The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination

On May 17, 1919, William C. Bullitt publicly resigned from the American peace commission in Paris after reading the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. In an open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, his erstwhile hero, he condemned the peace as a tragic mockery of the principle of self-determination, delivering “the suffering peoples of the world to new oppressions, subjections, and dismemberments.” Six months later, Senator George W. Norris, a longtime critic of Wilson’s foreign policy, also decried the treaty’s “violations of self-determination.” He attacked the League of Nations (or League) Covenant—which guaranteed the “territorial integrity” of its signatories in Article X—as a gag to “stifle the cry of freedom” rising from Ireland, India, and Japanese-occupied Shandong. Still later, on the verge of another war, E. H. Carr took a different attitude, charging that the influence of “Woodrow Wilson with his principle of self-determination” had proved disastrous over the two decades since the Great War ended. “The victors ‘lost the peace’ in Central Europe,” Carr insisted, “because they continued to pursue a principle of political and economic disintegration in an age which called for larger and larger units.”

Despite their differences, all three men assumed that self-determination was the crux of Wilson’s new world order, most famously articulated in Wilson’s Fourteen Points of January 1918: a program imbued with immense authority ten months later, when it was accepted at the Armistice as the basis for peace. Whether forsaken at Paris or foisted blindly upon the world, its fate was Wilson’s greatest failure.

Bullitt, Norris, and Carr, however, might have been surprised to learn that the brand of “self-determination” they invoked, whether by advocating independence for “suffering peoples” or lamenting the “disintegration” of multiethnic states, was not among the Fourteen Points brought to or abandoned at Paris. Such national self-determination—the principle that groups bound by common


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language or lines of descent have a right to political and territorial independence—was not one of Wilson’s Fourteen Points and was never central to his peace program. Even the bare phrase “self-determination” is absent from the text of his famous speech and from nearly all his public pronouncements of the war years. The passionate exponent of a pragmatic peace, negotiated through open, impartial inquiry, did play himself false in the eighteen months following the Fourteen Points address, but not by violating any dogmatically held principle of national self-determination. Rather, he violated his pragmatic principles by allowing millions worldwide to believe, as Carr did, that the postwar order he envisioned privileged the ethnic nation-state above all forms of political organization. Ever since, this popular misunderstanding has distorted the historiography of the Wilson era in ways that are rarely obvious, yet nonetheless profound.

These distortions have obscured the true character of Wilson’s internationalism, which was not disintegrative, but integrative, and in the context of his times, radically so. This integrative internationalism was epitomized in Wilson’s vision for a League of Nations: a deliberative, egalitarian polity demanding significant concessions of sovereignty from its members. Rather than the national right of self-determination, Wilson promoted the civil right of self-government, by which he meant participation, by all constituents of a polity, in determining its public affairs. It was a right entailing the obligation to subordinate parochial agendas to common interests emerging from what Wilson liked to call “common counsel.” And though the League he eventually asked Americans to join reflected the cultural prejudices of its designers—including Wilson—its capacity for self-correction under the pressure of world opinion was, in fact, its defining feature.

Yet by repressing dissent and abandoning public dialogue during World War I and the peace process, Wilson squandered the chance to realize his vision. Among those Americans who understood his program, his failure, at home, to match democratic means to democratic ends eroded support for the incipient global government he championed. Among his wider audiences, his refusal to discuss publicly the details of the postwar settlement led to confusion, as his vision became linked with the various calls for national self-determination that had emerged to shape the international discourse over the war. Eventually, Wilson’s failure to clarify that confusion made him seem a traitor to millions worldwide and to the principles they mistakenly assumed he held. The boost this gave League opponents in the Senate elicited, from Wilson, a fierce, stubborn, ultimately self-defeating defense of the League Covenant in its purest

internationalist form—a refusal to compromise that kept America from joining the organization he went to war to help create. Subsequently, his radically internationalist vision was forgotten, and has been ignored by policymakers and historians ever since.³

The purpose of this inquiry is to clarify that vision by removing national self-determination from the foreground, where it has loomed too large in most historical renderings. Granted, careful students of Wilson’s political thought and peacemaking efforts have acknowledged that he never intended to arrange the entire world into ethnic nation-states. Nevertheless, it has long been the habit of historians to present national self-determination as the vital principle animating his peace aims. In its unqualified form, this interpretation is largely a relic of the mid-twentieth century, when the vogue was to blame Wilson and his counterparts at Paris for the toxic nationalism that ignited World War II. Thus, Alfred Cobban concluded in 1944 that Wilson “rejected the idea of international government” and held instead that “the self-determination of nations, and national sovereignty, was a possible basis, indeed the only basis, of world peace.”⁴ By contrast, subsequent treatments have exhibited a kind of cognitive dissonance between a civic-nationalist Wilsonianism compatible with international citizenship and an ethnic-nationalist version that would seem to preclude it. In 1979, for instance, Arthur S. Link identified the civic nationalism of the United States, rooted in political participation rather than ethnic affiliation, as Wilson’s model for world organization. Yet he also claimed it was Wilson’s “strong belief in self-determination” that made him “the first effective decolonizer among the statesmen of the twentieth century.” Perhaps Link was using “self-determination” to mean “self-government,” but this is far from clear: His subsequent admission that Wilson valued the stability of the Austro-Hungarian Empire over independence for its “subject peoples,” followed by his contradictory claim that Wilson considered national self-determination “the new rule of international life,” only leaves the reader confused.⁵ Decades later Tony Smith, in an impressive study of Wilson’s influence on twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy, claimed Wilson “favored national self-determination” while simultaneously considering democratic institutions the primary criterion of a “legitimate” government. Yet according to Smith, Wilson also expected “ethnic boundaries” to dictate most political borders, for “his views on the proper organization of domestic affairs” made him “a man of 1848”—the “springtime” of ethnic nationalism. Even Thomas J. Knock, in an otherwise masterly analysis

³. The story sketched in these two paragraphs is told more fully in Trygve Throntveit, “Related States: Pragmatism, Progressivism, and Internationalism in American Thought and Politics, 1880–1920” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2008).
⁵. Arthur S. Link, Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace (Arlington Heights, IL, 1979), 6, 10–11, 84. This work, a revision of the same author’s Wilson the Diplomatist: A Look at His Major Foreign Policies (Baltimore, 1957), represents the mature fruit of decades of contemplation by the most important student of Wilson’s thought and politics.
of Wilson’s internationalism, used “self-determination” to describe the foreign-policy goals articulated in the Democratic Platform of 1916, the “Peace without Victory” speech of early 1917, and the Fourteen Points, crediting Wilson with endorsing colonial reform according to “the principle of self-determination” in the latter. Yet the phrase “self-determination”—absent from the texts of all three documents—is so encrusted with ethnic-nationalist connotations as to obscure what Knock himself sees as the radically internationalist core of Wilson’s diplomacy. Indeed, the widespread use of “self-determination” as shorthand for Wilson’s diplomatic agenda has encouraged the adoption of a bifocal lens, through which statehood and subjection appear as the only alternatives he offered to human populations. Thus, Thomas Bender, in his important recent work on America in global context, argues that Wilson divided the world between European nationalities with a right to independent statehood and non-European peoples whose de facto political status—whether sovereign, subject, or somewhere in between—was in most cases natural and appropriate.6

Meanwhile, the possibility that Wilson’s endorsements of certain nationalist movements were pragmatic, contextually specific applications of more deeply held principles has gone largely unexplored. As a consequence, a satisfactory account of those principles—and the international integration they implied—is lacking. Knock and John Milton Cooper have come closest to providing such an account in their respective works. But though Knock clearly demonstrates that Wilson’s projected world order mirrored domestic blueprints for social democracy, he fails, as mentioned, to clarify Wilson’s position on self-determination.

Cooper, for his part, usefully emphasizes Wilson’s rejection of isolationism, selfish nationalism, and imperialism, as well as his commitment to U.S. membership in “an essentially political international organization.” Still, he provides no detailed exposition of a positive, controlling vision of world order guiding a man he portrays as remarkably flexible in his thinking until the League fight’s final rounds. Meanwhile, Lloyd E. Ambrosius has argued persuasively for a “historicist” interpretation of Wilsonian “self-determination,” in which the phrase connotes the right of any community to develop self-governing capacities through experience in public debate and experiments in cooperative action. Still, two of Ambrosius’s central assertions—that Wilson’s League was designed primarily as a bulwark of “national independence” and that he celebrated the world’s “interdependence” but ignored its “pluralism”—elide Wilson’s repeated calls for a global machinery to facilitate democratic change, both within and between political units of many forms. Similarly, Betty Miller Unterberger has thoughtfully analyzed the synonymity of “self-determination” and “popular sovereignty” for Wilson, noting that he never thought “independent statehood was the only outcome consistent” with the principle. Yet Unterberger concludes that Wilson’s supreme faith in the popular will of democratic nations drove his pursuit of “a new international order on the basis of national sovereignty.” She thus ignores his conviction that while democracy within nations was necessary for world peace, it was both insufficient and fragile: in fact, the world order Wilson envisioned required a substantial relinquishment of national sovereignty, to an international community empowered to foster democracy where it was threatened and to check its excesses when necessary. Finally, Erez Manela also has emphasized Wilson’s tendency to equate the phrase “self-determination” with political liberties rather than political independence and has moreover acknowledged the challenge to national sovereignty he offered. Nevertheless, Manela’s main project is explaining the wave of anticolonial nationalism that swept parts of Asia and Africa after ethnic-nationalist interpretations of Wilson’s rhetoric failed to shape the settlement at Paris. The striking degree to which theoretical independence was subordinate to actual interdependence in Wilson’s view of the relations among states is not Manela’s subject.

