

# Woodrow Wilson and “Peace without Victory”: Interpreting the Reversal of 1917

John A. Thompson

In a speech to the Senate on January 22, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson called for the European war to be brought to an end through “a peace without victory.” This, he argued, was the only sort of peace that could produce a lasting settlement:

Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which the terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.<sup>1</sup>



President Woodrow Wilson

Wilson went on to outline what he saw as the other “essential” elements of a lasting peace. Such a settlement would need to be based on such principles “as that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed and that no right anywhere exists to hand peoples about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were property,” recognition of the rights of small nations, freedom of the seas, and limitation of armaments on both land and sea. Above all, it required that the settlement be underwritten “by the guarantees of a universal covenant,” that it be “a peace made secure by the organized major force of mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

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John A. Thompson is emeritus reader in American History and an emeritus fellow of St Catharine’s College, University of Cambridge. He thanks Ross A. Kennedy for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> An address to the Senate, Jan. 22, 1917. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (hereinafter *PWW*) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966–94), Vol. 40, 536.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 40, 533–39.

This address was the first of the speeches in which Wilson set out the principles that should govern the peace settlement, and it is often seen as the purest expression of his personal vision of the postwar order. Thomas J. Knock writes that it was *the* Wilsonian manifesto of the Great War,” while John M. Cooper sees the address as embodying “his most heartfelt hope and most deeply desired design for the future of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Recent studies have interpreted the origins and nature of Wilson’s peace program in different ways but have shared the assumption that his policy was shaped by a constant pursuit of it.<sup>4</sup>

The call for “a peace without victory” that was the centerpiece of the address to the Senate was not, however, simply part of a vision for the postwar world. It was an urgent appeal for a negotiated peace in which the president sought to appeal to war-weariness among the peoples of the belligerent nations: “I would fain believe that I am in effect speaking for the silent mass of mankind everywhere who have as yet had no place or opportunity to speak their real hearts out concerning the death and ruin they see to have come already upon the persons and the homes that they hold most dear.”<sup>5</sup> The speech represented a further step in the diplomatic effort that Wilson had been making since his re-election in November 1916 to bring about an early end to the European war. This initiative had been based upon a firmly neutral stance toward that conflict, which in his campaign speeches he had portrayed as the product of the European system as a whole, rather than of German aggression.<sup>6</sup> In a note calling on each side to state its terms of peace, he had observed that “the objects which the statesmen of the belligerents on both

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 115; John M. Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 362.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2017); Trygve Thronveit, *Power without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Address to the Senate, Jan. 22, 1917. *PWW*, Vol. 40, 538. Wilson delayed giving the speech until it had been transmitted in code to U.S. embassies in Europe so that they could ensure its full publication locally. “The real people I was speaking to was neither the Senate nor foreign governments,” he explained to a correspondent, “but the *people* of the countries now at war.” Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace 1916–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), 264, 271.

<sup>6</sup> “Have you ever heard what started the present war? If you have, I wish you would publish it, because nobody else has. So far as I can gather, nothing in particular started it, but everything in general. There had been growing up in Europe a mutual suspicion, an interchange of conjectures about what this government and that government was going to do, an interlacing of alliances and understandings, a complex web of intrigue and spying, that presently was sure to entangle the whole of the family of mankind on that side of the water in its meshes.” Luncheon Address to Women in Cincinnati, Oct. 26, 1916, *PWW*, Vol. 38, 531.

sides have in mind in this war are virtually the same, as stated in general terms to their own people and to the world.”<sup>7</sup> Wilson had already asked the Federal Reserve Board to strengthen its warning to Americans not to buy British and French short-term Treasury notes, which was interpreted by the British as a move to force them to the negotiating table.<sup>8</sup>

Ten weeks after appealing for “a peace without victory,” Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany and called on the nation “to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms.” On the face of it, this was a striking change of course, yet in his War Message the president stated that he had “exactly the same things in mind now that I had in mind when I addressed the Senate on the twenty-second of January last”: “My own thought has not been driven from its habitual and normal course by the unhappy events of the last two months.”<sup>9</sup>

