Janet Woodrow. Young Wilson was educated at home and developed close attachments to both parents, who instilled in him their Scotch-Irish and English heritage, Calvinist faith, and southern values. He later attended private schools.

The boy experienced the American Civil War and the postwar Reconstruction in the South. The Wilson family, although from the North originally, adopted southern ways. Dr. Wilson believed the Bible justified slavery. Although he welcomed African Americans in church, he kept them separate from the white congregation. He also helped divide southern from northern Presbyterians. In 1861, as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia, he organized a meeting to form the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church and served prominently as its clerk for thirty-seven years. He ministered to the Confederate army one summer as a chaplain and used the Augusta church as a temporary hospital for Confederate soldiers. In 1870 the family moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where Dr. Wilson became a professor at the Theological Seminary and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Young Wilson witnessed the war's devastation of the South even more here than he had earlier in Georgia. Like his father, he abhorred the participation of African Americans in the postwar Reconstruction governments and criticized universal suffrage as "the foundation of every evil in this country." He joined his father's church in 1873. Thereafter, Wilson's Calvinist faith sustained him during times of trial.

Wilson attended Presbyterian colleges away from home. In 1873 he entered Davidson College near Charlotte, North Carolina. Before finishing the academic year, however, the homesick student returned to his parents, who had moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, where his father had begun a new pastorate. After spending over a year at home, reading under his father's tutelage about such topics as Manchester liberalism, Wilson resumed his formal education in 1875 at the College of New Jersey in Princeton, a well-regarded school that attracted southern Presbyterians.

Princeton University, as the College of New Jersey was later named, provided the right environment for Wilson. Eager to learn about government, he studied history and politics. He also practiced the art of persuasion and leadership as an active member of literary and debating clubs, including the prestigious Whig Society. He organized the Liberal Debating Club and drafted its parliamentary constitution. Political theories of Edmund Burke and Walter Bagehot especially appealed to Wilson. Inspired by the British parliamentary tradition, Wilson began to regard himself as a future statesman. While an undergraduate, he wrote his first article, "Cabinet Government in the United States," which editor [Henry Cabot Lodge](#) published in the *International Review* (Aug. 1879). Wilson, who was elected editor of the *Princetonian* and secretary of the Football Association, played baseball for recreation. He graduated in the class of 1879.

Ambition to Become a Statesman

After Princeton, Wilson went to the University of Virginia to study law and prepare for a career as a lawyer and politician. Here in [Thomas Jefferson's](#) Charlottesville, he joined the Jefferson Society, a debating and literary club. In 1880 he endorsed John Bright's liberal British critique of the southern Confederacy and affirmed a pro-Union, nationalist interpretation of the Civil War. He agreed with Bright that southern independence was a futile dream and union with the North was the South's best hope for prosperity. Discouraged and lonely during the fall of 1880, and complaining of a cold, Wilson left the university on Christmas Day and returned home. He continued to study law at home and in 1882 passed the Georgia bar exam.

Wilson set up a law practice in Atlanta, but he and his law partner, Edward Renick, attracted few clients and did not share in the city's thriving economy. In 1882, having little else to do, he testified before a federal commission in favor of tariff reduction, which he endorsed as the way to promote international trade and peace. Wilson's mother gave him some legal business concerning inherited family lands, which took him to Rome, Georgia, in 1883. There he quickly fell in love with Ellen Louise Axson ([Ellen Axson Wilson](#)), daughter of the town's Presbyterian pastor.

Yearning for marriage but recognizing that he could not afford a family, Wilson decided to change careers. Abandoning law in 1883, but not his ambition to become a statesman, he entered Johns Hopkins University to study constitutional and political history. Modeled on German higher education, Hopkins offered doctoral degrees. Wilson studied history with [Herbert Baxter Adams](#), who had earned a Ph.D. at Heidelberg. Adams taught him the "germ theory" of history, emphasizing the Anglo-Saxon origins of American political institutions. Wilson also studied political economy with [Richard T. Ely](#), who rejected laissez-faire economics and later advocated progressive reforms in Governor [Robert M. La Follette's](#) Wisconsin.

Wilson found German-style research in historical documents, as taught by Adams, exceedingly tedious. He confessed to Ellen Axson: "I have a strong instinct of leadership, an unmistakably oratorical temperament, and the keenest possible delight in affairs; and it has required very constant and stringent schooling to content me with the sober methods of the scholar and the man of letters." Reading what he enjoyed and using his own imagination, he wrote his first book, *Congressional Government* (1885), which Adams approved as a doctoral dissertation. Emulating Bagehot's realistic approach to British politics, Wilson portrayed how the U.S. Constitution actually worked in contrast to its framers' theories as expressed in the *Federalist*. In his view, congressional committees dominated the government behind closed doors at the expense of both public discourse and presidential leadership. In 1886 Johns Hopkins University awarded the Ph.D. to Wilson (making him the first U.S. president with an earned doctorate).