7. John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge, 2001), quoted at 413; see also John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York, 2009), chaps. 20 and 22. Cooper is among the few historians to point out the absence of the phrase “self-determination” from Wilson’s Fourteen Points address; see, e.g., Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World*, 24128.

By tracing what Frank Ninkovich has called the “Wilsonian Century” to its origins in a “Wilsonian Moment” shared by millions outside the West, Manela widens our understanding of twentieth-century international relations and complements the work of Ninkovich, Smith, and others who explore how U.S. policymakers have shaped world affairs through attempts to implement “Wilsonian” ideas. Nevertheless, the largest and richest picture of international relations after 1914 must include a full and accurate rendering of one man and his ideas: of Wilson, and Wilsonianism as Wilson understood it. Only then can we understand the events his ideas affected, or just as important, begin to assess the relevance of those ideas to contemporary problems. For, contrary to Carr and Ambrosius, Wilson’s internationalist agenda was a conscious response to the integrative and disintegrative forces he observed at work across human societies, much as today’s policymakers confront a densely connected yet dangerously fissile world in which a number of particularistic movements (often flying universalist banners) threaten international stability. Moreover, investigating why and how Wilson failed to prevent such drastic misunderstandings by his contemporaries, with such dramatic consequences for his policies, reveals much about the extent to which open, deliberative diplomacy depends upon open, deliberative discourse at home. To use the principle of national self-determination as a foil for Wilson’s actual philosophy of politics and international relations is not, therefore, to pummel straw men, but rather to illuminate a pivotal figure’s transformation from world statesman to clay-footed idol.

Because of their salience for Wilson, and for those he has inspired, intrigued, and infuriated for nearly a century, the Fourteen Points are appropriate foci for an initial reexamination of his thought and actions. The development of his political philosophy, the background to his enunciation of the Fourteen Points, and his subsequent efforts for peace, all indicate that for Wilson national self-determination was but one means, with limited applications, of fostering conditions under which citizens could help shape the policies and goals of their governments—conditions he considered crucial to achieving the democratic relations among states that would ultimately guarantee peace. Yet, after his Fourteen Points were hailed worldwide as the charter of a new age, Wilson left his ideas vague, quietly ignoring the false ascription of “self-determination” to his famous utterance. Once in Paris, he isolated himself from the American delegation and kept his own counsel. Hammering out the details of the peace with Georges Clemenceau, David Lloyd George, and Vittorio Orlando in a


10. Thanks to David S. Foglesong for encouraging this clarification of the author’s purpose.
private room, he allowed himself, as a famous observer put it, “to be drugged by their atmosphere” of secrecy and jealousy. Ultimately, it was not the world’s faith in the Fourteen Points so much as his own ideal of democratic leadership that Wilson betrayed. That betrayal cost him everything for which he had worked.

**THE NATION, THE STATE, AND SELF-GOVERNMENT**

While national self-determination was never a universal principle for Wilson, self-government was the basic principle of his politics and the key to his internationalist vision. Wilson’s ideal international order grew from his ideal of the nation, for he believed the workings of the first depended upon the organization of the latter. Thus, to understand self-government (including its rare verbal incarnation, “self-determination”), as Wilson applied the idea to international affairs, requires examining his extrapolation of the concept from his studies of domestic politics.

For Wilson, the definition of “nation” was not confined to populations sharing an ancestral homeland. It denoted, simply, the population over which a state maintained order. Nonetheless, he believed that states and the societies they governed evolved in an organic relationship with one another; and so, in a sense, Wilson considered every state a nation-state. The ideal nation-state, however, was both organic and civic. Wilson’s fullest exposition of this ideal was *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (1889). As the subtitle of this work reveals, Wilson examined systems of government as products of history rather than embodiments of theory, and understood their functions as evolving in response to specific needs and goals. This explains Wilson’s organic ideal. The ideal nation-state was organic because history taught that no stable state could arise from the mere imposition of government upon a people, even the most homogeneous. Rather, even monarchical states proceeded from the specific character, shaped by historical circumstances, of a region and its inhabitants. And though the state, once established, did much to direct the course of a nation’s history, it also grew and changed along with the problems and aims of those it governed. “What was the force that sustained the authority of the tribal chieftain or of that chief of chiefs, the king?” Wilson asked. Such authority, he asserted, was neither “independent of the consent of those over whom it was exercised,” nor “formulated by that consent.” Rather, consent to despotic rule was “involuntary, inbred. It was born of the habit of the race.” Furthermore, the “congenital” habits of thought and custom that sanctioned

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such rule “bound the chief no less than it bound his subjects.” No more able to “transgress the unwritten law of the race than might the humblest of his tribesmen,” the chieftain, or even king, “was governed scarcely less than they were.”

Democracy, too, was a product of habit, sustained by custom. “Our own approval of the government under which we live,” wrote Wilson, “though doubtless conscious and in a way voluntary, is largely hereditary.” In American democracy the habit of approval was leavened by the habit of “constructive choice” in government. But even this choice was, in both aim and effect, “limited to modifications.” Nevertheless, “constitutional life” was no mechanical imposition. It proceeded from the “compact, living, organic whole” of society. “Government is merely the executive organ of society,” Wilson explained, “the organ through which its habit acts, through which its will becomes operative, through which it adapts itself to its environment and works out for itself a more effective life.”

The influence of national character on national government, which in turn shaped the character and habits of its citizens, was the root of Wilson’s deep faith in the civic ideal, the conjoined twin of his organic ideal. From his earliest years, Wilson associated civic virtue with the tenets of his Presbyterian upbringing: duty to God implied duty to one’s neighbor. But Wilson’s studies of government convinced him of the pragmatic merits of the civic ideal. As social organisms grew in complexity, new problems arose, needing new solutions, along with new ideals inspiring new goals for those who held them. In the healthiest nations, such solutions and goals were informed by an ingrained commitment to both individual freedom and the common weal, for history taught that only this civic ethos fostered institutions with both the flexibility and stability a changing world demanded. “[T]he best polity,” Wilson wrote, “is that which most certainly produces the habit and the spirit of civic duty,” that in which “men seek honor by seeking service. These are the ideals which have formed our [American] institutions, and which shall mend them when they need reform.”

Through this civic commitment to common goals, nations developed the capacity for self-government, which inhered not in the state, but in the people.

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14. Ibid., 575–76. Wilson’s emphasis on institutional organicism increased during the industrial tumult of the 1890s, when he rediscovered Edmund Burke, but it had marked his political philosophy since his graduate days and was the major theme of his first book, Congressional Government (1885). On Wilson and Burke, see Throntveit, “‘Common Counsel,’” in Cooper, Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson, 29; Throntveit, “Related States,” 92–94, 96–100; and John Milton Cooper, Jr., The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt (Cambridge, MA, 1983), chap. 4, esp. 53, 55–56.
themselves. “Self-government is not a mere form of institutions,” Wilson wrote in 1908. “It is a form of character. It follows upon the long discipline which gives a people self-possession, self-mastery, the habit of order and peace and common counsel . . . the steadiness and self-control of political maturity.” In its essential form, self-government comprised both the right and the habit of deliberative discourse over public affairs. It preceded formal democracy in history, and superseded it in importance. Put simply, as Wilson wrote in 1899, self-government was “the opportunity of laymen to speak their mind about affairs and get heard upon a public forum,” combined with the ability, developed through frequent and wise use of that opportunity, “to [make] the government intolerably uncomfortable.” Together, this opportunity and ability, or right and habit, of self-government put a far more effective brake on tyranny than formal institutions of representation, though they be “never so perfect.” Representation was impotent if constituents could not express their views and ineffective if they never engaged in the open, critical discussion that clarified their interests as individuals and as a society.

