

Woodrow Wilson's
Foreign Policy

Book Summary

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on Ethics & Foreign Policy

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points After 75 Years

Gaddis Smith



Twelfth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture
on Ethics & Foreign Policy

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Introduction

This Twelfth Annual Morgenthau Memorial Lecture on Ethics and Foreign Policy honors the memory of Hans J. Morgenthau, the man and his work, by continuing his inquiry into the connection between moral concerns and the pressures and realities of international politics.

Hans Morgenthau, as many of you well know, devoted a great deal of energy and thought to reconciling considerations of power and principle in the conduct of foreign affairs. His reputation as a purveyor of *realpolitik*—the idea that national interest is defined in terms of power, and that this is the guiding light of foreign policy—tells only part of the story. The other part was his ongoing concern with promoting a concept of international relations that retained a moral component at its core.

This “second” aspect of Professor Morgenthau’s thought was not lost among those who knew him, nor is it lost among those of us today who continue to study his work. It is reported that the columnist Walter Lippmann once said to Professor Morgenthau, “You are not the harsh realist you are painted. You are the most moral man I know.” The fact that so many of Professor Morgenthau’s colleagues and students went on to explore the ethical dimensions of foreign affairs attests to the power of his concern and guidance.

One need only to look at the roster of former Morgenthau lecturers to see the evidence. Through these lectures, and through our other efforts in research and publication, we at the Carnegie Council have sought to build upon this often neglected and misunderstood aspect of Hans Morgenthau’s legacy. Under the leadership of President Robert J. Myers, our objective has been not merely to keep it alive, but to strengthen it by establishing a

body of literature and scholarship in the field of ethics and international affairs.

Today's Morgenthau lecturer is uniquely qualified to add to our efforts. I suspect that Hans Morgenthau would have been drawn to his work—particularly his recent book with the title of *Morality, Reason, and Power*. Describing the Carter administration's efforts to apply an "effective combination of morality, reason, and power in the conduct of American foreign policy," this book, like much of our speaker's other work, shows how the study of American diplomatic history can, should, and often must address the moral dimensions of foreign-policy decision making. To understand our current assumptions about international politics and our moral intuitions about which policies are right and wrong, better and worse, it is essential to understand our past. It is with this in mind that we have asked Gaddis Smith to join us today.

Hundreds of Yale students have benefited from the teaching of Gaddis Smith. His courses on diplomatic history and the intellectual roots of American foreign policy have routinely been among the most popular on campus. I, of course, take particular pleasure in welcoming Gaddis here today. As my mentor through graduate school, his guidance and example were important to me in the most formative stages of my professional training. For that, and for his kindness in the intervening years, I am grateful.

Professor Smith has chosen a particularly timely topic, "Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points After 75 Years." In these days of presidential transition and searching for "a new world order," the echoes of history—and especially the echoes of Wilson—are sounding louder and louder. We are fortunate to have Gaddis Smith with us today to guide us through.

Joel H. Rosenthal
Director, Education and Studies
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Ethics and International Affairs

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points After 75 Years

by Gaddis Smith

The world in 1993 reaches the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the First World War and the effort of President Woodrow Wilson to shape a just, secure, and democratic order based on the Fourteen Points, "the only possible program" for peace. For the third time during those seventy-five years a great conflict has just ended. With the end of the Cold War, governments and individuals are again, as in 1918 and 1945, seeking to establish principles and institutions assuring international stability. Their efforts draw heavily on Wilson's ideas. The principles with which they wrestle, the conflicting ideals they encounter, and many of the specific functional and regional problems they try to solve are descended to a remarkable degree from Wilson's Fourteen Points and the ethical assumptions underlying them.

It is particularly appropriate to revisit the Fourteen Points in a lecture honoring the memory of Hans Morgenthau, the distinguished scholar of international relations whose books and teaching exerted a profound influence on American thinking and behavior in world affairs during the decades following World War II. Central to that influence was the intense debate between Morgenthau's admonition that politics among nations is a struggle for power and the Wilsonian belief in the possibility of remaking the world through moral principles and institutions based on justice rather than power. Writing in the aftermath of World War II and

at the beginning of the Cold War, Morgenthau accused Wilson of seeking unattainable moral perfection and of divorcing morality from national interest. "The choice," wrote Morgenthau, "is not between moral principles and national interest, devoid of moral dignity, but between one set of moral principles divorced from political reality, and another set of moral principles derived from political reality."¹

