
**FIRST DRAFT OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY:
WILSON'S FOURTEEN POINTS, A NEW EUROPE,
AND FAILURE AT VERSAILLES**

ONE HUNDRED YEARS of American policy toward Central and Eastern Europe arguably begins with President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points – presented in his January 8, 1918 speech to Congress – a rough draft of American Grand Strategy in what has been called the American Century.

It is worth recalling the moment: the Great War, the bloodiest in human history to date, was at its height and Germany was in a position to win. In the West, Imperial Germany occupied most of Belgium and held large areas of France. In the East, Germany had defeated Russia, now led by Vladimir Lenin, Lev Trotsky, and the Bolsheviks.

After just weeks in power, the Bolsheviks were preparing to capitulate to Germany, but far from feeling defeated, they proclaimed that the outcome of the imperialist war, as they saw World War I, was irrelevant. They believed that the time for socialist revolution had come; they predicted general revolution which would sweep away the old European order, and were nearly proven right.

For their part, the French, British, and Italian Allies, and Germany and Austria-Hungary as well, had fought within the established European balance-of-power framework. Their war aims were included in secret treaties which involved territorial seizures of the sort victorious European governments had practiced for centuries. Their peoples literally did not know what they were fighting for until Lenin and Trotsky published some of the secret arrangements to discredit the “imperialist” powers and justify their own position of removing Russia from the War.

Meanwhile, the established Central European order was dying. Created by force with the 1795 final partition of the Polish-Lith-

**Context of Wilson's
Fourteen Points**

uanian Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia (later Germany), and Austria, and affirmed and extended at the Congress of Vienna, the Central European status quo relied on the strength of these states. However, Russia was in revolutionary upheaval, Germany only months from its own near-revolution, and Austria-Hungary already on its last legs (for all the virtues of the conservative, multinational Dual Monarchy, history's verdict was not going to be kind). The Poles did not yet know it, but the partitioning powers of 1795 were about to be put out of commission, at least temporarily. When that opportunity came in the fall of 1918, the Poles would launch their first successful national uprising since the defeat of Swedish rule in the 1650s.

America now entered this seething mix of war, revolution, and empires. America had declared war on Germany the previous April, confident that it had the power to reverse battlefield fortunes fast, correctly as it turned out. President Wilson and America's senior military officer, General John Pershing, had held back American units from Europe, preferring instead to raise and train an army of overwhelming power and commit it to battle as a whole, rather than have individual units deployed and ground up piecemeal on the Western Front. By January 1918, with the American Expeditionary Force about to arrive in France in strength, Wilson delivered America's war aims.

The Fourteen Points themselves had been prepared by a secret United States Government group – called “The Inquiry” – launched at Wilson's instructions by his national security advisor (equivalent), Edward (“Colonel”) House. House sought out a rising young journalist from New York, Walter Lippmann, as one of the leaders of The Inquiry. The Inquiry's work was colored by the public revelation of the Allies' secret treaties which spelled out their war aims in Europe: among the arrangements, France would get from Germany Alsace-Lorraine and parts of the Saar; the UK would acquire Germany's African colonies; Italy would pick up much of the Adriatic coast; and Japan would get China's Shantung Peninsula.

The Bolsheviks' publication of the secret treaties was a potential political disaster for Wilson, who had brought America into the War on more principled premises, on the basis of which he

The Fourteen Points, by intention, challenged the substance of the Allied war aims and their zero-sum, balance-of-power premise; and simultaneously countered Lenin's revolutionary theses:

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willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world... We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world."

- Point Six covered **Russia**, which was to be “welcomed 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.” This was partly intended to signal to the Bolsheviks, whose character the United States did not yet know, that they had an alternative to surrender to the Germans through the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty then being negotiated.

Wilson was prepared to welcome post-Tsarist Russia to post-Great War arrangements, but as a country, not an empire. At Edward House’s instruction some months later, in preparation for the Versailles Peace Conference, Lippmann wrote an interpretive memorandum for Wilson¹ that, among other things, spelled out that Point Six meant Finnish, Baltic, and possibly Ukrainian independence, and even some form of international protectorate for Central Asia. Decades later, this approach was still applicable: in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, US policy took up where Wilson left off, embracing the nations emerging from another Russian imperial collapse and, under the conditions that Russia abandon its imperial claims, welcomed Russia into the society of free nations.