In short, Wilson believed self-government was a living tradition of civic participation with deliberative discourse at its heart. Democracy—that is, representative government—was its institutional byproduct, facilitating “qualities and conditions which it did not itself create, but only obeyed.”17 It was self-government that gave the ideal nation its collective identity as a union of free but interdependent individuals with common interests. Thus, he exhorted, “Every means . . . by which individual rights can be fitly adjusted and harmonized with public duties, by which individual self-development may be made at once to serve and to supplement social development, ought certainly to be diligently sought, and, when found, sedulously fostered by every friend of society.”18

As Derek Heater has argued, this “cluster” of ideas, “embracing Christianity, self-government, democracy, nationality and the organic state,” provided “the ingredients of what eventually came to be referred to as ‘national self-determination.’ ”19 But the particularist connotations of “national self-

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determination” veer from the trajectory of Wilson’s thinking. Like other turn-of-the-century thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, Wilson thought tribal versions of nationalism impeded the healthy development and spread of civilization. In a series of lectures on international law delivered at Princeton in 1894, Wilson explained that “the mind of man, whatever his race, whatever his religion,” recognized “fundamental, vital principles of right” composing “the universal conscience of mankind.” International order, he believed, depended on translating this conscience into “a moral sense and a community among states,” for absent a supranational executive, international law proceeded “from those upon whom it is enforced—not from those by whom it is enforced.” International law did require “independent states,” but on the model of individuals in civil society: “states responsible for their actions.” Such a community of states promised to develop patterns of interaction analogous to the self-governing habits of its healthiest members—perhaps generating, also analogously, a supranational democratic body. As early as 1887, Wilson discerned a “tendency” toward “confederation”: the integration, “first, of parts of empires like the British, and finally of great states themselves.” Crucially, this was not a völkisch movement, but “a tendency towards the American type—of governments joined with governments for the pursuit of common purposes, in honorary equality and honorable subordination.”

Clearly, the principle of national self-determination and the privileging of the ethnic nation-state were incongruous with Wilson’s political thought. As will be

20. Liberal critiques of nationalism had gained prominence on both sides of the Atlantic since the mid-nineteenth century. Free trade, popular government, and international cooperation were the critics’ answers to imperialism, Bonapartism, and the balance of power. Groups such as the Universal Peace Congress and Interparliamentary Union expanded in membership and influence until World War I made jingoes of many internationalists, divided the loyalties of others, and disheartened World War more. In Britain and the United States, the two decades preceding the war’s end were especially productive. Influential tracts by British internationalists include J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (1910), and H. N. Brailsford, *The War of Steel and Gold* (1914). Several American contributions can be found in Wilson’s personal library at the Library of Congress, including Lyman Abbott, *The Rights of Man* (1901), which echoes Wilson’s claim that Christian brotherhood must triumph over chauvinist nationalism; and Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), which dwells on numerous examples of various American social groups forging organizational and moral bonds with counterparts in other nations.

21. Lecture notes of Andrew Clarke Imbrie (Princeton Class of 1895) on Woodrow Wilson, “International Law,” Wilson Collection, box 59, folder 5, Lecture 8 (April 3, 1894—original emphasis), Lecture 3 (March 13, 1894), Lecture 2 (March 6, 1894—original emphasis), and Lecture 4, March 19, 1894, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

shown, Wilson took a historicist view of political institutions that led him to believe immediate extension of such a principle was in many cases impractical and in others dangerous. This is not to deny that Wilson occasionally used the phrase “self-determination” when discussing his program for peace. Nor is it to claim that he never included the fulfillment of nationalist aspirations among the phrase’s possible meanings. It is merely to emphasize that for Wilson “self-determination” meant something far more subtle than the mere drawing of territorial boundaries (as impossibly complicated as that was), whether along ethnic or any other lines. He believed, as a matter of practical political ethics, that all people should have a voice in the governments under which they lived and that politically mature communities should control the institutions that shaped their lives. By World War I, he further believed that democratic nations were threatened, in a global climate hostile to the right and habit of self-government that maintained free institutions. Many complex, contingent factors led Wilson gradually to abandon his initial policy of strict neutrality and finally to bring the United States into the war. But the ultimate aim by which he justified intervention—to himself and, in his better moments, to the world—was to promote self-government as the cornerstone of a new international order, extending his ideal of the state to relations among states.

WILSON, THE WAR, AND THE EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

When war broke out across Europe, President Wilson urged Americans to “act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality”—not as a nation apart, but rather a nation among nations. America was “fit beyond others to exhibit the fine poise of undisturbed judgment, the dignity of self-control, [and] the efficiency of dispassionate action” needed to compose the quarrel. By May 1916, however, the president felt America’s good offices would accomplish little unless the republic’s self-governing habits were fostered beyond its borders. The war, despite threatening common international interests, had come “without discussion, without any of the deliberate movements of counsel with which it would seem natural to approach so stupendous a contest.” Had the process allowed for public, collective reflection on the consequences of war, the belligerents’ leaders “would have been glad to substitute conference for force.” Thus the war’s lesson was that “the peace of the world must henceforth depend upon a new and more wholesome diplomacy”; nations must learn to agree not only on “common interests,” but on a “method of acting in concert” to serve and preserve them. As a pledge of faith in this new diplomacy, Wilson announced in 1916 that his government was “willing to become a partner in any feasible association of nations formed in order to realize these objects and make them secure against violation”—to join what he would later call a “League of Nations.” The basic duty of this “universal association” would be “to prevent any war begun either contrary to treaty covenants or without warning and full submission of the
causes to the opinion of the world”—in other words, to make diplomacy deliberative.  

Redefining diplomacy as deliberative discourse had immediate implications. The new diplomacy was not merely a means of defusing the next conflict. Its most important implication was, in fact, for the present pursuit of peace: “that it must be a peace without victory.” “Only a peace between equals can last,” Wilson argued in January 1917, “only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit.”  

But Wilson’s long-term perspective encompassed an even more radical corollary of deliberative diplomacy. Because (in Wilson’s view) states treated each other as they treated their citizens, and self-governing citizens were more peacefully inclined than unaccountable rulers, domestic self-government was vital to preserving a deliberative international order. Over time, an institutional framework must be established that would guarantee self-government both within and among nations.

This belief in the interdependence of domestic and international life was reiterated succinctly in Wilson’s war message of April 2, 1917: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” The president asserted that autocracy alone could explain the irrational militarism of the Kaiser’s government, which had thwarted the will of his peaceable people. It was clear to Wilson that wars of aggression occurred “when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers” and instead were “used as pawns and tools” in pursuit of dynastic interests. “Self-governing nations” did not “set the course of intrigue” in order “to strike and make conquest.” These were the designs of despots or ambitious cabals, “happily impossible” where citizens demanded and received “full information concerning all the nation’s affairs.” The deliberative prerogatives and practices of self-government needed safeguarding within individual nations, so that robust institutions promoting them could thrive where they existed and emerge—even if only slowly—where they were absent. The same prerogatives and practices also needed institutional support among nations, so that international society could become as self-governing as Wilson’s ideal state. Hence his intention, he told Congress, was not just “to vindicate the principles of peace and justice” that “self-governed peoples” cherished, but to establish “such a concert of purpose as will henceforth insure the observance of these principles.”

Guiding his nation through war, Wilson consistently reiterated his commitment to democratizing world politics. Indeed, in his Fourteen Points address he claimed that America and the Allies had “again and again” laid their “whole

25. Wilson, An Address to a Joint Session of Congress, April 2, 1917, PW 41: 525, 523, 519. Knock, To End All Wars, is richest on the development of Wilson’s commitment to the democratic control of foreign policy; but see also John A. Thompson, Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War (New York, 1987).
thought and purpose before the world,” and had done so “with sufficient defi-
nition to make it clear what terms of settlement must necessarily spring out of
them.” This was an overstatement at best. The Allied governments’ cold recep-
tion of the “Peace without Victory” address indicated the gulf between their
aims and Wilson’s. Just days before enunciating his Fourteen Points, he com-
plained to Sir Cecil Arthur Spring Rice, the British ambassador to Washington,
that while America was fighting a war against militarism and autocracy, his
European associates could not agree “on any programme which did not look on
the face of it as if its . . . main object was aggression and conquest.”

In fact, despite their nations’ expansionist war aims, some Allied statesmen
had begun to assimilate the rhetoric of national self-determination. But the
most significant forces promoting the principle as a basis for peace emanated
from revolutionary Russia. In April 1917, the Russian Provisional Government
had declared as a war aim “the establishment of a permanent peace on the basis
of the self-determination of peoples.” By the time the Bolsheviks seized power
in November, Vladimir Lenin was convinced that ethnic nationalism, because of
its disintegrating effect on existing state structures, would help spread the
proletarian revolution across Central Europe. The “Declaration of the Rights of
the Peoples of Russia,” issued by Lenin on November 15, promised all “non-
Russian nationalities in Russia, full freedom, including freedom of secession.”

One week later Leon Trotsky announced his government’s intention to nego-
tiate a “democratic peace” with Germany “on the basis of self-determination of
nations,” and on December 6, he challenged the Allies to accept these arrange-
ments or “openly state before the world . . . in the name of what purpose must
the people of Europe bleed during the fourth year of war.” By this time, the
Bolsheviks had published the secret treaties signed between the Czar’s govern-
ment and the Allies, which promised territory in return for a generation slaugh-
tered. What other gifts had the Western “democracies” in store? Did they
include “self-determination” for the peoples of Central Europe, and those “of
Ireland, Egypt, India, Madagascar, Indo-China, etc.”? The longer the invitation
to join Trotsky’s proposed general peace went unanswered, the Bolsheviks
argued, the clearer it was that the Allies were motivated by a “cynical imperi-
alism” making them the common enemy of the stateless peoples they oppressed
and the working classes they exploited. Audiences in imperialized regions across

26. Wilson, An Address to a Joint Session of Congress (hereafter Fourteen Points), January
8, 1918, PWW 45: 535; Sir Cecil Arthur Spring Rice to Arthur James Balfour, January 4, 1918,
ibid., 456–57.