Wilson’s domestic opponents at the time gave short shrift to this claim of consistency. To Theodore Roosevelt, it “represents really nauseous hypocrisy to say that we have gone to war to make the world safe for democracy in April, when sixty days previously we had been announcing that we wished a ‘Peace without victory,’ and had no concern with the ‘causes or objects’ of the war.”<sup>10</sup> Historians, on the other hand, have generally accepted that there was an essential continuity in Wilson’s policy objectives. In his recent study, Robert E. Hannigan argues that throughout “the Wilson administration’s war efforts were shaped by one overriding and long-standing goal”—to secure a form of international order that served U.S. interests. From a somewhat different perspective, Seth Tillman similarly writes that Wilson’s “unvarying *objective* was a peace of justice, based on permanent guarantees. The method of achieving it, by compromise, by negotiation, by victory, was always secondary, to be determined pragmatically.”<sup>11</sup>

In reality, the move from an emphatically neutral stance to active partnership with the allied war effort was accompanied by a great change both in Wilson’s public view of the causes of the war and in the substance of his peace program. The

<sup>7</sup> Appeal for a Statement of War Aims, Dec. 18, 1916, *PWW*, Vol. 40, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Spring Rice to the Foreign Office, Dec. 3, 1916, *PWW*, Vol. 40, 136–37.

<sup>9</sup> Address to Congress, Apr. 2, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 41, 519–27.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to William Allen White, Aug. 3, 1917, cited in Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), 271–72.

<sup>11</sup> Robert E. Hannigan, *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914–1920* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 115; Seth P. Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 33–34.

extent of these changes is hard to square with the view that his policy over the whole course of the war was shaped by the steady pursuit of a long-term strategic goal. But by insisting on the consistency of his position and refusing to admit that “peace without victory” no longer constituted his goal, Wilson gave his subsequent policy an element of ambiguity that persisted into the postwar period. This helps to explain the sense of betrayal felt by many of his former supporters when Wilson vigorously defended the terms of the Versailles treaty. Like many historians, these supporters had been led by Wilson’s elevated rhetoric to overestimate the extent to which his actions reflected the steady pursuit of consistent goals and to underestimate the extent to which they were shaped by a variety of more immediate pressures and circumstances.

### **Wilson’s Commitment to Victory**

Wilson’s January 1917 address to the Senate, then, had two aspects. It was an attempt to bring the European conflict to an end before either side had won—or lost—and it set out what Wilson saw as the essential features of a lasting settlement. Some historians, notably the doyen of Wilson scholarship, Arthur S. Link, believe that the president continued to pursue *both* objectives after the United States entered the war—the short-term one of ending the war through negotiations as soon as possible as well as the long-term one of achieving a liberal settlement. Link writes that the president “pressed his campaign for peace with mounting intensity as the months passed in 1917,” and that “there was much truth in a British contemporary’s quip that Wilson was talking more like a mediator than a belligerent. He certainly hoped all through 1917 that the moderate forces in the Reichstag and the civilian leaders in the Imperial Government would take control from the High Command and appeal for a peace conference.”<sup>12</sup> In his recent biography, John Milton Cooper also claims that entry into the war did not change Wilson’s position: “Instead of a sweeping victory, he still wanted ‘a negotiated settlement, whenever that was possible,’ with America ‘at the back of the settlement, a permanent guarantee of future peace.’” Cooper quotes these words from the interview the president gave to British radical MP J. Howard Whitehouse soon after American entry. But, as Whitehouse’s account makes clear, they described the views Whitehouse ascribed to “the more moderate school” in England, not those expressed by Wilson himself.<sup>13</sup>

Wilson’s response after the United States had become a belligerent to the moves

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Arlington Heights, IL: Wiley-Blackwell, 1979), 79–80.

<sup>13</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 395; Memorandum by John Howard Whitehouse, Apr. 14, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 42, 66.

that were made by various parties to secure an early, negotiated peace hardly suggests that he continued to desire such a peace. There were several such attempts. In May 1917, the Soviet that had been set up in Petrograd following the March revolution urged socialists everywhere to demand “peace without annexations or indemnities on the basis of the self-determination of peoples.”<sup>14</sup> This formula fed into the movement for an international socialist conference in Stockholm with delegates from all the belligerent countries. In July, the German Reichstag passed by a vote of 212 to 126 a resolution calling for “a peace of understanding,” with no “forced acquisitions of territory” or “political, economic, or financial oppressions,” that would lead to a new and equitable world order based on free trade, freedom of the seas, and an “international judicial organization.”<sup>15</sup> In August 1917, Pope Benedict XV sent an open letter to all the belligerent governments that not only appealed for “an early termination of the terrible struggle which has more and more the appearance of a useless massacre” but urged a settlement on lines very similar to those Wilson had set out in his address to the Senate. Specifically, the Pope urged the reciprocal decrease of armaments, the institution of international arbitration, freedom of the seas, the evacuation and restitution of occupied territory, and the adjustment of territorial disputes “in a conciliatory spirit, taking into account as far as it is just and possible . . . the aspirations of the people.”<sup>16</sup> These were all public moves, but in October Wilson was informed by London that Richard von Kuhlmann, the German foreign secretary, had privately suggested to the French and British peace terms that would be favorable to them but that made no mention of Russia.<sup>17</sup>