Wilson's Academic Career

Wilson began teaching history and political science at Bryn Mawr, a Quaker college for women near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With the promise of steady income, he and Ellen Axson were married on 24 June 1885. Their family soon expanded with the birth of three daughters. Ellen

Wilson devoted her time to the family and helped with research for her husband's next book, *The State* (1889).

In this textbook, Wilson affirmed his Social Darwinian belief in the "stronger and nobler races which have made the most notable progress in civilization." He attributed the progress of western civilization to the Aryan and Semitic races, which had transmitted their political ideas and habits through the history of the Greeks, Latins, Teutons, and Celts to the modern nations of western Europe and the United States. "The existing governments of Europe and America furnish the dominating types of today," he added. "To know other systems that are defeated or dead would aid only indirectly towards an understanding of those which are alive and triumphant, as the survived fittest."

Wilson's academic career took off. Unhappy teaching women, he left Bryn Mawr in 1888 to join the Wesleyan University faculty in Middletown, Connecticut. He hoped to shape the minds of young men, who would provide the nation's future leaders. Wilson welcomed the opportunity in 1890 to return to Princeton as professor of jurisprudence and political economy. A popular teacher and productive scholar, he gained further local and national recognition.

Wilson published extensively during his Princeton years. In *Division and Reunion, 1829-1889* (1893), he interpreted the Civil War and Reconstruction from a pro-Union and pro-white perspective. By this time, however, he had abandoned the germ theory and instead propounded his own frontier thesis to explain American history. Influenced by conversations and correspondence with historian [Frederick Jackson Turner](#), Wilson now credited the frontier, more than the Anglo-Saxon heritage, with the rise of freedom and democracy in the New World. He also wrote books for profit. *George Washington* (1897) and *A History of the American People* (5 vols., 1902) provided extra income for his growing family and their new house.

In 1902 Princeton's trustees chose Wilson as president. His national prominence and leadership potential promised to raise the university's stature. Its first president without formal theological education, he nevertheless possessed strong Presbyterian credentials. But unlike some clergy who rejected modern science and embraced fundamentalist religious beliefs, Wilson espoused liberal Christianity. He identified with his uncle, [James Woodrow](#), who had endured a trial in 1888 before the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church for teaching Darwinian science at Columbia Theological Seminary. Like his uncle, who left the seminary rather than change his views, Wilson saw no contradiction between modern science and religion.

As president, Wilson sought to improve Princeton's academic standing by instituting structural reform. Emphasizing scholarship, he established new departments and hired new faculty. With the trustees' approval in 1905, he recruited young faculty as tutors or preceptors. To stimulate intellectual activity and attenuate gradations of status among undergraduates, he attacked their exclusive eating clubs and proposed that students instead take meals in a residential quadrangle. Students as well as alumni criticized these reforms. Wilson also encountered resistance from the graduate dean, Andrew Fleming West, who pressed ahead with his own plans for a residential graduate college. Facing overwhelming opposition, Wilson's plan to replace the undergraduate eating clubs failed. Moreover, contrary to his advice, Princeton trustees in 1910 accepted a generous bequest that West had secured for the graduate college. Stubbornly refusing to

compromise, he denounced this decision as a violation of both educational and democratic values. This further alienated the trustees, who welcomed his resignation later in 1910.

Entrance into Politics (1910)

By this time, Wilson was running for governor of New Jersey. Democratic political bosses saw him as a candidate who might transcend the party's divisions, collaborating with them but also attracting support from those favoring progressive reforms. The bosses enabled him to win the nomination and the 1910 election. But Wilson soon distanced himself from them and presented himself as the people's advocate against special interests. He enhanced his progressive reputation by gaining the legislature's approval for laws guaranteeing an open political process, if only for white men, with direct nomination of candidates and honest elections. Other reforms attacked abuses of corporate capitalism by establishing workmen's compensation, regulating public utilities, and improving labor conditions for women and children. New Jersey continued, however, as a haven for corporations.

Wilson's reputation as a progressive governor improved his prospects for winning the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912. Encouraged by "Colonel" [Edward M. House](#) of Texas, with whom he formed a close friendship, and other Democrats who wanted to end Republican control of the White House, Wilson attracted nationwide support. He nurtured a closer relationship with [William Jennings Bryan](#), who, despite losing presidential elections in 1896, 1900, and 1908, had transformed the Democratic party into a more progressive institution. In his Jackson Day address on 8 January 1912, Wilson, who had once criticized Bryan's agrarian radicalism, now praised him for steadfastly advocating democratic principles. Wilson's progressivism, like Bryan's, affirmed both continuity and change. They both advocated self-government by the people. Their common Presbyterian faith undergirded their calls for reform and their patriotism. "Let no man suppose that progress can be divorced from religion or that there is any other platform for the ministers of reform than the platform written in the utterances of our Lord and Saviour," Wilson affirmed in 1911. He identified the United States with Christianity: "America was born a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture."