Morgenthau's realism, similar to that of Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan, had great utility for Americans in the long confrontation with Soviet power and for a generation of academics teaching and writing about that struggle. At times in their celebration of power as the ultimate objective, some of the acolytes of realism forgot Morgenthau's insistence on following moral principles realistically derived. Speaking from personal experience as a member of that generation, I know how fashionable it was to ignore Morgenthau's nuanced critique and ridicule Wilson as dangerously, hopelessly naive. Being considered tough-minded was high praise. That meant looking on the ideals of democracy, justice, truth, and national self-determination as beautiful abstractions, suitable for sermons, but illusions to be abandoned the moment the reality of national interest beckoned. As NSC-68, the seminal memorandum on the nature of the Soviet threat, declared in 1950: "Our free society, confronted by a threat to its basic values, naturally will take such action, including the use of military force, as may be required to protect those values. The integrity of our system will not be jeopardized by any measures, covert or overt, violent or nonviolent, which serve the purposes of frustrating the Kremlin design..."²

During the Cold War the three core principles of Wilsonian

thought—support for democracy, national self-determination, and collective security maintained by a world organization—were used instrumentally, often cynically, by the two superpowers in order to discredit the other. But the Vietnam War and the excesses of the nuclear arms race, both so cogently opposed by Morgenthau, restored a concern for the moral dimension and discredited the simplistic realism of the 1950s. Then came the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, followed by the reappearance of many of the specific problems Wilson had sought to solve. In the 1990s those principles have returned as ends in themselves, as Wilson proclaimed, not as mere means. Now let us go back to 1918.

The prospects for a world based on democracy and humane values were bleak in the numbing cold winter of 1918. Eight months after President Wilson had led the United States into the terrible European war in order to make the world "safe for democracy," the military and political outcome of the war was in doubt. The nations associated with the United States in the war against imperial Germany were battered and bleeding. American military power had not yet been brought to bear and those with inside knowledge wondered if Britain and France could avoid defeat. Italy was no longer a factor and Russia, swept by the Bolshevik revolution, had withdrawn from the war. Germany was concentrating its full power on the western front.

From President Wilson's point of view, the most dangerous element in the grim equation was the Bolshevik revolutionary appeal for a class-based peace, a people's peace to be achieved in defiance of the existing wartime governments. By publishing the secret treaties through which the tsarist government and its allies had selfishly divided up the potential spoils of victory over Germany, the Bolsheviks were undermining the moral basis of the anti-German cause and threatening to dissolve the will of war-weary people to continue in the fight. If the Bolsheviks succeeded in weakening Britain and France, but not Germany, the result

¹Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 33.

²Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, vol. 1 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 235–92, quotation at 244.

would be victory for autocratic militarism. If the Bolsheviks succeeded altogether in overturning every belligerent European regime, the result would be the triumph of a totalitarian system and the defeat of Wilson's hopes for a liberal, democratic world order.

At this moment of crisis Wilson conferred with Colonel Edward M. House, his only close adviser in international affairs and the first individual to hold the role that would eventually evolve into the position of national security adviser. The two men deplored the inability of the British and French governments to join with the United States in an altruistic statement of war aims as an antidote to the Bolshevik appeal. They decided that circumstances required a unilateral, public declaration by the United States of the moral purposes for which the war was being fought. Therein was born the single most important document in American diplomatic history: Wilson's address to Congress, January 8, 1918, containing the Fourteen Points of the program for ending the war and establishing a "world...safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and aggression."

That document had multiple purposes and characteristics. It was a piece of psychological warfare aimed at several targets: liberal, anti-Bolshevik Russians who were to be encouraged to continue in the war; liberal Germans who disagreed with the hard, uncompromising objectives of the Kaiser's government; British liberals who might tip the balance in London in the political struggle with those who wanted a vengeful peace. At a more profound level, it was Wilson's analysis of the fundamental causes of modern war in general and the European war in particular. And finally it was a list of specific changes necessary for peace and a sweeping elaboration of principles for the government of relations among nations. The ideas were drawn in part from contemporary

English liberal thinking, but the deep roots of the document grew out of American thought and experience.

The great scourge of humanity and the central evil to be exorcised by the Fourteen Points was, of course, war. Somewhat surprisingly for a man who as a child had experienced the American Civil War, Wilson dealt with the war exclusively as an international conflict perpetrated by autocratic aggressor governments against inadequately protected victims. Wilson saw war as the chosen instrument of small groups of men motivated by the desire for material aggrandizement, plotting in secret and frequently colluding in unholy alliance with other predatory governments of like character. Democratic governments, Wilson believed, did not wage selfish, aggressor wars. On the contrary, being of a peaceable character, they were usually ill-prepared to defend themselves.