27. “Statement by the Provisional Government Regarding the War,” April 9, 1917, in
C. K. Cumming and Walter W. Pettit, eds., Russian-American Relations, March, 1917–March,
1920: Documents and Papers (New York, 1920), 10; Lenin quoted in Heater, National Self-
Determination, 34. Lenin systematically outlined his views on national self-determination in
Theses on the Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (1916), reprinted in
Soviet foreign policy in its relation to the war and Wilsonianism is analyzed in Arno J. Mayer,
the globe were listening to the Bolsheviks, urging the Allies to answer the charges levied. Above all, they turned to Wilson for assurance that the governments in his coalition were ready to accept as partners peoples they had long sought to control as subjects.28

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, has been called the “catalyst” of a diplomatic and ideological revolution.29 But the catalytic effect of Russia’s exit from the war began before the actual signing of the treaty. Initially, at an inter-Allied conference convened just days after the secret treaties were published, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Italy’s Sidney Sonnino refused to discuss the Russian situation in any but military terms—despite the insistence of Edward M. House, Wilson’s closest adviser and liaison to the Allied heads of state, on regaining the psychological advantage with a statement of liberal war aims. Even Wilson’s public charge that Allied obstreperousness had driven the Russians from the war was ignored by the Allied leaders, who acknowledged only his call, in the same address, for the Kaiser’s deposition.30 But the Allied Left was aroused, in Britain especially: Throughout December pressure mounted on Lloyd George’s government, culminating on December 28, when the Labour party published a “Memorandum on War Aims” demanding the government commit to a peace of no annexations, an end to economic warfare, and “a supernational authority” comprising an international legislature, world court, and mediation council to settle even nonjusticiable disputes.31 The role of the French Left was more complicated, but even when imploring their Russian counterparts to abandon the separate peace with Germany, French Socialists insisted that the Allied governments in turn revise their war aims to reflect the “international justice” for which they claimed to fight.32

Signs like these emboldened Wilson. The Bolsheviks’ peace propaganda contained not one word about a “supernational authority” such as the Labour party invoked and the American president had championed since 1916. Thus, in the Bolsheviks’ bid for global moral leadership, Wilson saw an opportunity finally to bring the Allied leaders to heel. Discredited by the secret treaties, fearful of political collapse or outright revolution, they would have no choice but to align themselves with a pragmatically internationalist program—neither a power pact between imperial “democracies” nor a free-for-all among the world’s

stateless ethnicities. That program would have to be anti-imperialist and unselfish enough to shore up liberal support for the war, draw the Russians back into it, and encourage the war-weary German people to seize control of their affairs and end it. On Wilson’s instructions, House assigned the drafting of such a program to the Inquiry, a group of intellectuals and experts in various fields charged with formulating administration aims for the eventual peace settlement. Meanwhile, Wilson waited for the right moment to present America’s vision for a new international order to the world.33

Wilson, however, was not the only statesman who sought to salvage some advantage from the Bolsheviks’ challenge. On January 5, 1918, Lloyd George delivered a speech that seemed fully to embrace the Bolsheviks’ principle of national self-determination. Yet in criticizing Austria-Hungary’s refusal at Brest-Litovsk to entertain “suggestions about the autonomy of subject nationalities,” Lloyd George collapsed Lenin’s and Wilson’s terminologies, claiming, “All principles of self-determination, or . . . government by the consent of [the] governed, here vanish into thin air.” This ambiguity pervaded the prime minister’s speech. Most confusingly, he extended the principle of “self-government” to colonial “natives” living “under chiefs and councils . . . competent to consult and speak for their tribes and members,” asserting that the “general principle of national self-determination is therefore applicable in their cases as in those of occupied European territories.”34 Clearly, Lloyd George’s various permutations of the “general principle of national self-determination” precluded a strict construction accommodating political independence for ethnic groups alone. Indeed, in Paris, he felt obliged to support the territorial claims of the British Dominions (whose soldiers had captured several German colonies), urging “the Conference [to] treat the territories . . . as part of the Dominions which had captured them.”35

A PRAGMATIST PROVENANCE

Thus, while the “thought and purpose” of the Associated Powers were clear to Wilson, the exact terms of an acceptable European settlement remained nebulous. The Fourteen Points were Wilson’s attempt to concretize them. They were also an attempt to reiterate the “thought and purpose” that had led Wilson to endorse a League of Nations, demand a negotiated peace, and finally abandon

33. House diary, December 18, 1917, _PWW_ 45: 324. The only full-length study of the Inquiry is Lawrence E. Gelfand’s _The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919_ (New Haven, CT, 1963), which focuses on its evolving membership and structure. For the intellectual assumptions of its members and the strategic implications of its output, one must consult the Inquiry Documents (Special Reports and Studies), Record Group (RG) 256.2, film M-1107, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter Inquiry Documents).


neutrality and go to war against the Central Powers. Therefore, in an address to a joint session of Congress on January 8, 1918, Wilson proposed solutions to eight specific territorial and political problems that had caused or arisen from the war, while anchoring these aims in six general propositions that expressed the larger goals for which his nation fought: open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, abolition of trade barriers, arms reduction, colonial reform, and, most importantly, a League of Nations to ensure their pursuit and achievement.\textsuperscript{36}

In contrast to Lloyd George, Wilson did not appropriate the Bolsheviks' rhetoric of national self-determination in his Fourteen Points address. Rather, his program's organizing principle was that which for decades had anchored his political thought—self-government. To emphasize the distinction is not to suggest his address was a “counter-manifesto” to Lenin's. At the time Wilson had little fear of bolshevism's spread. To the contrary, he still saw the Bolsheviks as potential allies in the fight for a liberal peace.\textsuperscript{37} Still, Wilson's entire philosophy of government was antithetical to the Bolsheviks' pronouncements that every ethnic-nationalist aspiration must be realized in a sovereign state. Dogmatic adherence to that notion was an affront to Wilson's civic-nationalist ideal of variegated communities forming common purposes through “common counsel”: the formulation of public goals and policies through widely participatory deliberative discourse. His domestic pursuit of “common counsel” in the months preceding American belligerency was dogged enough to have earned praise from three of the day's leading exponents of deliberative democracy, the pragmatists John Dewey, Herbert Croly, and the Inquiry's own Walter Lippmann. All three men believed the president aimed to realize the same ideal for international society. Wilson's wartime diplomacy had so far given them little reason to doubt. As Wilson himself explained to the Russian Provisional Government that first made “self-determination of peoples” its war aim, the United States, too, desired “the liberty, the self-government, and the unddictated development of all peoples,” but it sought to secure these through a “common covenant” organized to reflect the “brotherhood of mankind.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Fourteen Points, 534–39.

\textsuperscript{37} The classic interpretation of the Fourteen Points as “counter-manifesto” is Mayer, \textit{Political Origins of the New Diplomacy}, chap. 9; see also N. Gordon Levin, Jr., \textit{Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution} (New York, 1968). Challenging these interpretations, Knock notes that Lenin's proclamations in the spring of 1917 echoed Wilson's “Peace without Victory” address, and that all the Fourteen Points, “save the very one on Russia,” were either territorial adjustments long pondered by the Inquiry or reiterations of pronouncements Wilson made long before the Bolsheviks' triumph in Russia. Knock, \textit{To End All Wars}, 138, 145.

The genesis of the Fourteen Points address offers further proof that the program’s overarching goal was to create an international environment in which self-governing institutions could take root and thrive in a variety of contexts. Had Wilson thought instead that self-government depended on political independence for all nationalities, he would certainly not have entrusted Lippmann to oversee the drafting of the program. A student of William James, Lippmann was also a founding editor of the *New Republic*. His views on international organization, which drew on James’s analyses of social interdependence and the provisional and collective construction of knowledge, were widely circulated before he was appointed Secretary of the Inquiry. The president himself corresponded occasionally with Lippmann and kept clippings of *New Republic* columns explaining the need for a deliberative, cooperative international community whose authority was recognized by individual states. Indeed, in early 1917, he requested a copy of Lippmann’s book *The Stakes of Diplomacy* (1915), which argued that the only viable “substitute for war” was a system of “election” among nations, like the systems that replaced fighting within them; in other words, a flexible, highly adaptive machinery by which the “political method” could trump “pretensions to sovereignty” in a world of increasingly obsolete geographical barriers. Wilson also saved an article from July 1917, in which

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Lippmann identified the germ of such a development in the Allies’ attempts at coordinating their war efforts.42 One month later, after Pope Benedict XV called for a general peace settling boundary disputes on a vaguely defined popular basis, Lippmann outlined Wilson’s reply: no democratic settlement was possible until German autocracy was completely dismantled. Finally, Lippmann’s Inquiry memoranda to the executive consistently reiterated the importance of marshaling world public opinion behind the continued integration of nations under flexible, amendable institutions like those of the United States.43