At the Democratic party's convention in Baltimore in June 1912, no candidate initially commanded the two-thirds majority required for the nomination. Wilson's strategists, including [William Gibbs McAdoo](#), hoped delegates would eventually vote for him after their first choices fell short. Bryan, who supported [Champ Clark](#) of Missouri, switched to Wilson. As prospects faded for Clark and [Oscar Underwood](#) of Alabama, others followed Bryan's example. Indiana's delegation, led by Governor [Thomas R. Marshall](#), was one of the first to shift to Wilson, who eventually won the nomination; Marshall was selected to run for the vice presidency.

In the 1912 presidential election, Wilson faced [William Howard Taft](#), the incumbent Republican president; [Theodore Roosevelt](#), the former Republican president and current Progressive candidate; and [Eugene V. Debs](#), the perennial Socialist nominee. The Republicans' split between

Taft "conservatives" and Roosevelt "progressives" made it possible for Democrats to capture the White House. Wilson presented himself as the people's champion within the progressive tradition. But his concept of democracy was limited. Stockton Axson, his brother-in-law, observed: "His instinct for democracy involved the idea that, because a democracy is free, it is the more necessary that it be led. His faith in the people has never been a faith in the supreme wisdom of the people, but rather in the capacity of the people to be led right by those whom they elect and constitute their leaders." Wilson wanted to exclude women from public affairs, opposing their right to vote because their place was "in the home" and their involvement would produce "the unsexed, masculinized woman." He also favored Jim Crow laws that excluded African Americans from voting and other basic rights. Nor did he expect Native Americans to assimilate into the nation as citizens. Wilson did not promise equality and freedom for all Americans.

First Southerner to Assume the Presidency since the Civil War

Wilson and Roosevelt, the two leading candidates, advocated different reform alternatives for dealing with America's industrial and agricultural problems. Wilson's New Freedom and Roosevelt's New Nationalism embraced democratic capitalism, but differed over the best means to preserve both equality of opportunity and efficiency within a modern corporate society. Wilson wanted to ensure the competitiveness of the free market so that opportunities would remain open for future individual entrepreneurs. Roosevelt, more accepting of large-scale organizations, preferred government regulation of monopolistic trusts so that the country would benefit from their efficient productivity. Wilson and Roosevelt agreed, in contrast to Taft, that reforms were needed to preserve the political and economic system and also protect it from Debs's "radical" socialist alternative. In the election on 4 November 1912, Wilson won 435 electoral votes to Roosevelt's 88 and Taft's 8, but not a majority of the popular vote. The solidly Democratic South helped its first native son since the Civil War to capture the White House.

After the inauguration on 4 March 1913, Wilson implemented his new concept of the presidency. In *Congressional Government*, he had regarded Congress as the dominant branch of the federal government, and the president as a mere administrator. Impressed with Roosevelt's use of presidential power, however, Wilson adopted a positive view of the office. In *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908), he offered a new concept of presidential leadership. "The President," he proclaimed, "is at liberty, both in law and in conscience, to be as big a man as he can. His capacity will set the limit; and if Congress be overborne by him, it will be no fault of the makers of the Constitution, . . . but only because the President has the nation behind him and Congress has not." Now Wilson could put his ideas into practice.

Wilson wanted to enhance the presidency by establishing a direct link to the American people. He thought the president, as their spokesman, should be the preeminent leader of the democratic nation. Long convinced that the British parliamentary government was better than the American constitutional system, he exerted personal influence on the legislative branch in unprecedented ways. Rejecting the traditional republican understanding of separation of powers among the branches of government as an old Whig or Newtonian theory, he endeavored to establish

executive control over both domestic and foreign affairs. He used an office at the Capitol to confer with members of Congress. The first president to hold regular press conferences, he sought to shape public opinion by managing news from the White House. Moreover, he delivered messages personally to Congress, reviving a practice that [George Washington](#) and [John Adams](#) had used on a few occasions. From Jefferson through Taft, other U.S. presidents had submitted only written messages. Wilson hoped to use his rhetorical powers to mold public opinion and thus to pressure representatives and senators to vote as he directed.

The "New Freedom" Agenda

Wilson successfully used these techniques of presidential leadership to gain the adoption of his New Freedom agenda. He advocated three major reforms. The first was the reduction of import tariffs. Now that the United States had emerged as the world's leading industrial nation, he saw no reason to protect American manufacturing against foreign competition. A lower tariff, he thought, would encourage greater efficiency in U.S. factories, undermine the monopolistic trusts, stimulate international trade, and promote world peace. On 8 April 1913 Wilson appeared before a joint session of Congress to make his case. Oscar Underwood, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, introduced a tariff bill that would lower duties by about one-fourth and add many items to the free list. His bill also included a new income tax to replace the anticipated loss of tariff revenue. Within a month the House voted for the bill. The Senate initially hesitated but eventually succumbed to Wilson's pressure through the Democratic caucus. On 3 October 1913 Wilson signed the Underwood Tariff Act.

