Woodrow Wilson led the American people into World War I not just to win the war but also to win the peace—that is, to create peacetime conditions that would rule out war in the future. Wilson hated war; it violated his moral and religious principles and caused innocent people undue suffering. Wilson also hated war because it disrupted the international trade that kept America strong. Wilson believed that America and other nations would be best served if countries could settle their disputes without war and continue to trade peacefully. Long before the war ended, Wilson began arguing for peace terms that would establish more orderly relations among the world’s major countries. He expressed his vision of the postwar world most clearly in his Fourteen Points address, which he delivered before Congress on January 8, 1918.

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Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points

Delivered in a Joint Session of Congress, January 8, 1918

Reprinted from the World War I Document Archive, available online at http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1918/14points.html

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Woodrow Wilson is best known for his leadership of the United States during World War I and for his dramatic statements about the need for world peace. However, he spent most of his political career campaigning for reforms (policy changes) in the United States. Wilson was known as a progressive politician, which meant that he favored reforms in American government that were designed to limit the power of corporations, provide basic protections for consumers, and give common people a bigger role in their government. He was part of a generation of politicians who had great influence on American government from 1900 to 1920.

Wilson was born in 1856, the son of a highly educated Presbyterian minister. He was a slow learner, not learning to read until he was almost twelve years old, but he developed quickly in high school and became a popular public speaker and athlete while attending Princeton University in New Jersey. Wilson later studied law and history, earning a doctorate degree in history from Johns Hopkins University in 1885. Wilson became a professor at Princeton University and later became the president of Princeton. His success as a university president launched him on his political career.

Wilson was elected as the Democratic governor of New Jersey in 1910. During his two years in office he pushed through progressive laws that gave voters a stronger voice in electing state officials, regulated public utilities like electricity and gas, reorganized the school system, established workmen’s compensation (payment for on-the-job injuries), and fought corruption in state politics. His strengths as governor brought him national acclaim and earned him the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912.

Wilson campaigned on a platform of reforms he called “The New Freedom.” He beat incumbent president William Howard Taft, former president Theodore Roosevelt, and Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs to become president in 1912. Within just a few years the major elements of Wilson’s “New Freedom” plan were passed into law: child labor restrictions; laws establishing better working conditions, trade among nations, smaller armies, and new negotiations on colonial holdings that respected the people in those colonies. Points six through thirteen proposed specific territorial adjustments, most of which were interpreted as punishments for members of the Central Powers. These points granted territory
for sailors and railroad workers; a progressive income tax; the Federal Reserve System to regulate the nation’s banks; and the Federal Trade Commission to prevent unfair monopolies in business. But Wilson’s domestic accomplishments would soon be overshadowed by the war in Europe.

When World War I started in Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson had conflicting goals: He wanted to keep the United States neutral and try to end the war by acting as a mediator. But he also wanted to protect the rights of Americans to trade wherever they chose. For nearly three years Wilson kept the United States neutral. But when German submarines began to attack U.S. ships in an effort to prevent supplies from reaching Britain, Wilson felt that he could no longer keep America out of the war.

Though Wilson led his country into war alongside the Allies on April 6, 1917, he continued to promote his vision of a more peaceful world. Wilson believed that strong trade and open communications between countries would make war unnecessary. In several speeches Wilson expressed his vision of a peaceful postwar world; his most famous speech is known as the Fourteen Points address. Among the points was a call for an international organization dedicated to keeping peace between nations; Wilson called it the League of Nations.

Pushing for the United States to join the League of Nations was Wilson’s political and personal downfall. Many Americans were not willing to become involved in world politics; they believed that the United States was better off making political decisions based solely on her own needs. Wilson spent his physical health and his political power promoting the idea of the League of Nations; but the Senate rejected the treaty that called for U.S. participation in the league, and Wilson’s political party lost the presidential election of 1920. Wilson died on February 3, 1924. Rarely in American history have presidents made such an impact on both domestic and foreign policy. Wilson is widely considered to be one of the greatest presidents of the twentieth century.
between countries. This League of Nations, as it came to be called, was the most radical of Wilson’s proposals and later met with intense opposition in the United States.

