



# Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points

David McGill looks at Wilson's Fourteen Points and considers why others were unwilling to adopt them all

The conflict that engulfed Europe between 1914 and 1918 accounted for almost 10 million dead and many more injured. Whole school years of leavers in certain countries were effectively decimated. Erich Maria Remarque spoke of a 'generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war'. Those looking on from afar were horrified and bewildered by this bloodletting. How had it started? How could it end? Could it be prevented in the future? Those fighting in it shared these feelings. The Great War as it was known also became 'the war to end war'. Many believed that if the bloodshed was to have any meaning then it must be to ensure future conflicts were never again as bloody as this one.

## The USA

The USA was one such onlooker. Despite various pressures to join the fighting the USA initially resisted getting involved. However it was selling

weapons and supplies, principally to the British and French, and these were being transported to Europe across the Atlantic Ocean. Millions of Americans whose families had emigrated from Germany and Austria-Hungary pressured the US government to rein back such support but it was difficult to do so. The German government clearly felt the USA was aiding its enemies and began to target its shipping with 'unrestricted' submarine warfare. It also encouraged a campaign of sabotage and even went so far as to consider supporting Mexico in an attack on the USA.

## Source B

The Zimmerman telegram (Alfred Zimmerman was the German under foreign secretary):

*Berlin January 19, 1917. On the first of February we intend to begin submarine warfare unrestricted. In spite of this it is our intention to keep neutral the United States of America. If this attempt is not successful we propose an alliance on the following basis with Mexico: that we shall make war together and together make peace. We shall give general financial support, and it is understood that Mexico is to reconquer lost territory.*

## Source A

The *HMS Lusitania*. An ocean liner sunk by a German U-boat in 1915 with the loss of 1,195 people (128 American)

1 Study Source A. How might the sinking of the *Lusitania* and other US merchant ships influence Wilson in deciding whether to enter the war?

2 Study Source B. What might the US reaction be to this telegram?

### Source C

Woodrow Wilson



### President Wilson

The US president at the time was Woodrow Wilson. He had become president in 1913. He was an idealistic man who had passed a series of reforming acts once in power. He had tried to avoid entering the war by maintaining his policy of 'armed neutrality' but the conflict was forcing him to take sides.

German actions made this calculation easier but it is clear that Wilson genuinely believed that by entering the war on the side of the British and French he was doing the right thing. The fact that Russia had recently overthrown its tsar and was now committed to democratic elections under a Provisional Government made the decision easier. On 2 April 1917 Wilson received the support of Congress and on 6 April the USA entered the war against Germany and its allies.

Once the Americans joined the war they were soon committed to fighting on the Western Front. The US navy assisted the British in combating U-boats and hundreds of thousands of men

3 Study Source D. What reasons does Wilson give for entering the war on the side of the Allies?

4 Study Source E. What points do you think were realistic? What points do you think would be difficult to implement?

### Source D

Wilson's speech to Congress, 6 April 1917:

*It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilisation itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts — for democracy, for the right of these who submit to authority to have a voice in their won governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.*

were conscripted and sent to France under the command of General Pershing. Wilson created new organisations to finance the war and support Allied economies. He raised income tax to pay for it. US industry and enthusiasm were going to be critical to Allied success and the Germans soon realised that even their victories on the Eastern Front would not free enough men and material to defeat their enemies.

### The Fourteen Points

As his commitment to the war intensified Woodrow Wilson gave increasing thought to what would follow. He had promised in his speech on entering the war to make 'the world at last free':

- What did that mean in reality?
- How could this be the 'war to end war'?
- What practical measures could prevent such a conflict reoccurring?