Wilson turned next to banking and currency reform. After the panic of 1907, almost all bankers, businesspeople, and farmers agreed that the nation needed a more modern banking system. They did not, however, share the same views on what it should be. Republicans generally preferred a privately controlled central bank. Secretary of State Bryan and other progressive Democrats advocated a regional banking system with government control of the nation's currency. Wilson worked with Bryan, Treasury secretary McAdoo, and the chairs of the House and Senate Banking Committees, [Carter Glass](#) and Robert L. Owen, to craft a compromise, a new Federal Reserve System that would regulate the nation's money supply. This provided for regional banks under a single Federal Reserve Board that could control the issue of currency. On 23 June 1913 Wilson again appeared before Congress. Both the House and Senate eventually voted for his banking and currency reform. On 23 December 1913 the president signed the Federal Reserve Act.

Wilson turned finally to antitrust reform. On 20 January 1914 he appeared before Congress and requested further sanctions against monopolies. [Samuel Gompers](#) and the American Federation of Labor urged him to exempt organized labor from antitrust injunctions. As he wrestled with the complexities of enforcing antitrust laws against industrial corporations and labor unions, Wilson shifted toward Roosevelt's New Nationalism. On 26 September 1914 he approved the Federal Trade Commission Act, which created a new regulatory commission. On 15 October 1914 he also signed the Clayton Antitrust Act, which revised the Sherman Antitrust Act to specify more precisely the unacceptable practices in restraint of trade and to provide penalties and remedies

for violations. This legislative compromise sharpened the distinction between legitimate and illegal corporate practices and partially exempted labor unions from injunctions.

By reforming the tariff, banking and currency, and antitrust laws, Wilson's New Freedom sought to preserve an open political economy for a new generation of Americans. Yet these reforms left women as well as racial and ethnic minorities on the margins. When a delegation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, headed by [Anna Howard Shaw](#), visited the president on 8 December 1913, he refused to support voting rights for women, claiming that he could not endorse this reform because he had not campaigned for it in the 1912 election. Wilson authorized racial segregation in federal executive departments, permitting the southern Jim Crow system to become the national practice. [William Monroe Trotter](#) and [W. E. B. Du Bois](#), two prominent African Americans who had supported him in 1912, quickly became disillusioned. On 12 November 1914 Trotter led a delegation of African Americans to the White House to plead for the removal of racial barriers. Wilson told them that he thought black as well as white Americans benefited from separation between races. When Trotter challenged his advocacy of racial segregation and inequality, the president angrily ordered the delegation out of his office. He also approved discrimination against Asian immigrants and allowed an increasing number of American Indians to lose their land to white owners. There were limits to his New Freedom and his underlying concept of democracy.

In his family, Wilson experienced both joy and grief during the early White House years. Two daughters were married, and the third also left home to pursue a career. Wilson's greatest loss, however, was the death of his wife on 6 August 1914. Ellen Wilson had provided constant love and support, especially during his recurrent bouts of ill health. His stress manifested itself in perennial stomach disorders and hypertension. In 1896 he suffered the first of what were possibly several minor strokes. She nurtured him and encouraged him to take vacations in Great Britain and Bermuda. She also tolerated his close friendship with Mrs. Mary Allen Hulbert Peck, whom he met in Bermuda in 1907. Mrs. Peck's divorce in 1912 generated rumors during the presidential campaign about their intimate relationship, which he claimed was purely platonic. Soon after Ellen Wilson's death, the lonely president met Edith Bolling Galt ([Edith Bolling Galt Wilson](#)), whom he married on 18 December 1915. Wilson's second wife, also a southerner, furnished the emotional warmth that he so desperately needed.

America's Global Mission during Wilson's Administration

In international relations, Wilson derived his orientation from the history and political culture of the United States. At home and abroad, he believed that democracy required "progressive order." First in the New World and then in the Old, he wanted to manage change rather than suffer uncontrollable chaos or anarchy. He preferred reform to revolution. After Europe plunged into war in 1914, he applied to the Old World the vision of America's mission that he first offered to the Western Hemisphere. The rise of the United States in the global political economy and the collapse of Europe's balance of power, which the First World War clearly revealed, provided the conditions for his redefinition of America's global mission.

Beginning with a new Latin American policy in 1913, Wilson urged "the development of constitutional liberty in the world." Edward House encouraged him to negotiate a Pan-American treaty of nonaggression and political cooperation, starting with the ABC nations, Argentina, Brazil and Chile. The president maintained that this treaty, which provided mutual guarantees of territorial integrity and republican political institutions, would extend the Monroe Doctrine throughout the Western Hemisphere. At the Pan-American Scientific Congress on 6 January 1916, he called for "the ordered progress of society" in South as well as North America. The proposed treaty, he said, would provide a guarantee against both internal revolution and external aggression. Latin Americans, however, were alarmed by Wilson's Pan-Americanism, which evoked the danger of U.S. hegemony throughout the hemisphere. He eventually dropped the treaty in early 1917, but this failure did not discourage him from projecting the same idea of collective security onto the entire world.