- Points Seven through Thirteen outlined a **general European and post-Ottoman settlement**, including among other things ethnic-based nations in Central and Eastern Europe and the **reemergence of Poland**. Ambiguously, Point Ten called for “autonomous development” of the “people” (not “peoples”) of Austria-Hungary, still standing as of January 1918, and not explicitly for its breakup. Point Twelve did the same for the Ottoman Empire

Somewhat inconsistently and famously, however, Point Thirteen called for the resurrection of an independent

¹ Interpretive memo for Wilson by Lippman
a. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/doc31.htm>

Polish State, including “*territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations*” with access to the sea, and its “*political and economic independence and territorial integrity...guaranteed by international covenants.*” That implied, per Point Fourteen, that Poland’s existence would be guaranteed by the League of Nations including – it was then assumed -- the United States. This was a remarkable political commitment to Poland’s security.

None of this would prove easy, either at the time or later. Lippmann’s interpretive memorandum itself recognized the practical problems of applying Point Thirteen on the ground, where the lines of nationality did not correspond with the principle of national viability or self-determination. Lippmann went on to become America’s foremost foreign policy commentator and journalist of the 20th century, someone who for two generations defined the mainstream thinking of the American foreign policy establishment. The issues of Poland, Russia, and Central Europe would challenge him for years to come.

Read today, the Fourteen Points make a powerful impression. What self-confidence America had! With the American frontier and Civil War still living memories, still considered cultural provincials, even by themselves, the Americans asserted world leadership in general and offered themselves, through the League of Nations, as the guarantor of a general European and Transatlantic peace. The Fourteen Points were the first rollout of the American Grand Strategy in the American Century. They were not simply abstract American “idealism” or charity, but based on canny assumptions:

- Yankee ingenuity would flourish best in a rules-based, open world without economic empires.
- America’s interests would advance with democracy and the rule of law.
- America would prosper when other nations did as well.
- The US thus could make the world a better place and get rich in the process.

These assumptions about peace resting on principle were not original to Wilson: Immanuel Kant’s Theory of Perpetual Peace

**The first American
Grand Strategy**

between Republics made similar assumptions about international security resting on a set of values shared among nations. But America had the audacity to try to put this into practice. This made America exceptional among the Great Powers.

Historians have not been kind to Wilson or the Fourteen Points. They have fairly noted the inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and nasty unintended consequences of Wilson's outline of American global leadership. Self-determination is easier stated as a principle than put into practice. Wilson's racial bigotry, even for his time, is a hard mark against him. But let us also consider the Fourteen Points by the standards of the competition: Lenin's world socialist revolution or French Prime Minister George Clemenceau's great power system which, to use the contemporary phrase, could be called France First. Wilson's vision – a rough first draft of a rules-based, liberal world order or, as we have come to call it, the Free World -- stands up well 100 years later.

Failure of the Fourteen Points

Wilson's Fourteen Points needed to survive their first encounter with reality, and did not fare well. Clemenceau gave a great and prophetic assessment of the Fourteen Points in his quip, "*God gave us the Ten Commandments and we broke them. Wilson gives us the Fourteen Points. We shall see.*" What American diplomat presenting a bold idea from Washington has not received that sort of French smackdown!

Indeed, the Fourteen Points faltered. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, Wilson almost immediately would have to face the gap between the principles he had set out, reality on the ground, and the interests of the other Great Powers. Upon his arrival in France, Wilson was greeted with rapturous crowds and counted on public pressure in Europe forcing Allied governments at least to bend in the direction of the Fourteen Points. But he overestimated his ability translate popularity into political power.

Much has been written about the shortcomings of the Versailles Treaty and Treaty of Trianon, devoted to the post-Austro-Hungarian settlement. The American vision failed in three ways.

The first, mostly unavoidable, was in Central Europe. The principle of self-determination, as it appeared in Point Thirteen calling for a Polish state including "*territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations*," was easier said than done. In general, and particularly in Central Europe, people did not live in territories convenient for the drawing of new international borders. The Polish delegates at Versailles sought a Poland roughly based on (though smaller than) the vast pre-partition territory of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They had a case, and were supported by the French who wanted a big Poland as a counter against Germany and Bolshevik Russia.

Wilson and British Prime Minister Lloyd George, however, argued for an ethnically homogenous Poland. They also had a case. But the first option was beyond Poland's power to establish under the chaos of the time, even if it had received more support from the French and Americans. The second option was impossible, given the reality of where people lived: cities were often Polish and Jewish; but the countryside was mixed, inhabited by Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, and Jews in the East; and Lithuanians, Poles, and Jews in the North. Western Poland, Silesia, and the corridor to Danzig/Gdansk, which Wilson had promised to Poland in Point Thirteen, contained many Germans.