Wilson believed that a number of factors had caused the war and that some of these were linked to the system of international diplomacy that had dominated Europe before 1914. Treaties between states had created armed blocs that had raised tensions. There had been no forum to settle disputes before they became militarised. Empires had carved up the globe and policed their dominions with navies that had prevented other powers from

### Source E

#### President Wilson's Fourteen Points

- 1 No more secret agreements.
- 2 Free navigation of all seas.
- 3 An end to economic barriers between countries.
- 4 Countries to reduce weapon numbers.
- 5 All decisions regarding the colonies should be impartial.
- 6 The German Army is to be removed from Russia. Russia should be left to develop its own political set up.
- 7 Belgium should be independent like before the war.
- 8 France should be fully liberated and allowed to recover Alsace-Lorraine.
- 9 All Italians are to be allowed to live in Italy. Italy's borders are to be 'along clearly recognisable lines of nationality'.
- 10 Self-determination should be allowed for all those living in Austria-Hungary.
- 11 Self-determination and guarantees of independence should be allowed for the Balkan states.
- 12 The Turkish people should be governed by the Turkish government. Non-Turks in the old Turkish empire should govern themselves.
- 13 An independent Poland should be created with access to the sea.
- 14 A League of Nations should be set up to guarantee the political and territorial independence of all states.



trading. Such problems could be solved in future by a number of proposals or 'points'. Wilson settled on fourteen key ones.

President Wilson outlined these Fourteen Points in another speech to Congress in January 1918. What is interesting about the Fourteen Points is that as a group they combined some very specific and practical plans with some much loftier and noble aspirations. For example, Point 7 demanded a return to Belgium independence and Point 8 stated France would get back Alsace and Lorraine. However, Point 1 demanded 'no more secret agreements', Point 2 promised 'Freedom of the seas' while Point 14 set up a 'League of Nations'. Clearly some of these would be practicable while others would be much harder to implement. Who would end, as Point 3 required, 'all economic barriers between countries' and how would 'self-determination' be allowed for 'all those living in Austria-Hungary' (Point 10)? It was these unresolvable dilemmas inherent in Wilson's Fourteen Points that would cause problems at the end of the war.

## Reaction

At the time Wilson made his speech few foreign powers paid much attention to it. Germany still thought it could win the war, Russia was sliding into civil war and the British and French were making their own plans for the postwar world. Nonetheless, the Fourteen Points made an impact with the general public across Europe and when the war turned against the Germans it was to Wilson that they directed their pleas when attempting to sue for an armistice and settlement. In fact Wilson

was not as naïve as they assumed. When they did sign an armistice the Germans found that as well as accepting the Fourteen Points they were forced to depose the kaiser, retreat from all occupied territories and surrender all military forces.

## Legacy

Woodrow Wilson hoped his Fourteen Points would serve as the basis for a new world order after 1918. Unfortunately at the Paris Peace conferences of 1919 he found his allies less willing to adopt them than he imagined. France and Britain were both imperial powers and interpreted points such as self-determination rather differently from how he had hoped. They replaced it with the mandate system and traditional Great Power politics. French *realpolitik* and British pragmatism sat uncomfortably with Wilsonian idealism. Some of the points were adopted but others were ignored and the loftier ones remained unfulfilled.

The end result was the compromised Treaty of Versailles, which many blame for the Second World War. The real blow for Wilson though came with the rejection of both the Treaty and the League of Nations by his own Senate in March 1920. His country's rejection of his great project ensured that it failed. Without the USA the league was never powerful enough to intervene effectively in international disputes and isolationism meant that the USA absented itself from international affairs throughout the build up to the Second World War. The Fourteen Points remained theoretical, rather than actual, one of the great 'what ifs' of the twentieth century. **HS**

### Source F

Woodrow Wilson with David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau in Paris in 1919

**5** Study Source F. Do you think the French and British leaders would have wanted to adopt the Fourteen Points? If not, why not?

**6** Read about the ambitions of the 'Big Three' at Versailles on the BBC Bitesize website ([www.bbc.com/oj3rz49](http://www.bbc.com/oj3rz49)). Who do you think 'won' in the treaty?

**7** Read the Covenant of the League of Nations here: [www.tinyurl.com/c24bab](http://www.tinyurl.com/c24bab). Do you think it could have worked?

**8** Think about the Fourteen Points. Which of them do you think should be adopted by governments today?