Wilson’s response to all these initiatives was unequivocally negative. Far from sympathizing with them, he publicly denounced any suggestion of an early peace. In his Flag Day address in June, he attributed “the intrigue for peace” to the German government’s desire to end the war while they were in a strong position, and described those “liberals . . . socialists, leaders of labour . . . thinkers” who favored the Petrograd Formula as “agents and dupes of the Imperial German Government.”<sup>18</sup> American Socialists were denied passports to attend the Stockholm conference. In early October, the president responded sharply to newspaper reports on his recent

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<sup>14</sup> Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), 194–95.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132–33.

<sup>16</sup> Text in W. H. Page to Robert Lansing, Aug. 15, 1917. *PWW*, Vol. 43, 482–85.

<sup>17</sup> E. M. House to Wilson, with enclosures, Oct. 5, 1917; Wilson to E. M. House, Oct. 7, 1917. *PWW*, Vol. 44, 310–11, 324.

<sup>18</sup> Flag Day address, June 14, 1917. *PWW*, Vol. 42, 502–3.

setting up of “the Inquiry” under Colonel Edward M. House to study the questions that would have to be resolved at the end of the war. “I think you newspaper men can have no conception of what fire you are playing with when you discuss peace now at all, in any phase or connection,” he wrote to the friendly journalist David Lawrence.

The Germans have in effect realized their programme of Hamburg to Bagdad, could afford to negotiate as to all the territorial fringes, and, if they could bring about a discussion of peace now, would insist upon discussing it upon terms which would leave them in possession of all that they ever expected to get. . . . It is, therefore, . . . altogether against the national interest to discuss peace from any point of view if the administration is brought in any way.<sup>19</sup>

In his recent book, *The Deluge*, Adam Tooze argues that if the war *had* been brought to an end in the summer of 1917 the Bolshevik revolution would almost certainly have been averted, so that if Wilson had responded positively to one of the various moves for peace at that time, “democracy in Russia might have been saved.” Tooze points out that following the collapse of the Kerensky offensive in early August, Colonel House (who was in New York) had written to Wilson that “the situation is full of danger as well as hope. . . . It is more important, I think, that Russia should weld herself into a virile republic than it is that Germany should be beaten to her knees.” A peace on the basis of the *status quo ante* would enable Austria to emancipate herself from Prussia, while “Turkey could be sustained as an independent nation under the condition that Constantinople and the Straits have some sort of internationalization. This would settle the question of a division



Colonel E. M. House

<sup>19</sup> Wilson to David Lawrence, Oct. 5, 1917. *PWW*, Vol. 44, 309. Wilson had already raised the specter of *Mittel-Europa* in his Flag Day address: “The military masters of Germany” planned “to throw a broad belt of German military power and political control across the very centre of Europe and beyond the Mediterranean into the heart of Asia; and Austria-Hungary was to be as much their tool and pawn as Servia or Bulgaria or Turkey or the ponderous states of the East. . . . The dream had its heart in Berlin. . . . These people did not wish to be united. . . . They could be kept quiet only by the presence or the constant threat of armed men.” Flag Day address, June 14, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 42, 499–501.

of Asia Minor between England, Russia, France, and Italy—a division which is pregnant with future trouble.” House urged the president to “answer the Pope’s proposal in some such way as to leave the door open.” When Wilson replied by saying that he was unsure whether to respond at all to the Pope’s message but that, if he did so, it would be to say that a peace on the basis of the *status quo ante* with the existing German government was quite unacceptable, House wrote back that Wilson had “an opportunity to take the peace negotiations out of the hands of the Pope and hold them in your own.” He ended the letter, “I pray that you may not lose this great opportunity.” In his diary, House wrote, “I am as certain as I ever am these days that he will make a colossal blunder if he treats the note lightly and shuts the door abruptly.”<sup>20</sup>