Not surprisingly, the “diplomatic offensive” Lippmann prepared with colleagues Sidney Mezes, David Hunter Miller, and Isaiah Bowman between December 18 and 22—the first draft of the Fourteen Points—was of the same pragmatist ilk. It offered Germany economic and political partnership in return for political reform and proposed territorial arrangements that, as Lippmann later explained, “conceded as much to the Allies as it could, but took away the poison” of the secret treaties. The goal was a settlement providing a stable psychological and political basis for international, cooperative responses to change. That, in turn, meant addressing the grievances of subject peoples without dismembering every multinational state.44 Indeed, many of the Inquiry’s recommendations explicitly advised against drawing boundaries according to ethnological criteria, as in the case of the Balkans. Even for Poland, cause célèbre of European political nationalism, the Inquiry advised that “boundaries . . . be based on a fair balance of national and economic considerations”; indeed, the group deemed it “necessary to insist” upon a “democratic basis for the Polish

responded, “I wish you would send one to the President. We were talking about it the other day and he was interested to see a copy.” Lippmann obliged; a copy remains in Wilson’s personal library at the Library of Congress. Wilson thanked Lippmann for the book, assuring him, “I shall take the greatest pleasure in looking it through and shall expect a great deal of profit from doing so.” Baker to Lippmann, January 29, 1917, and Lippmann to Baker, January 31, 1917, Walter Lippmann Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut, microfilm ed., series 1.1, box 2, folder 97, reel 2; Wilson to Lippmann, February 3, 1917, PWW 41: 113.

42. Lippmann, “The World Conflict in Its Relation to American Democracy,” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 72 (July, 1917): 1–10, copy in Wilson Papers, series 2, reel 90. The article was forwarded to Wilson by Baker. See Baker to Wilson, August 13, 1917, PWW 43: 454, and editorial note 1 under the same date.


state” in order to avoid “internal friction” between the many ethnicities it would inevitably comprise. In short, if the Poles were to have their state, a pragmatic peace required that they share nicely—and it was the business of the international community to make sure of it.45

THE PROGRAM AND ITS PURSUIT

Wilson had no trouble following the Inquiry’s logic and incorporated its plan, with little alteration, into the final draft of the Fourteen Points address. He knew he could not unequivocally endorse national self-determination as a universal principle, even for a universe as small as Europe. “Pushed to its extreme,” he confided to Spring Rice just four days before his address, “the principle would mean the disruption of existing governments to an undefinable extent. Logic was a good and powerful thing but apart from the consideration of existing circumstances might lead to dangerous results.”46 Indeed, the address itself provides the clearest evidence of Wilson’s pragmatic focus on fostering self-government through various, situation-specific political and economic arrangements, and his relative lack of interest in political independence for stateless nationalities. “What we demand in this war,” he told Congress, was that the world “be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, [and] be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.” The polyglot, patchwork United States was Wilson’s general model, and securing the right of all people to an accountable government, unthreatened by hostile powers, was his objective.47

In this spirit, the eight points addressing specific territorial disputes (Points VI–XIII) were designed to prevent depredations by governments operating solely on the principle of force: the fundamental characteristic, as Wilson saw it, of the “Imperialists” in charge of the Central Powers.48 Point VI addressed the vexing question of Russia, whose Bolshevik leaders were at that moment negotiating peace with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. Wilson knew that “the part of wisdom,” as House put it, was to keep the Russians in the war. Yet in his address, he applauded the Bolshevik negotiators for their efforts to secure justice from the “Central Empires” and demanded evacuation of all occupying forces from Russia, to permit “the independent determination of her own political development and national policy.” Contrary to some influential interpretations, Wilson was not bent on promoting “liberal capitalist democracy” or “open-door imperialism” in Russia. Rather, he condemned interference in its affairs. In this spirit,

48. See Fourteen Points, 536, 538–39, where the equation of imperialism with aggressive force, not geographic extension, is clear.
he offered Russia “a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing.”\textsuperscript{49} Granted, the Bolsheviks would have to prove that open politics, if not economics, could thrive under their system, lest they wear out that welcome. More problematically, Wilson later sent troops to Russia to protect Allied military assets and help reestablish an Eastern Front—objectives entailing support for the Bolsheviks’ White Russian enemies and severely compromising the “independent determination” of Russia’s institutions by its own citizens. But Wilson intervened reluctantly, primarily to counterbalance much heavier troop deployments planned by the Japanese government. At the peace negotiations, moreover, Wilson consistently pressed upon his counterparts the need to “withdraw from Russia and let the Russians settle their own affairs themselves.” In any case, at the time of his Fourteen Points address Wilson was “struck by the good sense of the Russian proposals” at Brest-Litovsk, despised the Central Powers for dismissing them, and sympathized with the aspirations of the Russian people toward self-government—even if he had doubts about the men claiming to represent them.\textsuperscript{50}

Reconciling his sympathies for common Russians with his desire to keep them in the war was a genuine struggle for Wilson, who wrangled far less over the other points in the territorial program. That Belgium should be “evacuated and restored,” for instance, was perhaps the sole item upon which nearly everyone outside the Central Powers agreed—but not for ethnic-nationalist reasons. As Point VII stated, the security of a peaceful, established, and in this case multiethnic state was crucial to “the whole structure and validity of international law.” The remaining territorial points, though addressing issues in which nationalist aspirations played larger roles, also demonstrate Wilson’s belief that self-government within and between states was the best remedy for

\textsuperscript{49}. House diary, January 9, 1918, \textit{PWW} 45: 553; Fourteen Points, 537. The relevant alternative interpretations are Levin, \textit{Wilson and World Politics}; and William Appleman Williams, \textit{The Tragedy of American Diplomacy} (New York, 1959). By the time he arrived in Paris in December 1918, Wilson worried over Europe’s susceptibility “to the poison of bolshevism.” However, by then stories of the Bolsheviks’ brutal measures proliferated. Furthermore, he understood the revolutionary mood of peoples whose “Governments have been run for the wrong purposes,” and considered it a lesson: “I am convinced that if this peace is not made on the highest principles of justice it will be swept away by the peoples of the world in less than a generation.” William Christian Bullitt diary entry, December 10, 1918, \textit{PWW} 53: 352.

conflict-prone regions. On the advice of Lippmann, Bowman, and Mezes, Wilson rejected David Hunter Miller’s plank explicitly demanding full restoration of Alsace-Lorraine to France. World-political rather than ethnic or historical considerations might make a different settlement desirable, Wilson determined, “in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.”

Point IX, calling for “readjustment” of Italy’s borders along “clearly recognizable lines of nationality,” was formulated by the Inquiry so as to “meet the just demands of Italy” while denying the “larger ambitions” revealed in the secret treaties, which reduced residents of the Eastern Alps and Adriatic coast to mere spoils of war. At Paris, in fact, Wilson proposed settling most Italian claims on purely practical grounds: The Sexten Valley, for example, was a necessary barrier to invasion, while the Istrian border would simply “follow the crest of the mountains.” Even when justifying his famous refusal of Sonnino’s demand for the Adriatic port of Fiume, Wilson appealed to Lippmann’s principle of “election” over ethnicity, insisting that “everywhere a poll has been taken the result has been unfavorable to Italy.”

Nor was ethnology central to the points regarding the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. These did call for “autonomous development” for ethnic minorities. But the aim, according to the Inquiry Memorandum, was encouraging “federalism” and ending both empires’ “vassalage” to Germany. Again, the destruction of autocracy within and between nations was more important than breaking them apart. Wilson’s later recognition of the nationalist groups that arose from the Austro-Hungarian Empire was largely the recognition of a fait accompli.

In discussing the Balkans, Wilson again subordinated nationalist aspirations to deliberative politics, regional stability, and freedom from foreign intrigue. Point XI stated that the “relations of the several Balkan states to one another [should be] determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality.” The task, in other words, was to settle the border disputes between these existing political entities, not to establish new nation-states. Indeed, only “Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro” were mentioned, for the perfectly logical reason that they were the only states extant.