While promoting Pan-Americanism, Wilson used military force unilaterally in the Caribbean and Latin America. The region's strategic importance for the United States increased with the 1914 opening of the Panama Canal. Despite his earlier denunciation of Taft's "dollar diplomacy," Wilson was eager to protect American economic interests. By fostering governments friendly to the United States, he sought to exclude European influence and impose American control in the region. He sent U.S. troops to occupy Haiti in 1915 and the Dominican Republic in 1916 to compel their leaders to establish "acceptable" governments and meet their financial obligations. Although Wilson promised constitutional liberty, his use of military force did not enable the United States to export its democratic political culture to these island nations. Military intervention did, however, consolidate U.S. hegemony in the Caribbean.

U.S. rivalry with Europe in Latin America became most intense during the revolution in Mexico, which caused Wilson more difficulty than any other foreign policy issue in the Western Hemisphere. Early in 1913, General Victoriano Huerta captured Mexico City, ousting Francisco Madero's revolutionary government. Madero was murdered during this counter-revolutionary coup. Refusing to recognize Huerta's new government, Wilson sought an acceptable alternative. He once remarked, "I am going to teach the South American Republics to elect good men!" Huerta turned to Europe to counter Wilson's plan to replace him through a democratic election. Failing to shape Mexico's politics by peaceful methods, Wilson resorted to military intervention. The occupation of Veracruz in April 1914, although timed to prevent the landing of a German ship with munitions and justified by the brief detention of U.S. sailors in Tampico, revealed his determination to remove Huerta. Unexpected Mexican resistance and U.S. casualties led Wilson to accept mediation by the ABC countries to end the crisis. Venustiano Carranza eventually replaced Huerta as Mexico's president, and Wilson recognized his government in October 1915. Yet Carranza, too, resisted American paternalism. He saw a threat in General [John J. Pershing's](#) punitive expedition into Mexico in March 1916 to capture [Francisco "Pancho" Villa](#), a Mexican outlaw who had raided Columbus, New Mexico. Pershing's soldiers clashed with Carranza's troops as well as Villa's. Mexico turned to Germany for military assistance. In January 1917, hoping to divert the United States from Europe by embroiling it in a war with Mexico, German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann proposed a possible alliance against the United States. This ill-conceived German plan failed. British intelligence intercepted the Zimmermann telegram and gave it to Wilson. As the United States moved toward war against Germany in 1917, Wilson

released the telegram. He also ordered Pershing's withdrawal from Mexico, which improved Mexican-American relations. But the episode left a legacy of distrust.

Pursuing Impartial Neutrality during World War I

Although Wilson had sought to keep the United States out of the European war, his efforts were failing by early 1917. U.S. relations with Germany had deteriorated before the Zimmermann telegram. From the beginning, the Great War had threatened to entangle the United States in Europe despite Wilson's pursuit of neutrality, which he proclaimed on 4 August 1914. He wanted the United States to remain aloof from both the Allies (the British, French, and Russian empires, and later Italy) and the Central Powers (the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires). He appealed to American citizens to "act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality."

Recognizing, however, that the war might threaten U.S. interests, Wilson was anxious to negotiate a compromise peace. He offered U.S. mediation and authorized Edward House, who had been in Europe on the eve of the July 1914 crisis, to continue his efforts to resolve the Anglo-German rivalry. He sent House back to Europe in February 1915 to seek a settlement between the Allies and the Central Powers and thereby protect neutral rights. Germany's decision that same month to use submarines against Allied shipping, in retaliation against the British offshore blockade of German ports, underscored the urgency of House's mission. But by April, when he returned home, it was obvious that House had failed to achieve any reconciliation between the belligerents.

On 7 May 1915 a German submarine sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania*, killing 1,198, including 124 Americans. Wilson vigorously protested. When he refused to make a comparable protest against the British blockade of German ports, Bryan resigned as secretary of state, believing that the president was no longer pursuing impartial neutrality. Yet Wilson still intended to avoid war, proclaiming that the United States was "too proud to fight." [Robert Lansing](#), Bryan's successor, also wanted to maintain U.S. neutrality, despite his belief that Kaiser Wilhelm II's Germany threatened all democratic nations.

Wilson endeavored both to keep the United States out of the European war and to protect its maritime and commercial rights. The potential contradiction between these goals reappeared when a German submarine sank the British ship *Arabic* on 19 August 1915, injuring two Americans. Wilson again issued sharp protests but refused to break diplomatic relations with Germany, as House and Lansing proposed. Germany ended the crisis by pledging to refrain from attacking passenger liners. In pursuit of neutrality, the president also pressed the Allies. On 21 October 1915 he denounced the British blockade, which restricted American access to the ports and markets of the Central Powers.

Wilson sent House back to Europe in early 1916 in search of peace. Neither Germany nor Great Britain and France welcomed House's vague proposals, and both sides resented American meddling in Europe. British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey encouraged House to focus

instead on plans for guaranteeing world peace after the war. While Grey wanted good Anglo-American relations, he hoped to prevent the United States from disrupting the Allied pursuit of victory. On 22 February 1916 Grey approved the House-Grey memorandum, which provided for Wilson to call a peace conference, with possible American mediation, if requested by the Allies. The Allies, however, never intended to invite the president to call such a conference or determine the conditions of peace with the Central Powers.