Two changes, therefore, were necessary in the relations of people to governments and governments to each other. First, international relations must be open, with all decisions subject to democratic review and approval. Thus, the first point called for "Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private [i.e., secret] international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view." This principle echoed the mandate of the United States Constitution that treaties must receive the approval of the Senate and that they are public law. The constitutional provision in turn grew out of the eighteenth century American abhorrence of the European monarchical practice of declaring war without consulting the wishes or the interests of the people.

Wilson, in common with liberals generally, believed the decisions for war in 1914 had been made in the old way and that war would not have come if all governments had been democratic and diplomacy open. Specifically, point I challenged the validity of the notorious secret treaties. Wilson, like the Bolsheviks, would throw them all out. But unlike the Bolsheviks he envisioned the

democratization of governments, not their transformation through revolution. The new basis of peace would thus be openly negotiated, published, and approved by democratic decision. The abolition of secret diplomacy did not mean the end of confidential discussions within or between governments, but the end of secret purposes, agreements, and methods.

Wilson was realist enough to recognize that some governments might remain under nondemocratic control and retain a propensity for aggression, and that in the future some governments might backslide from democracy. The second fundamental change, therefore, was the guarantee against aggression to be afforded to "great and small states alike" by a "general association of nations." That provision was point XIV, and it led, of course, to the League of Nations and ultimately to the United Nations. No Wilsonian principle had greater ramifications.

Points II–V dealt with broad causes of conflict and their solutions. Point II, calling for "absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war," grew out of the immediate conflicts between the United States and the belligerent powers during the period of American neutrality, 1914–1917, and more deeply out of traditional American principles going back to the eighteenth century. Britain had seized American cargoes and prevented American ships from proceeding to German-controlled ports, but had not found it necessary to employ violence. Germany, on the other hand, had relied on the submarine to attack commerce approaching Britain, and in the process had destroyed noncombatant ships and taken hundreds of civilian lives. The United States had protested British practice, but made Germany's submarine warfare as the immediate cause for war.

If point II had stopped with the words quoted above, it would be of historical interest only. But it contained a second clause, setting a condition when freedom of navigation could be denied: "The seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants." Even as Wilson

in the neutrality years had inveighed against the use of blockades violating neutral rights, he had come to appreciate their effectiveness as a relatively bloodless way of inflicting punishment against an aggressor. A blockade, he said on one occasion, is like a feather pillow pressed over a man's face. No blood is shed, but eventually the supply of oxygen is cut off and the heart stops. And so in point II he preserved the blockade, the denial of freedom of the seas, as a weapon to be used by order of the association of nations against an aggressor. The concept was reasserted in the United Nations Charter in 1945 and was used most recently pursuant to a Security Council resolution as punishment of Iraq for the aggression against Kuwait. Saddam Hussein shook a fist at President George Bush for the American role in the blockade, and behind Bush was the ghost of Woodrow Wilson.

Point III called for "the removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance." Here Wilson was reflecting American attitudes going back to the eighteenth century, especially attitudes associated with his own Democratic party and its antecedents. Only nineteen years before, this principle had received bipartisan endorsement with the "Open Door policy"—applied specifically to China. Point III also was Wilson's endorsement of the idea that a cause of war was trade rivalry pursued in a hostile, destructive manner, with nations seeking to bar each other from markets and access to raw materials. Everyone cognizant of international affairs in that era was familiar with the ferocious rhetoric and mutual recriminations accompanying pre-1914 Anglo-German commercial competition.

During the war itself the French and British had, in 1916, announced the intention of waging an economic "war after the war" against Germany and to a lesser degree discriminating against neutrals. Wilson believed this punitive approach would harden German determination to win at all costs, would make the negoti-

ation of peace impossible, and incidentally might injure the United States. Thus, the importance of offering an equality of trade conditions "among all nations consenting to the peace."

Wilson was no free-trade utopian. By qualifying point III with the words "so far as possible" he recognized that differences in geography, resources, stages of development, and international practice will always exist and that equality as a mathematically pure concept is a fiction. He may also have sensed how much persistent effort would be required to adjust these inherent inequalities in pursuit of the goal. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) has been the embodiment for more than four decades of point III and an unending illustration that there can never be complete equality of trade conditions.