As for other Balkan territories, the Inquiry Memorandum stated that their “ultimate
relationship . . . must be based upon a fair balance of nationalistic and economic considerations applied in a generous and inventive spirit after impartial scientific inquiry.” The ultimate goal was to discourage “the meddling and intriguing of Great Powers” that had destabilized the Balkans for generations, and to this end, a settlement ensuring “economic prosperity” was “most likely to be a lasting one.” 55 Without dressing Wilson in the ill-fitting garb of a racial democrat, it must be said that his accepting the Inquiry’s Balkan plan, not to mention his refusal to promote Irish and Baltic nationalism, challenges the notion that a racially exclusive principle of statehood for Europeans shaped his theory or practice in any determinative way. 56

Wilson’s Point XIII, calling for a Polish state comprising “the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations,” was the only outright concession to the principle of national self-determination in the Fourteen Points. Still, the Inquiry’s caveats about the new state’s multiethnic character, imprecisely ethnological borders, and imperative need for a democratic constitution—caveats Wilson read and digested in drafting his address—suggest that Polish nationalism was not the cause, but merely the most salient circumstance of the proposal. Wilson felt strongly that centuries of partition and ethnic persecution by conquering powers entitled the Poles to a state of their own. For the same historical, situational reasons, however, Polish independence would be a symbolic killing stroke against autocracy and balance-of-power politics. Hence, Wilson argued at Paris that the best means of establishing Poland’s boundaries was “to consult the people. All told, it would be a question of ascertaining, not what the race and the language of the people are, but under which regime they prefer to live.” 57

In any event, neither Point XIII nor any of the territorial proposals Wilson adopted from the Inquiry were devised or delivered with the intention that each represent a perfect microcosm of the ideal future. Though a concrete working program of territorial adjustment was necessary to start and shape the discussion of peace, all of the territorial proposals save those regarding Russian and Belgian

55. Inquiry Memorandum, 470. Wilson accepted the Inquiry’s logic and recommendations despite vehement protests by the Serbian envoy, to whom House showed the draft of Point XI. See House diary, January 9, 1918, PWW 45: 553–54.
56. Cf. Ambrosius, “Democracy, Peace, and World Order,” in Cooper, Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson, 234–39, which identifies civic- and ethnic-nationalist strains in Wilson’s thought, but emphasizes the latter in discussing his differing attitudes toward Europe and the rest of the world. On Wilson’s relative indifference to domestic pressure to support Irish independence, see John B. Duff, “The Versailles Treaty and the Irish Americans,” Journal of American History 55 (December 1968): 582–98. Two contrasting studies of Wilson and Baltic nationalism that both stress his lack of sympathy for the cause are Albert N. Tarulis, American-Baltic Relations, 1918–1922: The Struggle over Recognition (Washington, DC, 1965); and David S. Foglesong, “The United States, Self-Determination, and the Struggle against Bolshevism in the Eastern Baltic Region, 1918–1920,” Journal of Baltic Studies 26 (Summer 1995): 107–44. Tarulis emphasizes Wilson’s belief that the Bolshevik regime would collapse on its own and democratic institutions arise in its place, while Foglesong argues that fear of bolshevism spurred the administration’s support of White Russians seeking to restore the territorial integrity—but not, the Americans hoped, the imperial machinery—of Great Russia.
57. Fourteen Points, 538; Inquiry Memorandum, 470–71; Mantoux, Deliberations, 2: 131.
restoration were formulated with an eye toward flexibility, as comparison of Wilson’s original drafts with the final product shows: every imperative “must” or “shall” was struck out by Wilson and replaced with “should” (see Figures 1 and 2). Wilson’s territorial points were designed to identify the major problems that would face peacemakers at war’s end, and to exemplify—not codify—pragmatically internationalist solutions.  

Not all points were created equal, however. Drafting and revising the speech with House, Wilson determined on “placing the general terms first and territorial adjustments last,” making the general terms a prolegomenon to the rest. The exception was the call for a League of Nations, which Wilson felt “should come last because it would round out the message properly.” Points I through V and XIV, then, should be read as those most fundamental to the “thought and purpose” driving Wilson’s diplomacy. The thought, or principle, was that deliberative discourse within and among nations must replace force and repression as the primary guarantor of both domestic and international order. The purpose was to guarantee that principle’s continued application long after the current war had ended, and its settlement became obsolete.

Point I, for instance, would erase what many considered the major cause of the war: secret treaties. “Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at” were necessary to ensure that the external affairs of states were conducted “frankly and in the public view.” Wilson believed that no people anywhere, if aware of and involved in their government’s affairs, would sanction the types of treaties that had drawn a whole continent into war with a single assassination as pretext. At the urging of House, Wilson rearranged his first typed draft of the address so that this point came first, “to lay deep stress upon it.” Point II, calling for “freedom of the seas,” also resonated with concerns both specific to the current war and applicable to international affairs generally. The disruption of American shipping had involved the United States in the conflict, and true freedom of the seas might have prevented a transatlantic war. Wilson’s caveat that “the seas [could] be closed” through “international action,” however, implied that cooperative formulation and execution of international law should strive not only for fairness, but flexibility.

International cooperation was also the theme of Point III, demanding “removal” of “all economic barriers” between nations. Wilson recognized that the struggle for autarky was one motor of the expansionism that brought the belligerents into conflict. But Point III had a more general, philosophical basis as well: Wilson felt, like many at the time, that commerce was a unifying and pacifying force, and that “an equality of trade conditions among all the nations

Figures 1 and 2: Wilson’s late-stage revisions to his Fourteen Points address, ca. January 6-7, 1918. To emphasize the flexibility of the settlement he envisioned, Wilson struck out each imperative “must” and “shall” from earlier drafts of the individual points—except in the case of his call for a League of Nations, which he considered the crucial guarantor of a settlement both flexible and stable. Woodrow Wilson Papers, Series 7B, microfilm reel 479, Library of Congress.
consenting to the peace” would give each democratic nation a say in how such salubrious economic conditions could best be maintained. The latent radicalism of Point III emerged nearly a year later in a Wilson-approved gloss on the Fourteen Points, commissioned for negotiating purposes and drafted by Lippmann and fellow progressive publicist Frank Cobb. Their memorandum stated that a “fair and equitable understanding as to the distribution of raw materials” among the world’s peoples was one of the League’s crucial deliberative tasks.62

Wilson also invoked a deliberative paradigm of international relations in Point IV. This proposal for disarmament acknowledged the obvious fact that the war had been fought with weapons, whose very proliferation seemed to have demanded their use—as peace advocates long had warned.63 Disarmament, however, was a thorny issue. No peace program could fail to call for arms reduction. Yet Wilson had often stated that the contemplated League of Nations depended upon a “concert of power” to protect member states. Moreover, a state had to have enough force at its disposal to maintain internal order. Hence Wilson insisted upon “guarantees . . . that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety”—affirming disarmament but inviting discussion over the specifics of this complex issue.64

Point V, regarding the postwar disposition of European colonies, reveals the complexities of Wilson’s desire to foster self-government in the various ways, and at the various rates, he thought a heterogeneous world demanded. It also reveals Wilson himself at his noblest and, simultaneously, his most chauvinistic. Point V called for “free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims,” stipulating that “the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.” Wilson decided to include Point V on his own; it was not suggested in the Inquiry Memorandum or by House, and Wilson and House both worried over the Allies’ reaction to it. Despite Point V’s equivocal wording, its call to weigh natives’ “interests” against foreigners’ “equitable claims” was consistent with Wilson’s deliberative concept of self-government and belief in the right of all peoples to it. More important, it was a direct challenge to the imperial order of the day.65 “Imperialism,” in the Wilsonian lexicon, implied

62. Ibid.; memorandum by Walter Lippmann and Frank I. Cobb, printed as House to Wilson, October 29, 1918 (fifth of that date), PWW 51: 495–504 (hereafter Lippmann-Cobb Memorandum), esp. 496. The most famous prophet of “the harmony of interests” that commercial integration would create was Norman Angell. Besides The Great Illusion (1910) and The Foundations of International Polity (1914), Angell frequently contributed articles to the New Republic, some of which Wilson read: see, e.g., PWW 34: 135–36, 217; and Wilson Papers, series 9, reel 513.


64. Fourteen Points, 537. For Wilson’s emphasis on a “concert of power,” see his address to the Senate of January 22, 1917, PWW 40: 534.

self-interested, autocratic, violent interference in politics, not territorial sovereignty over large regions. Thus, the British, whose (white-majority) territories constituted “a union of free peoples acting on free impulses,” administered a radically different sort of empire than the Germans. Wilson firmly believed that as long as a people’s expressed interests were served by their government, that government was legitimate, and he was putting the Allies on notice that they would have to meet that standard under the new international order he envisioned. Still, Wilson was vague as to what meeting that standard entailed. It did not entail immediate decolonization: Though decades had passed since his first writings on the nature of states, he still believed self-government was a habit arising from long practice under the right conditions. And yet the tragedy of the war, as well as his own botched attempts to bring democracy to revolutionary Mexico, had shaken his belief that white men trained in the arts of democracy were competent to instill such habits in others. As his later advocacy of the mandate system would demonstrate, Wilson simply did not know how or when long-oppressed peoples would reach their potential for full self-government. Furthermore, as his initial resistance and subsequent acquiescence to Japanese retention of Shandong reveals, assuring the participation of powerful states in a League that could reform their imperialist ways often seemed the better part of valor. Wilson was less troubled by the postponement of freedom for many oppressed populations than our postcolonial sensibilities can easily stomach, but not because he considered oppression their racial destiny. The “adjustment” of colonial conditions to self-governing principles was a problem to be solved case by case, with definite responsibilities lodged in trustees answerable to an impartial, international body—a body in which every mandate would someday enjoy full membership.