A new submarine crisis encouraged Wilson to continue searching for peace. On 24 March 1916 a German torpedo struck the English Channel steamer *Sussex*, injuring some Americans. Wilson denounced this violation of the *Arabic* pledge and demanded an unequivocal German promise to follow the cruiser warfare rules of international law. On 4 May 1916, rather than risk a diplomatic break at this time, Germany capitulated to the president's demand. In the midst of this crisis, Wilson pursued the idea of a future League of Nations, which Grey had encouraged. On 27 May 1916 the president announced his vision of collective security in an address to the League to Enforce Peace, calling for a new global community of democratic nations to preserve world peace and protect universal human rights.

The *Sussex* pledge effectively deprived Germany of the use of its submarines. Under these conditions, the United States experienced more difficulty with British maritime practices. In July 1916 Wilson protested British discrimination against American firms trading with the Central Powers. The British largely ignored this protest. Still, he seemed to have preserved U.S. neutrality, asserting the nation's rights while keeping it out of war.

The 1916 Presidential Election

Fortunately for Wilson, the 1916 presidential election came before the war in Europe shattered the illusion that the United States could remain at peace without sacrificing maritime and commercial rights. At the Democratic convention in St. Louis in June 1916 and during the subsequent campaign, Wilson benefited from his reputation as a consummate statesman who had kept the nation out of the Great War. The Republican party and its presidential nominee, [Charles Evans Hughes](#), appeared more likely to entangle the United States in Europe's conflict. With the split between "conservative" and "progressive" Republicans having been substantially healed, Hughes obtained the support of Theodore Roosevelt. But because Roosevelt openly identified with the Allies, the endorsement suggested that Hughes's election might indeed result in war.

Before the 1916 election Wilson expanded his political base among progressive constituencies. He nominated Boston attorney [Louis Brandeis](#), a trusted adviser who had helped define the New Freedom, to the Supreme Court. Confirmed by the Senate on 1 June 1916, Brandeis became the first Jew on the court. Wilson went beyond his New Freedom agenda to support reforms that the Progressive party had championed in 1912, hoping to attract Roosevelt's former constituency. On 17 July 1916 he signed the Federal Farm Loan Act, which provided credits to farmers. On 3 September 1916 he approved the Adamson Act, which guaranteed the eight-hour day to railway workers. Wilson's record of peace and progressivism enabled him to win a second term on 7 November 1916 by a narrow margin of 277 electoral votes to Hughes's 254. Wilson again carried

most southern and western states but lost several eastern and midwestern states that had supported him in 1912.

After the election, Wilson made another attempt to stop the Great War. On 18 December 1916 he asked the belligerents to state their war aims. Minimizing differences between the Allies and the Central Powers, he urged both sides to resolve the conflict through compromise and then join the United States in a postwar international order of universal collective security. Both sides, however, shunned Wilson's peace initiative.

Persevering in his search for peace, Wilson developed the idea of a new world order. In his "peace without victory" address to the Senate on 22 January 1917, he proclaimed that "the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe [[James Monroe](#)] as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people." This worldwide Monroe Doctrine in a postwar League of Nations, Wilson anticipated, would replace Europe's discredited balance of power and old alliances. "There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace." This was his vision of a new "covenant" among democratic nations.

Declaration of War (1917)

Germany's decision to begin unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917 ended Wilson's pursuit of impartial U.S. neutrality. On 9 January, in a desperate attempt to win the war, Kaiser Wilhelm II had approved the new submarine policy. After the Germans announced their new submarine warfare, the president in early February broke diplomatic relations with Germany but still hoped to avoid war. But in mid-March 1917, when German submarines sank three U.S. ships, Wilson was forced to make a choice. No longer able to remain at peace and protect the nation's maritime and commercial interests, Wilson led the United States into the European conflict shortly after the inauguration of his second term. At a special session of the new Congress on 2 April 1917, denouncing Germany's autocratic government and its submarine warfare, he called for war to liberate all nations from this threat, including the Germans themselves. He proclaimed that "the world must be made safe for democracy." Four days later, Congress declared war against Germany.

As commander in chief, Wilson appointed Pershing to take charge of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in Europe. But the United States had prepared for a defensive war against Germany, not for fighting in Europe. Only after declaring war did Congress pass and Wilson sign, on 18 May 1917, the Selective Service Act giving the federal government the power to draft young men into the U.S. armed forces. The War and Navy departments, under [Newton D. Baker](#) and [Josephus Daniels](#), respectively, created the AEF and transported it to France. The AEF required a year to organize and train before it began to make a significant military contribution to the war.