No boundary line could create an ethnically-homogenous Polish state. National viability and reality clashed with ethnic homogeneity. In the end, Poland's Eastern borders ended where the battles in 1919 and 1920 left them: Poland had not pushed its borders out to the 1772 lines of the old Commonwealth, but well past the closest thing possible to a line of ethnic demarcation.

Czechoslovakia was similarly complicated, with millions of Germans living in the Sudetenland and Hungarians in what is now southern Slovakia. Czechoslovakia itself was largely run by the Czechs, with Masaryk's promise of Slovak autonomy largely disregarded.

Millions of ethnic-Hungarians found themselves outside the new borders of Hungary, instead in the Vojvodina region of the new

Kingdom of Yugoslavia or in Romanian Transylvania, where they lived not adjacent to the border but deep in the interior, with ethnic Romanians living between them and the new border with Hungary.

Wilson and his team discovered, as have generations of American leaders and policy makers after them, that realities on the ground complicate the best of theories. When the dust settled – when the post-1918 wars of imperial succession and revolution ended – Central Europe consisted of free and hopeful, but insecure, imperfectly organized, vulnerable, and sometimes poor countries:

- Poland and Romania were nation states with large minorities and border disputes with their neighbors;
- Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were multinational in theory but dominated by one constituent nation;
- Hungary was more homogenous, but embittered by the loss of so much territory.

The second failure at Versailles involved Germany: Wilson had not achieved its integration into the post-War system, as his Fourteen Points speech had advocated, nor was he willing to invest the resources to occupy and control it, as the United States did after 1945. This failure was linked to the larger problem of European recovery. Clemenceau and Lloyd George, facing massive debts and (in France's case) devastation, looked to German reparations to make up their losses. Lloyd George ran for and won re-election in December 1918 on the promise to squeeze the Germans. Versailles, notoriously, took the weak Weimar Republic and imposed on it insurmountable debt.

The alternative to financing French and UK recovery with German reparations would have been some sort of Marshall Plan, with the US in the lead, e.g., by canceling inter-allied debts as was advocated by the great British economist John Maynard Keynes, or some early version of the European Coal and Steel Community, forerunner of the European Union, as French Industry Minister Etienne Clementel proposed.

Such bold solutions would have been consistent with Wilson's thinking and American Grand Strategy. But they were too much for the Europeans or even the Americans of 1919. Neither was

ready for such transnational thinking in practice. It would take another world war before transatlantic leaders would learn the necessary lessons about transcending nationalist thinking. At the time, the Americans were having none of it and, fearing being tied to European finances, agreed to harsh German reparations. Unsustainable war reparations, forcing Germany to take political responsibility for the War, and leaving the new German republic in isolation opened the field to German nationalists, giving pro-Western Germans no place to turn.

The third and most profound failure was America's unwillingness to underwrite with its power the flawed but potentially workable peace which emerged. Versailles did not fully reflect the Fourteen Points. But it still left much for the US to work with to shape a European peace: the Bolsheviks were then weak and inward-looking; the emerging nations in Central Europe were seeking allies and models; even after Versailles, the Germans still had pro-Western leaders who might have responded to American offers. The weaknesses of Versailles (and Trianon) might have been overcome had the United States joined the League of Nations and taken responsibility for the implementation of the peace of which it was an author. The United States might have offered cancellation of Allied war debts owed to the US in exchange for less onerous reparations from Germany. It might have offered to underwrite European security, leveraging that offer to convince Clemenceau to ease up on Germany, thus bolstering the pro-Western Germans and making Weimer Germany potentially viable. In short, the United States might have offered resources commensurate with its vision to shape and implement the peace.

Instead, America went home. Wilson's weaknesses – tactical rigidity chief among them – killed Senate ratification of the League of Nations in early 1920. In the course of his campaign to convince the Senate to pass it, Wilson had a stroke and never functioned fully as President again.

America left the Germans to themselves, the French to deal with the Germans, and, having acted as sponsor of Polish, Czechoslovak, and Yugoslav independence, decided that support for these

American retreats

countries was beyond us. America retreated from the vision of the Fourteen Points, not to return to it until after the next war.

Wilson, House, and Lippmann had sought to construct a post-War European order without presumption of a divided Europe; there was no principled difference in the Fourteen Points between Europe East and Europe West. But Wilson died and Lippmann never again attempted to think of Europe in undivided terms.

America would not make such a bold effort to look at Europe whole until after 1989, though Ronald Reagan was headed in that direction. The Fourteen Points were a high-water mark, to which the United States would not return for three generations.