Point IV was one of the shortest in words but longest in future implications. It read: "Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armament will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety." Had Wilson been asked the classic chicken-or-egg question about whether the build-up of arms among nations is a cause of insecurity, or insecurity a cause of the build-up of arms, he would probably have answered "both." He shared the broad liberal belief of the time that the Anglo-German naval arms race and the Franco-German race in land armaments were contributing causes of the outbreak of war in 1914. The power and number of those arms then produced the unspeakable carnage of the war. His conclusion in January 1918 was radical: abolish all armaments giving a nation the capacity for waging war, leaving only those necessary for "domestic safety." The implication was that national governments should have no more than the light implements necessary for dealing with riots, labor disturbances, and other threats to domestic tranquility.

If a nation violated its pledge to reduce arms to this level, then sanctions under the association of nations would come into play. Wilson's thinking here was incomplete, but the implication was that the association of nations would possess its own heavy

armaments capable of dealing with violators of point IV as well as, of course, outright aggressors. The League of Nations never acquired a military capacity of any sort. But by the 1990s the United Nations through its numerous peacekeeping enterprises had built up the light armaments—vehicles, noncombatant aircraft, light weapons—Wilson had once sought to confine to national entities.

In October 1918, during the negotiations for armistice terms, Wilson approved and the United States issued an official commentary on the Fourteen Points, drafted primarily by Walter Lippmann. The interpretation of point IV denied the radical implication of the words "domestic safety" and declared that nations should be permitted armaments necessary for protection against attack. That view was eminently practical in that no government, not the least the American government, was then ready to relinquish the right of self-defense. But the commentary opened the unresolvable debate over whether a purely defensive array of arms could provide for defense. As the maxim had it, the best defense is a good offense.³

Point V dealt with the colonial world of non-white peoples. "A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon the 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." This declaration raised false hopes among, for example, some Vietnamese seeking independence from France, including a man later called Ho Chi Minh. It also caused consternation in the British Colonial Office, which feared its impact throughout the non-white portions of the empire. The hopes and fears, however, were based on a misreading. Point V was not a radical call for national liberation. It was intended, as the October commentary pointed

³ For text of this official commentary see Charles Seymour, ed., *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. 4 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926-28), 192-200.

out, to apply only to "German colonies and such other colonies which may come under international consideration as a result of the war." It did not even hint at self-determination or self-government for the "populations concerned," i.e., the "natives" as they were called. There was no mention of the voice, the wishes, or the rights of the people—only of "interests" to be determined paternalistically. At the ensuing peace conference Germany lost all her colonies—to Britain, South Africa, Australia, Belgium, France, and Japan. But the spirit of point V was thinly protected by calling those colonies "mandates" with the occupying power responsible to the League of Nations for the well-being of the natives.

After World War II the old League mandates in Africa and the Pacific were translated into trusteeship territories of the United Nations, but this time with the affirmed goal of preparing them for independence. By the 1970s independence for trust territories and most colonies still under direct European rule had been achieved. Sadly, by 1993 there had been many tragic demonstrations that independence did not automatically mean stable, nonviolent self-government. Diplomats and commentators were speculating about the possibility of returning some places, such as Somalia or Bosnia, to trusteeship status. Others worried that this could turn the United States into "the new world's colonial power."⁴

Point VI, the longest and most convoluted, dealt with Russia—which in 1918, as later, was one of the most intractable issues on the international agenda. In January 1918 the Germans controlled the Ukraine and most of what had been Russian Poland. The Bolsheviks had stopped fighting and were waging an ideological war of words against all capitalist-imperialist governments. They would soon sign a treaty ceding Germany swaths of territory and economic rights. Wilson's attitude toward the situation was ambiguous. He considered Bolshevik doctrines as dangerous

⁴*New York Times*, February 7, 1993, pp. 1, 4.

appeals to the simple-minded. And because the Bolshevik revolution assisted the German cause, he could not accept it as genuinely Russian, but rather saw it as something imposed on a suffering people against their will. On the other hand, Wilson had applauded the overthrow of the tsarist monarchy and the creation of the provisional government in the spring of 1917 and he knew that the counterrevolutionary forces in Russia were hardly models of democracy or human decency.

Thus, point VI called first for the evacuation of all Russian territory. This meant evacuation by Germany, but later in 1918 the issue would be confused by the presence of Allied and American forces on Russian soil as part of a chaotic intervention. Next, Russia should be accorded an opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy. The unstated implication was that Bolshevism was the antithesis of free, independent choice. Next, Russia should receive "a sincere welcome into the society of free nations...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."