On the home front, the president exerted vigorous executive leadership. To manage public opinion, he established the Committee on Public Information under [George Creel](#). Using the

authority granted to him by Congress under the Espionage Act of June 1917, the Trading with the Enemy Act of October 1917, and the Sedition Act of May 1918, Wilson acted to silence radical critics of the war, such as Eugene Debs and the Socialist party. The Lever Act of August 1917 enabled Wilson to mobilize the economy by creating the Food Administration under [Herbert Hoover](#) and the Fuel Administration under [Harry Garfield](#). To solve the transportation crisis, the president consolidated railroads under the Railroad Administration, which McAdoo managed in addition to the Treasury. In March 1918 Wilson placed [Bernard Baruch](#) in charge of the War Industries Board to harness key industries for wartime production. The National War Labor Board, under former president Taft and labor lawyer [Frank P. Walsh](#), mediated labor-management disputes to prevent strikes. All these wartime measures gave the Wilson administration unprecedented powers over the daily life of Americans.

Wilson's Fourteen Points

Russia's 1917 revolution seemed at first to justify Wilson's wartime crusade for democracy. The new provisional government, which he welcomed in March, promised to replace the czarist regime with constitutional liberty. But after the Bolshevik revolution in November, the president refused to recognize Vladimir I. Lenin's Soviet government. Rejecting its worldwide appeal for peace and revolution, Wilson on 8 January 1918 outlined his vision of progressive order in the Fourteen Points address to Congress. His plan called for open diplomacy, freedom of navigation and commerce, disarmament, national self-determination, and a postwar League of Nations. Wilson insisted that the Fourteen Points promised a new world order far superior to Lenin's socialism or communism. He also approved limited U.S. and Allied military intervention in northern Russia and Siberia in 1918, having convinced himself that this would help the Russian people resist their common German and Bolshevik enemies and remain with the United States and the Allies in the war. But revolutionary developments in Russia, as in Mexico, eluded Wilson's control.

On the western front, after Soviet Russia abandoned the war, the Central Powers threatened to defeat the Allies in 1918 before the United States could provide much relief. British and French forces absorbed the brunt of Germany's summer offensive before Pershing's AEF contributed decisively to the Allied victory. In October 1918, facing military defeat, Germany appealed to Wilson for peace on the basis of his Fourteen Points. He sent House to Europe to commit the Allies as well as Germany to these terms. On this basis, but with reservations, the victorious and defeated enemies concluded the armistice on 11 November 1918, ending the war.

Wilson participated personally in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Of the five great powers, only Great Britain, France and Italy were European; the United States and Japan came from outside. Russia was conspicuously absent. German delegates from the new Weimar Republic, which had replaced Kaiser Wilhelm II, arrived only after Wilson and Allied leaders prepared the peace treaty. Some new nations, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, were welcomed, but others were not. Wilson applied the principle of national self-determination with caution against the defeated enemy. In the Jones Act of 1916, the United States had promised independence for the Philippines, but Wilson chose to postpone it. Likewise, he accepted continuing British rule in

Ireland, Egypt, and India as well as French rule in Indochina. He recognized only the new nations that had been carved out of the defeated Central Powers in Europe.

Formation of the League of Nations

At the heart of Wilson's peace program was the new League of Nations. He made drafting the covenant for this new international organization his top priority and insisted on its inclusion in the peace treaty. He and British prime minister David Lloyd George anticipated Germany's eventual membership in the league. Wanting an anti-German alliance instead, French premier Georges Clemenceau sought to restore Europe's balance of power. In collaboration with the British, Wilson succeeded at Paris in drafting the covenant as he desired. It promised both order and change in international relations. Article 10 offered a mutual guarantee of territorial integrity and political independence for nations in the new league, yet Article 19 anticipated future revision of the peace settlement. The covenant thus embodied Wilson's vision of "progressive order." On 14 February 1919 he presented it to the peace conference, stressing that "throughout this instrument we are depending primarily and chiefly upon one great force, and that is the moral force of the public opinion of the world." The president realized, however, that military force might be needed "if the moral force of the world will not suffice." He viewed the league as a practical way to reform the Old World on an ongoing basis.

Wilson compromised with the Allies in other areas to win their approval of the league covenant. He acquiesced in Clemenceau's request for continued U.S. and Allied military occupation of the Rhineland. He and Lloyd George also approved separate guarantees of French security, promising to defend France against future German aggression. Wilson and Allied leaders also decided to disarm Germany, force it to relinquish some of its territory and all of its colonies, and require it to pay an unspecified amount of reparations. The covenant disappointed the Japanese because it did not affirm racial equality, a principle they had sought to add by amending the Anglo-American draft. To gain Japan's approval of the covenant after helping the British defeat this amendment, Wilson agreed with the Allied leaders to permit Japan to replace Germany in the Shantung province of China.

Germans almost universally denounced the peace treaty, which included the covenant, that their delegation received at Versailles on 7 May 1919. They claimed that it violated the Fourteen Points. Approving only a few concessions, the president joined the Allies and compelled Germany to sign the treaty on 28 June 1919.