However, as Tooze notes, “Colonel House’s insights into the geopolitics of progress were out of season.”<sup>21</sup> When Wilson did reply to the Pope, it was to dismiss the idea of an early negotiated peace. The need was for “not a mere cessation of arms” but “a stable and enduring peace.” Such a peace must be based upon “justice and fairness,” and not include “punitive damages, the establishment of selfish exclusive economic leagues,” but it could not be made with “an ambitious and intriguing government”: “We cannot take the word of the present rulers of Germany as a guarantee of anything that



Pope Benedict XV

is to endure.” The *status quo ante* could not produce a lasting peace because, as he had said in his message to the Russian Provisional Government in May, “it was the *status quo ante* out of which this iniquitous war issued forth, the power of the Imperial German Government within the Empire and its widespread domination and influence outside of that Empire. That *status* must be altered in such fashion as to prevent any such hideous thing from ever happening again.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), 86–87; House to Wilson, Aug. 15, 17, 1917, Wilson to House, Aug. 16, 1917, 488–89, House diary, Aug. 18, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 43, 471–72, 508–9, 521.

<sup>21</sup> Tooze, *The Deluge*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Lansing to W. H. Page, Aug. 27, 1917; To the Provisional Government of Russia, May 22, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 44, 57–59, Vol. 42, 366.

Why did Wilson take this position? Tooze interprets his stance, as he does Wilson's policy generally, as a power play:

It was one thing for the President of the United States to arbitrate a world settlement, it was quite another to allow the Russian revolutionaries to dictate the pace of peace politics. Nothing good could come of an undisciplined socialist peace conference in Stockholm in which America had no substantial voice. Having been forced to opt for war, Wilson was not about to lose control of the politics of peace.<sup>23</sup>

But there is a much simpler and more basic explanation. Wilson did not want peace in 1917 because the United States had not yet won the war. In an informal address at the White House to members of a newly organized "League for National Unity," he stated flatly that "the war should end only when Germany was beaten."<sup>24</sup> Wilson had been reluctant to enter the war, and hesitant about doing so even after the German declaration of an unrestricted submarine campaign. But once he had made the decision, he evidently became committed to a maximum effort and a clear victory. Cooper suggests that he may have had in mind Luther's injunction to "sin boldly."<sup>25</sup> Be that as it may, it is clear that the president had developed a deep personal hostility to the ruling powers in Berlin. The unrestricted submarine campaign and the Zimmermann telegram had not only demonstrated the brutality and duplicity of the Kaiser's government but also forced him into an unwelcome war. In his eyes, there was no question that they bore the moral responsibility for the suffering that followed. But there was also a political judgment involved. Wilson would have recognized that success in the war, achieved as quickly and completely as possible, was the best way to sustain domestic support for an enterprise about which many Americans had doubts. Victory would bring him domestic credit at home as well as greater influence abroad. It alone could vindicate his decision for war.

Moreover, in essentially demanding regime change in Germany, Wilson had committed himself to an ambitious war aim. The destruction of the internal structure of German power surely required a decisive military victory. The allied governments were more cautious on this issue, particularly those elements that foresaw the possible need for a negotiated end to the war. It was one of the reasons why they were unwilling to associate themselves completely with Wilson's reply to

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<sup>23</sup> Tooze, *The Deluge*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1917, PWW, Vol. 44, 325.

<sup>25</sup> Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*, 387–88.



the Pope.<sup>26</sup> When Wilson had himself sought a peace without victory in January, he had, of course, not suggested that any of the belligerent governments needed to change its character.

The goal of victory bound the United States to the allies. From the beginning, Wilson had downplayed this in public. In his War Address, he presented intervention as necessary for the defense of America’s own rights and the achievement of its own goals, rather than as joining the allied cause, and he continued to stress the independence of U.S. policy.<sup>27</sup> When the term “our allies” appeared on posters of the Food Administration, the President sent a sharp note to its head, Herbert Hoover: “I would be very much obliged if you would issue instructions that ‘Our Associates in the War’ is to be substituted. I have been very careful about this myself because we have no allies and I think I am right in believing that the people of the country are very jealous of any intimation that there are formal alliances.”<sup>28</sup>

This was more than a symbolic matter. Wilson was very reluctant for the United States to be involved in interallied bodies, and insisted that these not discuss political questions. And he firmly supported Gen. John J. Pershing’s determination to maintain the independence of the American Expeditionary Force and Pershing’s resistance to the strong pressure from the British and French for its constituent parts, particularly brigades, to be integrated into their forces.