That treatment, the acid test, was military intervention in Siberia, northern Russia, and the Caucasus, begun in the summer of 1918 and lasting in some degree into the 1920s. The intervening powers—Britain, France, Italy, Japan, the United States, and Canada—did not agree on what they were doing. After November 1918 they could not claim to be contributing to victory over Germany. Whatever their objectives, they lacked the power to achieve them. But this much can be said: the intervention did not mean well to the Bolshevik regime. The Soviets could, with some plausibility, represent the birth of their state as taking place in the face of hostile foreign military forces.

Some of Wilson's contemporaries wondered if a great

opportunity had been lost. Could Wilson have persuaded himself, the other Western nations, and the American Congress that the Bolshevik regime was a legitimate Russian government deserving of recognition, sympathy, and assistance—rather than ostracism and intervention? Playing at “what might have been” is an entertaining pastime, but in this case I consider it nothing more. The obstacles standing in the way of an accommodation with the Bolsheviks were too powerful and numerous to overcome. And yet, in recognizing the importance of Russia and in calling for the world to offer assistance without knowing what that assistance should be, point VI foreshadowed the 1990s.

The next three points need little comment. Point VII, calling for German evacuation of and reparations for Belgium, was beyond controversy. In August 1914, Germany had invaded neutral Belgium, in gross violation of a treaty, in order to strike at France’s flank. Point VIII, returning Alsace-Lorraine to France, righting “the wrong done to France by Russia in 1871,” was a French *sine qua non*. Similarly, point IX—a “readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality”—was a necessary concession to Italian political passion.

The next four points called for the redrawing of borders and the establishment of statehood or autonomous development for nationalities whose aspirations had been thwarted under old, now discredited empires. Point X declared that “the peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity for autonomous development.” In January 1918 the ambiguous phrase “autonomous development” reflected the possibility that Germany’s ally, Austria-Hungary, might be lured by generous terms to leave the war. In subsequent months, however, the political lobbying in the United States by different nationality groups and the changing military situation converted Wilson to full support for national self-determination.

Point XI focused on a region which once again in the 1990s is

a place of discord and violence: the Balkans. It called for German evacuation, Serbian boundaries with “free and secure access to the sea,” and “the relations of several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states.” The principal outcome of point XI was the birth of Yugoslavia.

Point XII turned to the Middle East. There the Ottoman Empire, a German ally, was in the final stage of dissolution. Point XII asked for assured sovereignty for the Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire and “undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development” for the other nationalities under Turkish rule. But which nationalities did Wilson have in mind? Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese? Yes. They became mandates under French and British control. Unlike the African mandates, they could look forward to independence. But Kurds and Armenians? No. And Jews? The Jewish people are not mentioned in the Fourteen Points, but in the autumn of 1917 Wilson had been privately consulted by the British and had given quiet approval to the Balfour Declaration in which His Majesty’s government promised to “use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement [of] a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, “it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities.”⁵ What a long tale of conflicting promises began at that moment. In the largest sense American diplomacy in the 1990s seeks to fulfill the promise of point XII while being afflicted with the dual assurance of the Balfour Declaration.

Point XIII, returning to Europe, called for the birth of an independent Poland with boundaries enclosing “indisputably Polish populations.” Poland, of course, had been partitioned in the

⁵Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

eighteenth century among Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. The dream of independence restored had never faltered and had won enthusiastic support by 1918 from Wilson and all Americans. Setting boundaries without producing war or threat of war, however, proved impossible—as Poland's fate through the middle part of the twentieth century so tragically illustrates.

We have now reviewed the content of the Fourteen Points. By the following October the grim military outlook of January had been transformed. Although Russia had not been brought back into the war against Germany, American power had more than compensated in the military balance. Germany's great spring offensive of 1918 had threatened to break the Allied line, but had been stopped. Germany was like a heavyweight boxer who throws all his energy into an attempted knockout blow and in failing is more exhausted than the foe. In the autumn the German military high command urged the government to seek an armistice on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points. Wilson told the British and French that they must agree or face the loss of American support. On November 11, 1918 the armistice was signed.

In December 1918 Wilson went to Europe as head of the American delegation to negotiate the peace. The hopes of an orderly, peaceful, democratic world seemed on the verge of fulfillment. Nations, unarmed except for requirements of defense, would trade freely and fairly with the world, would have democratic governments, and would conduct their diplomacy "frankly and in the public view." They would govern their colonial domains as benevolent trustees of the well-being of the native populations. Small nations, many born from the dismantled former multinational empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, would live securely within clearly recognizable lines of nationality, the international equivalent of Robert Frost's good fences for good neighbors. And guaranteeing this happy order against any possible miscreant would be the League of Nations, founded on the solemn

covenant of all to protect the political independence and territorial integrity of each.

