

# “A Net of Intrigue and Selfish Rivalry”: Woodrow Wilson and Power Politics During World War I<sup>1</sup>

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Woodrow Wilson looms over American politics to a remarkable degree today, especially in connection with foreign policy debates. Both critics and supporters present Wilsonianism as a supposedly idealistic foreign policy focused on upholding international law and promoting democracy overseas. This picture of Wilson's approach to international relations is not entirely inaccurate. It is certainly true that Wilson feared and loathed traditional European diplomacy as it was practiced on the eve of World War I—a diplomacy he called *power politics* or *balance-of-power politics* that involved arms races, alliances, and unrestrained imperialism. It is certainly true, too, that Wilson wanted to reform international politics and build an international system based more on democratic principles, arms control, and collective security. However, Wilson's relationship with power politics was significantly more complicated than is often depicted.

Wilson saw the system of power politics as inherently unstable and as the fundamental cause of the war; but he simultaneously saw Germany as an aggressive, hostile state and German power specifically as a threat to the United States. These two ideas were in tension with each other. Seeing the balance-of-power system as the problem in world affairs implied that all the major states, including Germany, had to be involved in fixing it, which was especially the case because the international reform Wilson had in mind would be based in large part on *collective security* (i.e., a system in which all states promised to protect each other against aggression anywhere it occurred). On the other hand, seeing Germany specifically as a threat to America implied that the United States should ally with others to contain Germany's power—in other words, that the United States should practice power politics

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itself to protect its national security. Wilson struggled during World War I to reconcile these two views but was not successful—and in fact, his effort to do so had some damaging consequences.

Wilson's attempt to reconcile his desire to reform power politics with his fear of Germany's power went through two phases: one before 1917 and America's entry into the war, and one after. From 1914–17, he focused on convincing German leaders to abandon their pursuit of conquest, accept a peace settlement based on the status quo ante bellum, and embrace his vision of international reform. He tried to get the Germans to see that a decisive victory in the war was unlikely and, even if it happened, the Allies would sooner or later recover from their defeat and seek revenge. A new round of arms races and war would commence, with disastrous results for all nations. The wise policy for the Germans, then, would be to settle for what Wilson called a "peace without victory" and join the United States in the effort to build a more secure world based on arms control and collective security.

The Germans, however, were not convinced by this argument. Peace without victory, from their point of view, amounted to a victory for the Allies because Germany would have to evacuate the Allied territory it occupied at enormous cost in blood and treasure. Not surprisingly, Germany interpreted Wilson's proposed peace terms as a thinly disguised attempt to reduce its power. His terms seemed to assume that Germany had been defeated in the war—and German leaders did not think Germany had been defeated. Implicitly, the Germans also did not believe that international reform would give them real security; the proposal for a collective security league was, after all, a radical departure from traditional international politics. The Germans therefore opted to stick with their pursuit of victory. This policy eventually drove the United States into the war because of German submarine attacks on American shipping.

Once in the war, Wilson had to rethink how to harmonize his goal of ending power politics with the goal of containing Germany's power. He decided that Germany's autocratic leaders (the Kaiser and his military advisors) were a lost cause and could never be won over to the project of international reform, but the German people were another story—to Wilson, they could be won over. Wilson thought the German people were stuck in a war of conquest they did not want and about which they had never been consulted. They supported the war largely because they believed they were fighting in self-defense, against Allied desires to crush Germany. If the German people could be assured of moderate peace terms if they gave up the war, Wilson reasoned, they might take power away from Germany's autocracy, end the fighting, and embrace his vision of international reform.

Even if Germany did not democratize and abandon its quest for conquest, Wilson still thought he could salvage his goals of ending power politics and containing Germany's power. Germany's army would have to be defeated and its power rolled back in the peace settlement, but the peace terms imposed on Germany would have to be something less than "crushing" in character. As Wilson outlined in his famous Fourteen Points speech presenting his peace program, the terms had to be conciliatory in some respects; in Wilsonian language, they had to be terms of "justice" that the German people would willingly embrace. In other words, even without a trustworthy democratic government in place in Germany, Wilson hoped that peace terms that somehow combined limiting German power with gestures of conciliation would get the Germans to support his international reform project.

As their armies on the western front suffered serious reverses in late summer 1918, the Germans did indeed institute some democratic reforms in their government and appealed to Wilson for peace talks based on the Fourteen Points. Wilson did not trust the new German government, however, and so refused to engage in substantive negotiations with it. Together with the Allies, Wilson devised armistice terms that significantly disarmed German forces in the west and made it impossible for them to resume the war. However, Wilson strongly opposed invading Germany and imposing extensive occupation on it: he did not want to do so because he feared it would alienate the German people from his program to reform power politics. Wilson's views were not the only reason the Allies did not invade and occupy Germany, but the president's opposition was certainly a major factor in their decision. All in all, Wilson was happy with the armistice terms, believing they struck just the right balance between limiting Germany's power and keeping the door open for reconciliation with the German people.