Notwithstanding all this, the logic of the situation dictated collaboration with the allies. “The United States had its own quarrel with Germany,” Charles Seymour observed, “wished to make war as efficiently as possible, and found the most efficient method in close military cooperation with the allies.”<sup>29</sup> It was a joint war

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<sup>26</sup> Sterling J. Kernek, “Distractions of Peace During War: The Lloyd George Government’s Reactions to Woodrow Wilson,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Vol. 65, Pt. 2 (Philadelphia, 1975), 59–60; David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916–1918* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 202–3; Mayer, *Political Origins*, 333–34. Lord Milner was an example of a British policymaker who foresaw the possible necessity of a negotiated peace.

<sup>27</sup> As he was preparing his War Address, Wilson received the following advice from his political secretary Joseph P. Tumulty (to whom he always paid attention), which was based upon Tumulty’s reading of newspapers across the country as well as conversations with congressmen: “If we are driven into war by the course of Germany, we must remain masters of our own destiny. If we take up arms against Germany, it should be on an issue exclusively between that Empire and this Republic; and that the United States must retain control of that issue from beginning to end.” Tumulty to Wilson, Mar. 24, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 41, 462–64.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson to Herbert Hoover, Dec. 10, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 45, 256–57.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Seymour, *American Diplomacy During the World War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1942), 269.

effort. This was obviously the case militarily and in terms of supply and finance. But it was also true diplomatically. Wilson recognized this. In his interview with Whitehouse in April, the president said that the subject “which had been greatly occupying his thoughts” was whether he should sign “the Allies’ agreement not to make a separate peace.” He was glad that Whitehouse agreed with his decision not to do this, but stressed that “he would not desert them” or “assent to a peace inimical to them.”<sup>30</sup>

The British and French governments had long seen any talk of peace before Germany was defeated as a threat to their war effort, which is why they had fended off Wilson’s initiative in the winter of 1916–17. After the United States became a belligerent, Wilson likewise feared that any suggestion of early peace negotiations would dampen war spirit and diminish the public’s willingness to make the sacrifices that war demanded. In seeing all the moves for peace in the summer of 1917—whether by the Petrograd Soviet, international Socialists, the German Reichstag, or the Pope—not as opportunities but as threats that had to be countered, the president shared the perspective of the British and French, and indeed there was consultation over how they should be handled, particularly between London and the administration.<sup>31</sup>

By late November, however, Wilson had come to favor a public declaration of war aims that would rebut accusations that the United States was fighting for the Allies’ imperialistic ambitions. This was a response to external developments. The pessimistic assessment of the likely course of the war on which House had based his advice “to leave the door open” in response to the Pope had been vindicated by subsequent events. The eastern front had essentially collapsed in the fall, and in early November the Italians suffered huge losses at Caporetto. Simultaneously, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia and launched a propaganda campaign for an immediate general peace that included publication of the secret treaties in which the allies had promised each other territorial gains. This propaganda targeted the working populations from whom the allied governments were going to have to demand further sacrifices. These developments constituted a crisis for the whole allied war effort, and the U.S. government initially sought a collective response. At the interallied conference at the end of November, House proposed a joint declaration that they were not fighting for “aggression or indemnity” but only for an end to

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<sup>30</sup> Memorandum by John Howard Whitehouse, Apr. 14, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 42, 65–66.

<sup>31</sup> Mayer, *Political Origins*, 225–28; W. B. Fowler, *British-American Relations: The Role of Sir William Wiseman* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 91–93; Kernek, “Distractions of Peace During War,” 58–77.

militarism and the right of nations to determine their own course. It was only after the French and Italians blocked this proposal that he and Wilson determined to make their own independent statement. The British government, responding essentially to the same stimuli, made a similar decision a little later. Thus Lloyd George set out British war aims in a speech to the Trades Union Congress on January 5, 1918, three days before Wilson’s Fourteen Points address to Congress.<sup>32</sup>

The two statements did not differ much. It is true that Wilson’s calls for open diplomacy and freedom of the seas had no counterpart in Lloyd George’s speech, and that the British made a less unequivocal commitment to “an equality of trade conditions” after the war. But both statements called for a measure of disarmament and some form of international organization. With regard to territorial issues, the most marked difference was with respect to Russia, where Wilson insisted upon its territorial integrity much more strongly than Lloyd George did. Those of the Fourteen Points dealing with Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, Italy’s borders, Poland, the Balkans, and the future of the



British Prime Minister Lloyd George

Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires differed only slightly from the positions Lloyd George had set out three days earlier. This was no accident. The authors of the Inquiry memorandum on which the territorial Points were based knew of the Allies’ commitments and objectives, and they explicitly stated that the purpose of their proposed statement of war aims was to “cause the maximum disunity in the enemy and the maximum unity among our associates.”<sup>33</sup>

This would be a fair description of the immediate objective of the Fourteen Points speech, which was designed to strengthen the war effort in various ways.