The Rejection of the Versailles Treaty by Congress

On his return home, Wilson presented the treaty to the Senate. "We entered the war as the disinterested champions of right, and we interested ourselves in the terms of the peace in no other capacity," he asserted on 10 July 1919. Although the treaty embodied the Fourteen Points, "it was not easy to graft the new order of ideas on the old." Wilson called the League of Nations

"not merely an instrument to adjust and remedy old wrongs under a new treaty of peace"; it was, he said, the "only hope for mankind." Affirming, moreover, that America's global mission was God-given, he concluded: "It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way."

Once Wilson identified the Versailles treaty not only with his Fourteen Points but also God's will, he refused to compromise. He rejected all amendments and reservations to the treaty, firmly resisting efforts by Republican senators, and even some Democrats, to limit U.S. obligations in the postwar league. As Stockton Axson noted at the time, Wilson was "uncompromising, unforgiving, stubborn." The president's great foe in the treaty fight was Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, leader of the Republican majority and chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It soon became apparent that the Senate would not approve the treaty without attaching strong reservations, if not amendments, to the ratification resolution. Wilson once more decided to appeal directly to the American people and in September 1919 went on a speaking tour of western states. Among other arguments, he advocated U.S. membership in the league so as to contain Bolshevism. Although Wilson contributed to the Red Scare--the grossly exaggerated fears of radical subversion at home as well as abroad--he failed to mobilize public opinion effectively against Lodge and the Republican-controlled Senate. During the western tour, Wilson's health collapsed. On 2 October 1919, back in Washington, he suffered a massive stroke.

With Edith Wilson's assistance, and that of his loyal private secretary [Joseph P. Tumulty](#), the president managed to finish his term but could exercise only minimal leadership during the remaining months. While his cabinet members ran their departments largely on their own, he focused primarily on the treaty fight. After the stroke, Wilson rigidly adhered to his position on the Versailles treaty. Nebraska senator [Gilbert M. Hitchcock](#), the Democratic minority leader, followed the president's direction. Together, they stopped Democratic senators from compromising with Republicans to win a two-thirds majority for the treaty with the Lodge reservations, thereby ensuring its defeat. When Wilson perceived that the cabinet was too independent, he forced Lansing's resignation as secretary of state on 12 February 1920 and replaced him with [Bainbridge Colby](#), who faithfully maintained Wilson's uncompromising stance. The Senate rejected the treaty on 19 November 1919 and again on 19 March 1920, thereby preventing the United States from joining the League of Nations.

The Politics of Wilsonianism: A Lasting Legacy for the Twentieth Century

Wilson's techniques of presidential leadership were no longer effective. The president's physical incapacity was matched by his diminished political leverage. In the 1918 elections the Democrats had lost their majority in both the House and Senate, and now he experienced a strong backlash against his wartime powers. The postwar deregulation of production, prices, and wages resulted in high inflation and labor strikes in 1919, followed by recession in 1920. Adding to social unrest was the rapid demobilization of Pershing's AEF, an upsurge in urban race riots and rural lynchings directed against African Americans, and scapegoating of striking workers and socialists, who were crudely caricatured as the causes of postwar turmoil and anxiety. The Red

Scare, nurtured by Attorney General [A. Mitchell Palmer](#) and other members of Wilson's cabinet, provided a rationale for repression. Outside Washington other politicians and industrialists also called for "law and order" to enable them to retain their control of the political economy. Given Wilson's neglect of postwar reconstruction at home and his attitude toward radical or marginal groups, he bore some responsibility for the lack of domestic comity.

American voters rejected Wilson's leadership and priorities in the 1920 presidential election. Though gravely ill, he had considered running for a third term to make it "a great and solemn referendum" on the League of Nations, but his closest associates forced him to abandon this foolish idea. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which had just been ratified, extended voting rights to women in 1920. Although Wilson had finally, in 1918, endorsed woman suffrage as an essential wartime reform in his global crusade for democracy, this expansion of the American electorate did not help the Democrats. On 2 November 1920 Republican senator [Warren G. Harding](#) won a landslide victory over Democratic nominee [James Cox](#), who had attempted to defend Wilson's legacy. The American people wanted less government at home and less entanglement abroad--Harding's "normalcy" instead of more Wilsonian reform.

Woodrow and Edith Wilson retired to their home in Washington on 4 March 1921. Having experienced both phenomenal triumphs and great failures, the former president lived there in relative obscurity. He reaffirmed his most basic beliefs in a final article, "The Road away from Revolution," in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Aug. 1923). To protect "modern civilization" against communist revolution, he urged Americans to draw on "the spiritual life" to reform capitalism and preserve democracy. He wanted to save "Christian civilization" in the United States by infusing it with "the spirit of Christ." He thought this nation, as "the greatest of democracies," should keep the world "safe for democracy." Although the United States had apparently repudiated his vision of America's global mission, Wilson remained faithful to the tenets of Wilsonianism--a progressive and peaceful world order with democracy and capitalism, national self-determination and collective security--which would shape much of American history throughout the twentieth century. He died at home in Washington.

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