Wilson walked a similar tightrope at the Paris Peace Conference as he tried to balance (a) punishing the Germans to deter them from future aggression, (b) weakening their power so they had less capability to threaten their neighbors, and (c) conciliating them so they would embrace a Wilsonian world order. All three impulses showed up in the Treaty of Versailles: for example, the reparations clauses punished Germany for its crimes; the disarmament provisions weakened the country; and the promise of future entry into the League of Nations held out the hand of reconciliation.

Wilson left Paris convinced he had achieved his goals; the treaty's terms on Germany, he thought, were tough but fair, and the creation of the League of Nations marked the end of the old system of power politics. However, his paradoxical quest to end power politics while

controlling Germany's power rested on some deeply unrealistic assumptions. Essentially, Wilson believed that the German people would recognize that the punishment they received was in their own interest and in the interest of justice, and so they would willingly embrace it. They would do so because the United States had given its stamp of approval to the treaty—and the United States, in Wilson's eyes, was an exceptional nation, one that was morally and politically superior to other peoples and one that embodied progress and justice. Wilson assumed that the German people saw the United States the same way he did and would therefore accept its judgment on them and join with America in building a new world order based on their defeat.

Needless to say, the Germans did not react to the treaty the way Wilson expected. Germany's new democratic leaders had put the best spin possible on the Fourteen Points and assumed, at the time of the armistice, that Wilson's promises of justice and fairness meant that Germany would suffer no real penalties at the peace conference. When the Treaty of Versailles was published, they were shocked and dismayed; they quickly concluded that Wilson had cheated them. Angry and bitter at what they saw as the president's betrayal, they paid no attention whatsoever to the conciliatory provisions Wilson built into the peace terms. Forced to sign a treaty most Germans considered immoral and unworkable, Germany's democrats appeared to the German people as failures, or worse, traitors. This charge especially had resonance because the Allied failure to invade and extensively occupy Germany at the time of the armistice made it easy for the Germans to convince themselves that they had not really been defeated on the battlefield and so must have been "stabbed in the back" at home. Once the treaty was published, support for Germany's centrist democratic parties fell by almost 50%—and they never really recovered.

Germany's determination to resist the Treaty of Versailles was the central feature of international politics in the 1920s, and the question of how to deal with it absorbed the attention of Britain and France. Here, too, Wilson's approach to power politics had damaging consequences. Essentially, the Allies had two options for dealing with the German problem. One alternative was to compel the Germans to fulfill the treaty with force and more extensive occupation of Germany's territory if necessary. The point of this policy would be to not only weaken Germany's power but also get the Germans to acknowledge their defeat in the war with the hope that once this psychological threshold had been passed, some sort of process of reconciliation could then be set into motion. The other option was to revise the treaty—to negotiate concessions to Germany to stabilize its democracy and make it feel like a partner in a Western European concert of peace.

Both of these options required the participation of the United States to have any chance of success. Enforcing the treaty would be costly and risky, as France found out when it tried to do so in 1923. Without the commitment of the United States to support the Allies in a sanctions policy with economic aid and at least a token occupation force, it is hard to imagine how the Allies, exhausted by the war, could sustain it on their own. Likewise, a concessions policy would only work if the United States provided security assurances to France because otherwise, the concessions would probably come too slowly to have any positive impact on Germany's politics and psyche.

However, to the American people in the 1920s, any such political-military involvement in Europe was out of the question. The Senate failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 because liberals saw the terms imposed on Germany as an expression of power politics, whereas conservatives questioned the sweeping commitments involved with the collective security provisions of the League of Nations. Few supported alternative proposals, pushed especially by Henry Cabot Lodge, to make a specific security commitment to France's independence. Schooled by Woodrow Wilson for years that power politics was unstable and doomed to produce arms races and war, most Americans in 1919 and into the 1920s saw no benefit in making any sort of quasi-alliance with the Allied powers. To be sure, Republican leaders in the '20s did try to prop up a policy of revising the peace treaty by encouraging extensive private loans to the Germans and the French. But they would go no further, even as it became clear that France would not give the Germans the concessions they wanted without firmer security commitments from Britain and the United States. When the Great Depression hit, U.S. bankers terminated the economic assistance they had provided to Europe in the '20s, collapsing the whole policy of negotiated concessions to Germany that France and Britain had attempted. Hitler was waiting in the wings.

This is not to blame Woodrow Wilson for Hitler and World War II—I won't go that far! But it can be argued that Wilson's tortured approach to international politics—his paradoxical effort to end power politics while simultaneously practicing power politics against the Germans—confused the American people about their national security interests in Europe at a pivotal time in world history. World War I was the ultimate "teachable moment" to get Americans to realize that they had specific stakes in specific countries overseas and that protecting those interests in cooperation with others could help avoid future conflicts. Ironically, however, Wilson—the "schoolmaster" in politics and the professor-turned-politician—completely failed in this task. Instead of educating his fellow citizens about their interests, he

pandered to their fantasies of American exceptionalism—a failure of leadership that, I fear, still haunts us today.

*Author's Note*

This essay is largely taken from my book *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent, O.H.: Kent State University Press, 2009). On Henry Cabot Lodge's foreign policy views, see William C. Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). On the 1920s, see Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918–1933* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Patrick Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain and the Stabilisation of Europe, 1919–1932* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008).