<sup>32</sup> House to Wilson, Aug. 15, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 43, 471–72; Mayer, *Political Origins*, 286–89, 313–24; French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 202–3; Kernek, “Distractions of Peace During War,” 72–73.

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum by Sidney Edward Mezes, David Hunter Miller, and Walter Lippmann, “The Present Situation: The War Aims and Peace Terms It Suggests.” Wilson began drafting the Fourteen Points on a copy of this memorandum. *PWW*, Vol. 45, 459–85, quotation on p. 468; Kernek, “Distractions of Peace During War,” 73–76. Kernek provides a detailed comparison of the Fourteen Points with Lloyd George’s statement.

By repudiating imperialistic objectives, Wilson sought to rally liberal and labor support in allied countries. His expression of willingness to aid Russia, and even the tone of his references to the Bolsheviks, suggests that he was also hoping to re-establish some form of eastern front. Like Lloyd George, he was careful in what he said about the future of the Austro-Hungarian empire not to sabotage the efforts being made at that time to induce Vienna to make a separate peace. By reiterating that “we have no jealousy of German greatness” and that “we wish her only to accept a place of equality among the nations of the world, . . . instead of a place of mastery,” Wilson no doubt hoped to weaken the Germans’ will to fight. In this connection, he also rowed back a little from his earlier demand for regime change by disclaiming any presumption “to suggest to her any alteration or modification of her institutions,” but still insisted that it was “necessary as a preliminary to any intelligent dealings with her on our part, that we should know whom her spokesmen speak for when they speak to us, whether for the Reichstag majority or for the military party and the men whose creed is imperial domination.”<sup>34</sup>

Link sees these paragraphs as implying that “the United States would be willing to go at once to the peace table if the Germans would accept the fourteen points as the basis of settlement,” and that Wilson was hoping to initiate “transatlantic conversations that might lead to an armistice and peace negotiations.” But it is highly unlikely that Wilson foresaw such a development before Germany had been defeated militarily. Like the British, he knew that the German High Command was confident at that time that it could secure Germany’s most ambitious war aims. In the Reichstag, support for the July resolution had melted away in the face of the German army’s subsequent triumphs in the east and Italy. The Fourteen Points speech did not represent any weakening of Wilson’s commitment to victory. As recently as his Annual Message to Congress in early December, the president had again insisted that there must be no “premature peace . . . before autocracy has been taught its final and convincing lesson.”<sup>35</sup>

The Fourteen Points speech did lead to some sort of “transatlantic conversation” in that both the new German Chancellor, Georg F. Hertling, and the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Ottakar Czernin, gave their responses to it in addresses of their own. Their speeches had been coordinated, with each addressing the specific points that concerned their own country, but Czernin’s evinced Vienna’s eagerness for an

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<sup>34</sup> Address to Joint Session of Congress, Jan. 8, 1918, *PWW*, Vol. 45, 534–39. On British efforts to induce Vienna to make a separate peace, see French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 195–211.

<sup>35</sup> Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, 84; French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 210; Tooze, *The Deluge*, 82, 123; Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 4, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 45, 196.

end to the war. In his own reply to these addresses, Wilson took the opportunity to widen the distance between Berlin and Vienna by suggesting that Czernin saw the Fourteen Points as “a basis for a more detailed discussion between the two governments.” Praising Czernin for understanding “the fundamental elements of peace” in the modern, democratic age, Wilson condemned Hertling for seeking to return to “the method of the Congress of Vienna,” with its bilateral deals between governments.<sup>36</sup>

As Link observes, this relatively polite exchange gave way to much more belligerent rhetoric a few weeks later. In a speech on the anniversary of America’s entry into the war in early April, Wilson called for “Force, Force to the utmost, Force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant Force which shall make Right the law of the world, and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust.” Link attributes this harsher tone to Wilson’s outrage at the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, but the speech was more than a month after that treaty, and its militancy probably owed more to the immediate crisis on the western front created by the Ludendorff offensive and the consequent need to prepare the American public for a greater military effort.<sup>37</sup> In any case, there could hardly have been a greater contrast with the tone of the Address to the Senate.