Things to remember while reading Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points:

- The Fourteen Points address came well before the end of the war, and before the United States had played a major role in the fighting. Germany reacted with anger at the suggestion that she give up so much, and some historians believe that the Fourteen Points kept the Germans fighting longer than they might have otherwise.

- Wilson’s Fourteen Points address gained him a great deal of support in the United States and overseas, for it seemed to indicate that the president was truly looking out for the good of the world and would avoid the kind of secret treaties that had started the war in the first place. After this speech, Wilson became the most respected spokesman for Allied war efforts.

Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points

Gentlemen of the Congress:

Once more, as repeatedly before, the spokesmen of the Central Empires have indicated their desire to discuss the objects of the war and the possible basis of a general peace. . . .

. . .[T]hey have again attempted to acquaint the world with their objects in the war and have again challenged their adversaries to say what their objects are and what sort of settlement they would deem just and satisfactory. There is no good reason why that challenge should not be responded to, and responded to with the utmost candor. We did not wait for it. Not once, but again and again, we have laid our whole thought and purpose before the world, not in general terms only, but each time with sufficient definition to make it clear what sort of definite terms of settlement must necessarily spring out of them. . . .
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 insti-
tutions, 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 the matter of Alsace-Lorraine: Alsace-Lorraine is a region that was taken from France by Germany (formerly called Prussia) in 1871; the French had long believed that they should get the territory back, and they did at the end of World War I.

Autonomous: Independent; without the interference of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Rumania: Romania.

Territorial integrity: This phrase refers to the rightful borders of the various Balkan countries, a matter that was in dispute for much of the twentieth century.

Unmolested: Unbothered; as before, Wilson is indicating his preference that the people of a country or region be allowed to determine their own political future without the interference of others.

Dardanelles: A strait between Europe and Turkey in Asia, connecting the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara.

Guarantees: Treaties or agreements; in this case, those that protect the rights of ships on the sea.
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. . . . 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.

We have spoken now, surely, in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the **vindication** of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything they possess. The moral climax of this the **culminating** and final war for human liberty has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.

What happened next . . .

With the help of the United States, the Allies went on to win the war, and Wilson’s Fourteen Points provided the framework for the Treaty of Versailles, the major treaty that settled issues between the warring nations. However, the treaty was not nearly as fair as Wilson had hoped; it split up territories among the victorious European powers and punished Germany severely. The Treaty of Versailles was also the cause of
Wilson’s political downfall. The treaty, which Wilson helped to write, called for the United States to become part of the League of Nations. Wilson and his supporters—called internationalists—believed that America’s future prosperity would lie in global trade. They thought that the United States should protect its economic interests overseas by cooperating with other countries to avoid warfare and other disruptions of trade. Wilson’s opponents—who dominated the Senate—were known as isolationists. They believed that the United States was better off avoiding entanglements with foreign countries and that America should concentrate on building up its domestic economy.

Isolationist senators were dead set against America joining the League of Nations, and they took their campaign to the American people. Wilson did the same, traveling around the country promoting his peace plan. In the end the Senate was too strong and Wilson too weak. The Senate defeated the Treaty of Versailles, which meant that America would not
enter the League of Nations. Many historians see America’s refusal to join the League of Nations as a contributing factor in the coming of World War II. If it had joined the league, they believe, America might have been able to stop the rise of Hitler’s Germany. In 1945 the United States did join an international organization designed to promote world peace, the United Nations.

**Did you know . . .**

- Campaigning for the Treaty of Versailles nearly killed President Woodrow Wilson. While on a whirlwind speaking tour of the United States to drum up support for the treaty, Wilson suffered a stroke and was virtually incapacitated for several months. He never fully recovered his health and left office in 1921 a broken man.

- Several of Wilson’s ideas for the peace treaty were rejected. Germany was punished far more severely than Wilson had
wished, and France and England profited more than Wilson had intended.

- Though American troops stopped fighting in November 1918 along with everybody else, it took until July 1921 for the United States Congress to pass a simple declaration stating that America’s war with Germany was over.

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