What went wrong? A full answer would require a review of the entire history of international relations from 1918 to the present: the repudiation of Wilson's program by the United States Senate, including the American refusal to join the League of Nations or accept any political responsibility for maintaining the peace settlement; the unwillingness of victors to forego the punishment of Germany in favor of the healing peace that Wilson had once advocated; the failure to meet the "acid test" of assistance to Russia; the inability of nations to find security through arms control; destructive economic competition; the weakness of democracies during the 1930s in the face of Japanese, Italian, and, above all, German aggression; persistence of the colonial mentality and insensitive European rule in Africa and Asia; and much more.

Or was the failure deeply rooted in conflicts among Wilson's ideals—specifically the tension between the unlimited right of national self-determination and the need for compromise in the interests of a larger international order when different groups claim the same territory or resources; and the conflict between permanent commitments to a world security organization and the democratic principle that the people in every nation should have a voice in the great decisions, especially decisions of war and peace, affecting their lives? To answer yes is not to denigrate Wilson as did the cruder realists of the 1950s. Wilson himself was aware of those conflicts and sought to resolve them. The same conflicts persist in the 1990s. They can be usefully explored in the light of Wilson's experience.

For Wilson, democracy and the right of all people to live free of violations of their territory or political independence were inseparable. National self-determination democratically achieved was essential for peace. Wilson knew how the discontents of the subject peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were behind the

assassination in Sarajevo that lit the powder keg of war in 1914. He heard the cries of Poles, denied a national existence by three empires since the eighteenth century. He knew the aspirations of Czechs and Slovaks. He believed that the suppression of national self-determination for people he considered capable of self-government, i.e., those of European stock, was an international crime equivalent to permanent aggression.

Not everyone agreed. Most notably, Secretary of State Robert Lansing, less than a week before the Fourteen Points were written, had the temerity to attack the principle of national self-determination head on. In a memorandum of January 2, 1918—ostensibly criticizing the Bolshevik peace appeal with its expansive call for national liberation but really criticizing Wilson—Lansing noted the shifting criteria of nationality. Blood, habitation of a particular territory, language, and political affinity could all be claimed. If every community, said Lansing, “can determine its allegiance to this or that political state or to become independent, the present political organization of the world would be shattered and the same disorder would generally prevail as now exists in Russia. It would be international anarchy.”

Lansing drove home his point in a manner which must have been offensive to a president who as a child had lived through the Civil War in the Confederate state of Virginia. Recall, he said, that “the right of communities within a constituted federal union to determine their allegiance was denied by the government of the United States in 1861 and the denial was enforced by military power. We, as a nation, are therefore committed to the principle that a national state may by force if necessary prevent a portion of its territory from seceding without its consent especially if it has long exercised sovereignty over it or if its national safety or vital interests would be endangered.” In short, the modern, powerful American union rested on the denial of national self-determination.⁶

⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, vol. 2 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 346–49.

Lansing’s argument was both reactionary and farsighted. In its reactionary mode it could be used to freeze the status quo in favor of the powerful. In its farsighted mode it anticipated American advocacy of political and economic integration over fragmentation, as with support for the evolving European Community beginning with the Marshall Plan of 1948.

In 1991, when the Soviet Union, no longer a Cold War foe, was wobbling on the edge of dissolution, President George Bush used the language of Lansing rather than Wilson. In Kiev, capital of a Ukraine about to assert its right to national self-determination, Bush said: “Freedom is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred.”⁷ And when Yugoslavia, beneficiary in 1919 of Wilson’s program, separated into warring factions in 1992, the recent American ambassador in Belgrade, Warren Zimmermann, went further than Bush: “I think Communism adapts very easily to nationalism. They are both totalitarian ideologies, which attempt to solve every problem in terms of their ideology. They are both exclusivist ideologies.... If you are not a member of the group, you cannot exist, you have to be exterminated.”⁸

Ambassador Zimmermann’s denunciation of nationalism was overwrought, and yet understandable in the light of the atrocities then being committed by Serbs in their campaign of “ethnic cleansing” against Muslims in Bosnia. A more sympathetic, neo-Wilsonian approach was advocated early in 1993 by Cyrus R. Vance and Lord David Owen, peace mediators representing the United Nations and the European Community. The Vance-Owen plan called for dividing Bosnia-Herzegovina into ten autonomous

⁷ Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 418.