### **The Ambiguity of Wilson’s Peace Program**

Wilson’s change of stance on the desirability of “a peace without victory” in the sense of an inconclusive military outcome has been recognized by several historians.<sup>38</sup> Less noticed has been the effect of the move from neutrality to belligerency on the substance of his peace program. Like Tillman, most historians have seen constancy in Wilson’s repeated assertions that he sought “a peace of justice.”<sup>39</sup>

But what constituted “a peace of justice”? The European settlement outlined in the Address to the Senate was essentially a conservative one, departing very little from the *status quo ante*. Indeed, at that time, Wilson’s main concern was that the Allies might be seeking to disrupt the Austro-Hungarian empire by encouraging the nationalist aspirations of its constituent ethnic elements. His gradually increasing endorsement of the principle of national self-determination in 1918 represented a revisionist commitment. Of course, the goal of a postwar League

<sup>36</sup> Address to Congress, Feb. 11, 1918, *PWW*, Vol. 46, 318–24.

<sup>37</sup> Address in Baltimore, Apr. 6, 1918, *PWW*, Vol. 47, 270, Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Most recently, Hannigan, *The Great War and American Foreign Policy*, 116, 132.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 12, above.

of Nations remained constant, but even here there was a subtle change. When he had first publicly committed himself to the idea in May 1916, Wilson had spoken of “an universal association of the nations,” and in his address to the Senate he had said that he was “proposing that all nations henceforth avoid entangling alliances” by uniting in “a concert of power.”<sup>40</sup> But in his War Message, Wilson had declared that “a steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants.”<sup>41</sup> The implication was that either all governments must become democratic or some would be excluded. That Wilson anticipated the latter eventuality was made clear a few weeks later when he said that after the war “the free peoples of the world must draw together in some common covenant, some genuine and practical cooperation that will in effect combine their force to secure peace and justice in the dealings of nations with one another.”<sup>42</sup>

After victory had been secured and the armistice signed in November 1918, Wilson insisted again on the long-term continuity of his policy. “A statement that I once made that this should be a ‘peace without victory’ holds more strongly than ever,” he told newspaper correspondents on the ship taking him to Europe for the Paris conference. “It must not be a peace of loot or spoliation.”<sup>43</sup> Such statements, together with the President’s diplomatic success in getting the Fourteen Points (with two minor qualifications) accepted as the basis of the settlement, led liberals on both sides of the Atlantic as well as many in Germany to believe that Wilson was committed to a generous treatment of the defeated foe. And during the conference, he did seek to moderate the demand for reparations and, together with the British, resisted the French attempt to detach the Rhineland from Germany.

Yet the terms of the draft treaty presented to the Germans in May 1919 seemed shockingly harsh not only to them but also to several members of the American and British delegations. Responding to these reactions, Lloyd George sought amendments of the treaty, but Wilson was prepared to make only minor ones. The factors that had led to his earlier retreat from “peace without victory” were

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<sup>40</sup> Address to the League to Enforce Peace, May 27, 1916, Address to the Senate, Jan. 22, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 37, 116, Vol. 40, 539.

<sup>41</sup> Address to Congress, Apr. 2, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 41, 524.

<sup>42</sup> In conversation with the Belgian Foreign Minister in August 1917, Wilson suggested that “a pact for mutual defense” would be “much more practical than a ‘League of Nations,’ which would be very difficult to organize since all countries, the smallest ones as well as the largest, would wish to take part there on the same footing.” To the Provisional Government of Russia, May 22, 1917; Baron Moncheur to Baron Charles de Broqueville, Aug. 14, 1917, *PWW*, Vol. 42, 367; Vol. 43, 467–68.

<sup>43</sup> From the Diary of Dr. Grayson, Dec. 8, 1918, *PWW*, Vol. 53, 337.