Whether the mandate system—adopted at Paris in 1919—alleviated or perpetuated the problematic situation of the world’s colonized peoples is a matter

66. See Sir Arthur Spring Rice to the Foreign Office, January 9, 1918, PWW 45: 549. This presumed self-governing character of the British Empire explains Wilson’s dismissal of the Irish nationalist cause, despite the domestic political advantages of supporting it. He insisted the Irish question was the internal concern of a legitimate democracy. See Ray Stannard Baker diary entry, March 8, 1919, PWW 55: 463; David Hunter Miller, The Drafting of the Covenant (2 vols., New York, 1928), 1: 294.

67. Studies emphasizing Wilson’s changed attitude after his 1914 intervention in Mexico include Knock, To End All Wars, esp. 25–30; and Cooper, Warrior and the Priest, which returns often to the theme. On the Shandong question, see Kawamura, “Wilsonian Idealism and Japanese Claims at the Peace Conference”; Stephen G. Craft, “John Bassett Moore, Robert Lansing, and the Shandong Question,” Pacific Historical Review 66 (May, 1997): 231–49. At Paris, Wilson consistently emphasized the evolutionary and impermanent nature of the mandates system. All the mandates were “candidates for full admission to the League of Nations,” he told plaintiffs of the “Mohammedan nations.” There was but “one general condition,” namely, “that the country which wishes to enter it possesses a truly democratic government.” Mandates, he explained, would protect “untutored” peoples while accelerating their education in designing and controlling self-governing institutions—organizations meeting the same standards, Wilson claimed, that Germany’s would have to meet. Wilson quoted in Mantoux, Deliberations of the Council of Four, 2: 99.
beyond the scope of this analysis. Yet it was a matter Wilson had considered at length, along with other uncertainties his program entailed. He knew full well that no peace would be perfect. Mistakes would be made even in the most judicious settlement, and the world community would change over time. These considerations lay behind the last and most important of the Fourteen Points: “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” That the call for a League of Nations as the finale of Wilson’s peace overture indicates the full extent of his commitment to a pragmatically internationalist peace. Upon America’s entry into the war, Wilson had imposed a moratorium on discussion of the League, worrying that the idea’s main champions, the League to Enforce Peace (LEP), had “a very much too definite programme” in mind for an organization meant to embody the common counsel of many nations. The centrality of international cooperation to the rest of the Fourteen Points, along with growing jingoism in the United States, required that discussion of a League resume; but despite the “guarantees” of Point XIV, the League Wilson imagined was still a flexible, amendable, constantly evolving forum for international discussion and adaptation to the flux of international relations—a compromise between the legalistic posse commutatus devised by the LEP and the pacificist mediatory body envisioned by groups like the American Union Against Militarism. The League idea, Wilson told the American peace delegation on the way to Paris, “implied [not just] political independence and territorial integrity,” but “alteration of terms if it could be shown that injustice had been done or that conditions had changed.” “In fact,” recorded one listener, Wilson “could not see how a treaty of peace could be drawn up or how both elasticity and security could be obtained save under a League of Nations.” Thus, in contrast to the territorial proposals, Point XIV was constructed in the imperative: “A general association of nations must be

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68. In one of the few general assessments of the mandate system produced to date, Andrew J. Crozier concludes that although U.S. rejection of the League allowed European mandatories to ignore the interests of the populations under their jurisdiction, the system nonetheless instigated the decolonization process that accelerated after World War II. It should also be noted that it was South African Jan C. Smuts, not Wilson or his advisers, who introduced the ideas culminating in the hierarchical A-B-C system, in which C-class mandates considered generations away from fitness for self-government were effectively relegated to permanent colonial status. See Andrew J. Crozier, “The Establishment of the Mandates System 1919–25: Some Problems Created by the Paris Peace Conference,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 14 (1979): 483–513; Gelfand, *The Inquiry*, 231–33; Smuts, *The League of Nations, A Practical Suggestion* (London, 1918); Knock, *To End All Wars*, 203, 206, 210–12, 221. Still enlightening of the Smuts-Wilson relationship in general is George Curry, “Woodrow Wilson, Jan Smuts, and the Versailles Settlement,” *American Historical Review* 66 (July 1962): 968–86. 69. Fourteen Points, 538; Wilson to Braxton D. Gibson, May 5, 1917, *PWW* 42: 221 (on the LEP’s program). Knock offers a running analysis and comparison of the various League blueprints then circulating in *To End All Wars*, beginning with chapter 3.
formed,” Wilson asserted, and he sincerely hoped the world would note the distinction.70

Wilson’s paradoxically rigid insistence on “elasticity” only reaffirms the primacy of pragmatic adjustment in his politics, and belies the notion that he aimed to stamp any universal order immediately across the world—much less one that eviscerated the League of Nations by affirming the absolute sovereignty of nation-states. Wilson’s fight for the League at Paris yields the same conclusion. Even his “Paris draft” of the League Covenant’s notorious Article X (then numbered Article III), which did refer to “the principle of self-determination,” established an equilibrium between maintaining “political independence and territorial integrity” on the one hand, and making “such territorial adjustments . . . as may in the future become necessary” on the other. Though such adjustments must be “pursuant to the principle of self-determination,” they might be prompted by either “changes in present racial conditions and aspirations or present social and political relationships.” Any changes must serve “the manifest interest of the peoples concerned” and be “agreeable to those peoples.” As Wilson’s draft stated, the ultimate premise of these elastic provisions was “that the peace of the world is superior in importance to every question of political jurisdiction or boundary.”71

Wilson never gave up on this evolutionary, internationalist plan for the League. Promoting American League membership in the summer of 1919, after Article X had been pared down to a mere collective security agreement, Wilson often referred to Article XI as his “favorite,” for it asserted (as Wilson paraphrased it) “that every matter which is likely to affect the peace of the world is everybody’s business, and that it shall be the friendly right of any nation to call attention in the League to anything that is likely to affect the peace of the world or the good understanding between nations.” Both Wilson’s original draft of the future Article X and his attempt to invest Article XI with its lost content deflect Senator Norris’s imputation of collusion with imperialists to maintain the status quo. They also explode the idea that Wilson saw ethnicity as the acid test of sovereignty. “National” communities were simply too fluid for any settlement to mark eternal boundaries with ethnic stelae.72

70. A Memorandum by Isaiah Bowman, December 10, 1918, PWW 53: 354; see also Bullitt diary, December 10, 1918, ibid. 351; House diary, PWW 45: 552–53.
71. Miller, Drafting of the Covenant, 2: 99 (emphasis added).
72. Wilson, An Address in the Indianapolis Coliseum, September 4, 1919, PWW 63: 27. On Wilson’s anti-imperialist interpretation of Article XI, see Robert David Johnson, “Article XI in the Debate on the United States’ Rejection of the League of Nations,” International History Review 15 (August 1993): 502–24. Johnson argues that “mild reservationists attacked [Wilson’s] interpretation of the article, while Wilson’s opposition to imperialism proved insufficiently vigorous to convince his radical critics to change their minds and support the treaty” (ibid., 524). Yet one could argue that it was not the refusal of radicals to support the treaty that caused the Senate’s rejection of League membership, but rather Wilson’s insistence that moderate pro-League Democrats reject a more conservative treaty, with Lodge’s reservations, which they would have otherwise accepted. See Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, chap. 8.
Hence, the only principle Wilson sought permanently to inscribe in the law of nations was that of deliberative self-government—the political embodiment of orderly change. In drafting the peace, numerous complex formulae would be devised in an attempt to factor in the countless variables specific to the war just ended; but the Covenant of the League was no such formula. “The simplicity of the document,” he told the Paris conferees, when presenting the Covenant’s final draft (Figure 3), seems to me to be one of its chief virtues, because, speaking for myself, I was unable to see the variety of circumstances with which this league would have to deal. I was unable, therefore, to plan all the machinery that might be necessary to meet the differing and unexpected contingencies. Therefore, I should say of this document that it is not a strait-jacket but a vehicle of life.
“A living thing is born,” Wilson announced. Like other living things, the “wide union” of governments he had imagined since 1887 would both shape and be shaped by its environment; but unlike the red-clawed governments from which it evolved, deliberation would secure its survival and reproduction. As the president told a Montana audience many months later, “The League of Nations substitutes discussion for fighting.”

“An evident principle runs through the whole programme I have outlined,” Wilson concluded his Fourteen Points address. “It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another.” With one another, and not independent of one another; that was how Wilson envisioned the peoples of the world living freely. And why would he have envisioned it otherwise? American history as he read it was a triumph of civic unity over ethnic, cultural, and regional division. Above all, the American Civil War had proven the primacy of the organic democratic ideal over the fissile logic of states’ rights theories of liberty. Indeed, campaigning for American League membership in 1919, Wilson warned that opponents would come to rue their obstructions as much as those who once “tried to divide this Union.” No wonder, then, that critical analysis reveals the Fourteen Points’ roots in America’s civic-nationalist tradition of self-government rather than ethnic-nationalist ideas of self-determination.