⁸ Peace Through Law Education Fund, *Congressional Roundtable on Post-Cold War Relations: 1992 Report* (Washington DC), 11.

cantons along ethnic lines: a ten-fold partition of what was a sixth of former Yugoslavia. Were Lansing alive, he might have said "I warned you." The Vance-Owen plan was condemned for assigning too much territory to the Serbs, the guilty party, the perpetrators of aggression against the innocent Muslims. Some called it appeasement. The controversy illuminated a clash between the Wilsonian principle of punishing aggression and self-determination even for those who bore a degree of guilt.

Taken in isolation, the text of the Fourteen Points and Wilson's other comments on self-determination to be achieved along "clearly recognizable lines of nationality" suggest that Wilson was quite detached from the realities of Europe in 1918. His mental image, one might think, was of nationalities growing like the crops of an orderly farmer: beets here, wheat there, potatoes across the road. The people would not move about, intermarry, cross boundaries in search of a better life, feel envy, or fight among themselves. The emotional power of their national identity, their sacred right, would be entirely peaceful and inner-directed, readily satisfied with the recognition of a neatly marked, secure domain. Of course, Wilson knew better. He received scores of detailed memoranda outlining the ethnic and political complexity of Europe. He considered a reversion to hegemonic imperial control morally wrong and an invitation to further war. National self-determination, for all its difficulties, was a better course. The verdict of history has not yet been rendered.

Wilson did not live to see all the difficulties flowing from national self-determination. But he was destroyed politically by the tension between his espousal of a permanent American commitment to act through the League of Nations, even to the point of going to war, and his belief that the people through their elected representatives should have a democratic voice in the great decisions of foreign policy.

Recall the circumstances. Point XIV was carried over, almost word for word, to the Covenant of the League of Nations where it

appeared as the famous Article X binding all participating governments "to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and political independence of all Members of the League." In the event of aggression, member states would be bound at the direction of the Council (equivalent to the United Nations Security Council) to impose sanctions first and then use armed force against the aggressor. Wilson hoped that the collective power of peaceful nations, bound by unbreakable commitments, would deter aggression, or, failing to deter, would reverse the evil and punish the evildoer.

In the summer of 1919 Wilson returned to Washington from the peace conference in Paris and submitted the treaty containing the Covenant of the League of Nations to the Senate for the constitutionally mandated two-thirds vote of approval. Months of complex debate centered on one essential point of disagreement. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Henry Cabot Lodge, asked whether the president would and should have the sole authority, in fulfilling obligations arising under Article X, to commit American military force anywhere in the world. Yes, said Wilson. If the president lacks this authority, the credibility of the United States will be in question. Our commitment is a moral commitment; it must be absolute. Senator Lodge and other critics answered the question with an emphatic no. The exercise of such unlimited presidential power, without specific authorization of Congress in each particular case, would violate the Constitution, which assigns the power to declare war to Congress.

The Foreign Relations Committee recommended that the treaty be approved with the reservation that the United States would assume no obligation to defend the territory and independence of any other nation "under the provisions of Article X, or to employ the military or naval forces of the United States...unless in any particular case the Congress, which, under the Constitution, has the sole power to declare war or authorize the employment of the military or naval forces of the United States, shall by act or joint

resolution so provide." Wilson replied that this reservation would "cut the heart out of the covenant," undermine the moral authority of the United States, and doom mankind to interminable war and suffering.

Your fears are fanciful, Wilson told the Senate. We cannot be compelled by the League to embark on an unjust action because as a permanent member of the Council, which directs the action to be taken, we can vote no and decisions must be unanimous. To which the senatorial critics asked, who is "we"—the president and Congress acting together under the Constitution or the president alone? Wilson refused to accept Congress as partner. His interpretation of "we" was the same as "I, the president." The Senate was not persuaded and in several votes it blocked approval of the treaty and American membership in the League, both with reservations recommended by the Foreign Relations Committee and in its pure Wilsonian form. Wilson's inability to compromise what he considered an unequivocal permanent commitment with the principle of democratic foreign policy and the congressional role under the Constitution was his undoing.

Let us now leap over seven decades, past the Second World War, past the partial vindication of Wilson with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, past the Cold War, which paralyzed the United Nations in the political arena, all the way to 1990 when the ghost of Woodrow Wilson stood at the shoulder of George Bush. The American and United Nations response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, August 2, 1990, was Wilsonian: a series of Security Council resolutions calling for Iraq's withdrawal, imposing economic sanctions, and ultimately authorizing armed force if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait by January 15, 1991. Meanwhile, nearly half a million American combat troops were deployed in Saudi Arabia. President Bush, with less faith in economic sanctions, was impatient to use the instrument of war. He and his supporters said he had full authority to act without

congressional authorization. Wilson, arguing theoretically, had taken the same position in 1919—and was repudiated.