The “Big Four” at the Peace Conference in Paris, May 27, 1919. Left to right: Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Premier Vittorio Orlando, Premier Georges Clemenceau, and President Woodrow Wilson.

still in play. The French adamantly refused any further concessions, and Wilson still needed their cooperation to achieve his over-riding objective of the League of Nations. While the president’s rigidity dismayed many of his liberal supporters, his prestige rose in France as confidence grew that he meant to commit American power to the maintenance of the severe peace settlement.<sup>44</sup> And, as Joseph P. Tumulty advised him, calls for a “softer peace” were not well received by the American public opinion on whose support Wilson would have to rely in his forthcoming battle with the Republicans in Congress over the League of Nations.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the President himself had never returned to the neutral view of the war’s origins on which his initial plea for peace without victory had been based. In response to a plea from the South African statesman Jan Christiaan Smuts that he use his “unrivalled power and influence to make the final Treaty a more moderate and reasonable document,” Wilson replied that “my thought goes back to the very great offense against civilization which the German State committed, and

<sup>44</sup> N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution* (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), 172.

<sup>45</sup> Tumulty to Wilson, May 8, 1919, May 22, 1919, *PWW*, Vol. 58, 561, Vol. 59, 419.



the necessity for making it evident once and for all that such things can lead only to the most severe punishment.”<sup>46</sup> It was with this justification that he began his public campaign for ratification of the treaty later in the summer:

In the first place, my fellow countrymen, it seeks to punish one of the greatest wrongs ever done in history—the wrong which Germany sought to do to the world and to civilization, and there ought to be no weak purpose with regard to the application of the punishment. She attempted an intolerable thing, and she must be made to pay for the attempt.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

In a broader perspective, the reversal of Wilson’s position regarding the desirability of “a peace without victory” highlights the unsteadiness of his response to the European war. His policy choices between 1914 and 1918 were not shaped by a consistent attempt to achieve a specific outcome of the conflict. Such actions as his response to submarine warfare or his decision to enter the war are better understood in terms of the immediate pressures arising from the conjuncture of external events and the shape of domestic opinion.<sup>48</sup> They were more tactical than strategic. To the extent that this was the case, the divergence between those who see his policy as governed by a view of America’s long-term security interests and those who see it as the product of an idealistic attempt to establish world peace is rather beside the point.<sup>49</sup>

Nothing illustrates the nature of Wilson’s decision-making better than the “peace without victory” speech itself. Admittedly, Wilson had said as early as 1914 that the best outcome of the conflict would be “a deadlock” that “will show to them the futility of employing force in the attempt to resolve their differences.”<sup>50</sup> But this

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<sup>46</sup> Jan Christiaan Smuts to Wilson, May 14, 1919; Wilson to Jan Christiaan Smuts, May 16, 1919. *PWW*, Vol. 59, 149–50, 187–88.

<sup>47</sup> In this speech, Wilson insisted that “in the last analysis, as we in America would be the first to claim, a people are responsible for the acts of their government.” Address to the Columbus Chamber of Commerce, Sept. 4, 1919, *PWW*, Vol. 63, 7–8.

<sup>48</sup> For substantiation of this assertion, see John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2015), 65–69, 79–87, 106–8.

<sup>49</sup> The former viewpoint is represented by Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I and America’s Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, OH: Kent State Univ. Press, 2009), and Hannigan, *The Great War and American Foreign Policy*. The latter viewpoint is represented by Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*, and Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1991).

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum by Herbert Bruce Brougham, Dec. 14, 1914, *PWW*, Vol. 31, 458–60.



had been the expression of a personal view in a newspaper interview. The reason that “a peace without victory” became a declared objective of American policy in January 1917 was because it was the only possible form of *early* peace, and Wilson was at that time desperately anxious to bring the European conflict to an end. He knew that the Germans were almost certain otherwise to resume submarine warfare while the recent election had just demonstrated how widespread was the desire of Americans not to be involved in the war. Compelling the belligerents to come to terms was the only sure way he could avoid having to choose between a humiliating climb-down on the submarine issue and an unpopular war. But the Central Powers held the military advantage at that time, and in December 1916 the German government offered to enter into direct negotiations with its enemies. In pressing for peace at that time, and threatening the allies with a withholding of supplies if they resisted, Wilson’s diplomacy seemed to be aligned with German interests, much to the distress of House and Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

So the address to the Senate in January 1917 was the product of particular circumstances and should not be seen as providing a unique insight into Wilson’s personal thinking. It is true that the desirability of a peace without victory was a recurrent theme in Wilson’s comment on the European war from 1914 on. But it was a much less prominent element than other themes, such as the importance of representative government, the rights of small nations, and above all the need for an international organization to maintain the peace. And it vied in particular with a hostility to the German cause that was also recurrent and persistent. It was only for a few weeks in 1916–17 that “a peace without victory” was actively pursued as the objective of U.S. policy.

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