Bush, confronting a real situation, was more flexible. Whether or not he was conscious of Wilson's fate, Bush took the prudent course of asking for congressional support—although he explained the support as the best way to send a clear message to Saddam Hussein, not as a constitutional necessity. Congress provided the authorization, by a close margin, and immediately after the January 15 deadline the war against Iraq began. There was a risk that Congress might not vote as the president asked, but the risk of outraged reaction if he had acted without congressional support was far greater. If ghosts can observe and learn, perhaps Wilson's ghost sighed and said, "That is how I should have done it."

The legacy of the Fourteen Points, like the condition of the world, is mixed. The United Nations is actively working to keep or bring peace in over twenty conflicts around the world. National self-determination in the last four years has yielded fifteen independent states in the vast region once occupied by the Soviet Union; two in place of a single Czechoslovakia; a still uncertain number for former Yugoslavia. Two states have rejoined into one: Germany. Eighteen years ago North and South Vietnam became a single nation after the United States lost a war whose public purpose was to protect South Vietnam's right of self-determination. Whether the Vietnamese outcome was a defeat or a triumph of Wilsonian principle depends entirely on how one viewed the war. Self-determination for Palestinians has not been attained because of the unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Many nominally sovereign states, quite free of aggression from without, are far from democratic or internally peaceful, or even capable of maintaining a semblance of order. Somalia, Haiti, and Zaire come to mind. Others repress or cannot protect minorities living within their borders.

The pessimist could say that the state of the world shows how

removed Wilson was from reality. Optimists can say he started the world in the right direction and that failures are the responsibility of governments and individuals who failed to abide by his principles. Realists can say that mankind is inherently selfish and that groups will, unless checked, always seek power at the expense of others. A composite assessment would hail Wilson as practical, not hopelessly idealistic, in his contribution to the United Nations. In spite of the crippled false start under the League of Nations, Wilson is the United Nations' real founding father. He was practical also in his grasp of the democratic foundations of a stable order, although like most leaders of great ego and self-confidence he was not comfortable when his judgment was democratically challenged. He was practical in his insistence that secrecy and democracy are incompatible. Some of his successors in the White House violated that principle. They individually, the country, and some parts of the world paid a heavy price.

Wilson's thinking rose above the level of any of his contemporaries, but in other respects he was a prisoner of his times and the limitations of his life experience. Who is not? His concept of national self-determination was limited to Europeans and perhaps some Asians. His grasp of nationality, even in its white, European context, underestimated the human capacity for discord and focused too exclusively on aggression across borders and coercion by great powers against small. His hope that objective study might find clear lines of nationality was not achievable. When boundaries turned out to be imperfectly drawn, perfection being impossible, then the powerful and ambitious were tempted to use force to redraw boundaries to suit their ambitions, as Hitler did on such a horrifying scale and Serbian practitioners of "ethnic cleansing" attempted in 1992-93.

Wilson was learned in American and English history and political institutions. But he was not well traveled or well informed about the world beyond the north Atlantic shores. His Fourteen Points were rooted in that experience and in the great hope that

the carnage of the Great War would never be repeated and that a world without aggression across borders would be a world of peace. He and no one of his generation could anticipate such horrors as the Holocaust, or the famine in Somalia, or the swirl of hatreds within countries and the refugees stumbling across borders. And of course he could have no inkling of global issues such as climate change, overpopulation, and the poisoning of our environment, issues which are not addressed at all in his thought.

And yet Wilson remains one of the boldest, ethically sound leaders and thinkers of this century. No one thought more deeply or comprehensively about the requirements of a humane world. Much of what he proposed remains relevant and, unfortunately, no comparable figure, no Woodrow Wilson-plus-75, has appeared to do as well in setting a program for a post-Cold War world as he did for the world after the Great War of 1914-1918.

About the Speaker

Gaddis Smith is Larned Professor of History and Director of the Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. A distinguished historian of American diplomatic history, he has written widely on America's role in World War II, the Cold War, and the intellectual roots of American foreign policy. Two of his best-known books are his biography of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and his analysis of American foreign policy during the Carter administration, *Morality, Reason and Power*. Most recently, Smith turned his attention to U.S. policy toward Central and South America, and North-South relations generally.

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