After the Address

Liberals across America were thrilled by the Fourteen Points. Shrewd observers noted how deftly each specific term balanced practical considerations with ideal desires, while exemplifying both the firmness and flexibility a settlement hospitable to international order required. “A durable peace for the world does not depend upon the acceptance of the President’s programme without the changing of a word,” opined the New York World on January 9, “but it does depend upon unyielding adherence to the principles of justice and right that he has enunciated in defining these terms.” As Max Eastman reflected some months later, Wilson’s Fourteen Points had brought to statesmanship “some of the same thing that Bergson and William James and John Dewey have brought into philosophy—a sense of the reality of time, and the creative character of

75. Wilson, An Address in the Marlow Theater in Helena, September 11, 1919, PWW 63: 181. Compare Heater, who claims that while the “Fourteen Points were anything but a wholehearted exposition of the principle of national self-determination,” there nevertheless “can be no doubt that, in his heart, Woodrow Wilson was deeply committed to national self-determination.” Heater, National Self-Determination, 43, 44.
change. . . . It is the expression of a wisdom which is new and peculiar to our age.”

Beyond America’s borders, the president’s message was cabled to press associations in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and South America. Izvestia, official organ of the Central Executive Committee in Petrograd, praised the Fourteen Points as an endorsement of the Brest-Litovsk peace proposals. Pravda, organ of the Bolshevik party, condemned Wilson as a capitalist imperialist pretending at democracy; but Lenin wired the president’s message to Trotsky nonetheless, to use as leverage in negotiations with the Germans. Months later, Germany accepted the Fourteen Points as a basis for peace, in hope that the principle of national self-determination would protect them from territorial losses. Meanwhile, Wilson reiterated—privately—his ambivalence toward the idea. “While, as you know, I am strongly inclined to nationality as the basis for territorial limits,” Wilson wrote Secretary of State Robert Lansing on January 29, 1918, “I believe that it cannot be invariably adopted.” To protect self-governing nations from militaristic autocracies Wilson believed that “in certain cases . . . strategic boundaries must be considered and must modify boundaries based on nationality.”

But “national self-determination” was the phrase the world seized upon. This was due, in part, to the immediate circumstances surrounding the address. Lloyd George’s speech on January 5 greatly enhanced the power of Lenin’s centrifugal concept of national self-determination to distort Wilson’s centripetal ideal of global self-government. As far as many thousands worldwide were concerned, Wilson’s address, which House predicted “would so smother the Lloyd George speech that it would be forgotten,” simply amplified it. A year later, as Wilson battled to enshrine the spirit and substance of his address in the treaties ending the war, George Harvey of the North American Review published a widely read article claiming that Lloyd George’s speech had, in fact, been “The Genesis of the Fourteen Commandments.” The confusion, however, was immediate. Viscount James Bryce, former British ambassador to Washington, publicly praised Wilson’s “broad, clear assertion of the right of a nationality to self-determination.” In their enthusiastic response to the address, British laborites

called for “Self-Determination for India.” By June, Stephen Paneretoff, the Bulgarian minister in Washington, was declaring that “Wilson’s formula for the self-determination of nations alone [was] capable of a lasting solution of the Balkan problem.” Long before Wilson went to Paris, “national self-determination” had become the insidious shorthand by which his ideas for peace were translated into something at once greater and less profound in the consciousness of the world. Even the pragmatists at the New Republic, while attempting to explain the delicate experiment in world democracy that was America’s true objective, invoked the phrase. 79

These immediate misunderstandings were not Wilson’s fault. That this incubus of self-determination was allowed to grow until it burst from the host of public opinion was. Wilson began laying the traps that would ensnare him barely a month after his address when, again before a joint session of Congress, he first uttered the term “self-determination” on February 11, 1918. Already the careful language of the Fourteen Points had begun to disappear. “Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase,” he told Congress, upon receiving Germany’s disappointing reply to his Fourteen Points address. “It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.” The speech was not an unequivocal endorsement of territorial sovereignty for ethnic groups. “Self-determination” in the form of ethnic nationalism was indeed a force acting in Europe, with or without the statesman’s seal of approval; one did not have to embrace it fully to recognize its power and, in many cases, justice. Besides, “national self-determination” was not the phrase Wilson used, nor the idea with which he was most concerned. He immediately explained that it was Germany’s insistence on “individual understandings between powerful states” (rather than a peace “submitted to the common judgment”) that was most intolerable. As he stated earlier in the address, Europe’s problems “each and all affect[ed] the whole world,” and as such, they could not be “discussed separately or in corners.” 80

Yet Wilson’s address was irresponsible nonetheless. Mixed among his indictment of the old diplomacy was the assertion that Europe’s problems must be approached “with a view to the wishes, the natural connections, the racial aspirations, the security, and the peace of mind of the peoples involved.” Further


confounding the distinction between ethnic national independence and self-government, he declared, “National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent.” Wilson quickly explained that the United States desired only to prevent another war, not “to act as arbiter in European territorial disputes,” and noted that the territorial program of the Fourteen Points provided only a “sketch of principles and of the way in which they should be applied.” But once again he returned to the theme of “national aspirations,” stating that the war “had its roots” in “the disregard of the rights of small nations and of nationalities which lacked the union and the force to make good their claim to determine their own allegiances.”

Between February 1918 and his return from Paris nearly eighteen months later (Figure 4), Wilson’s nice distinctions between self-government and self-determination were known only to his closest advisers—and even they saw but dimly into his mind. Consequently “the people”—those composing the body of

world opinion that was to ratify Wilson’s charter of international democracy—
were left to make of the phrase what they would. Though Wilson spoke later of
his “anxieties” over the false hopes he raised worldwide, he never stated publicly
that he had been misunderstood. Lansing, describing the removal of Wilson’s
phrase “self-determination” from Article X of the League of Nations Covenant,
regretted that whatever influence had prevailed on this point “was not potent
enough to obtain from him an open disavowal of the principle as a right standard
for the determination of sovereign authority.” The secretary of state, long ago
banished from the president’s confidence, was mistaken to believe Wilson felt a
“right standard” required any ethnic calibration. But Lansing’s criticism of the
president’s ambiguous public stance rings true.82

Indeed, as waging the war and planning the peace consumed him, Wilson
abandoned his own deeply held convictions regarding democratic leadership.
The duty of the democratic statesman, according to Wilson, was a complicated
mix of boldness and circumspection, of educating and acquiescing to the judg-
ment of the public. “Whoever would effect change in a modern constitutional
government must first educate his fellow citizens to want some change,” he wrote
in 1887. “That done, he must persuade them to want the particular change he
wants.” In the 1890s, Wilson elaborated on this theme, writing that “no reform
may succeed for which the major thought of the nation is not prepared,” and
that “the instructed few may not be safe leaders, except in so far as they have
communicated their instruction to the many,” and “communicated their thought
into a common, a popular thought.” By the first decade of the twentieth century
Wilson was convinced that the president, if he could “rightly interpret the
national thought,” might “not only lead it, but form it to his own views.”
Whether interpreting or shaping public opinion, however, the successful
popular leader could never forget the transcendent importance of communica-
tion: “the rule of entire frankness and plain speaking that ought to exist between
public servants and the public whom they serve.”83

It was just such frankness and plain speaking that Wilson began to abandon
after January 1918. His independent streak emerged to dictate his approach to
foreign affairs almost entirely, realizing the fears of even many staunch support-
ers. On the day Wilson asked Congress to declare war, his friend Thomas
Brahany, pegging Senator Henry Cabot Lodge as a student and shaper of
foreign policy whom the president should “consult freely and frequently,” none-

82. Wilson before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, quoted in H. W. V. Temper-
83. Wilson, “The Study of Administration” (1887), PWW 5: 369; Woodrow Wilson,
Leaders of Men by Woodrow Wilson, ed. T. H. Vail Motter (Princeton, NJ, 1952 [1890]), 41;
Woodrow Wilson, Constitutional Government in the United States (New York, 1908), 59; Wilson
to A. Mitchell Palmer, February 5, 1913, PWW 27: 100. A nuanced analysis that nonetheless
overemphasizes Wilson’s fear of demagoguery is Terri Bimes and Stephen Skowronek,
“Woodrow Wilson’s Critique of Popular Leadership: Reassessing the Modern-Traditional
theless rued, “In most things the President is his own counselor.” This proved altogether too true. Wilson invited no senators to join the American peace commission, and by most accounts, the hand-picked group that did accompany him to Paris were little closer to the action for all their travel. Only days before the George Washington berthed at Brest, France, Charles Seymour described a meeting between Wilson and the commission as “really a historic occasion because it is absolutely the first time the President has let anyone know what his ideas are and what his policy is.” It seemed things were changing: Wilson “explained that he could not know the details of all the questions” that would arise in Paris and “would be forced to rely on the information we gave him.” Wilson, wrote Seymour, said “that he wanted us to come to him freely and that we must expect him to call on us. One phrase sticks in my head—‘You tell me what’s right and I’ll fight for it.’” William C. Bullitt recorded the same presidential promise in his diary—perhaps explaining some of the bitterness soaking his letter of resignation:

That you personally opposed most of the unjust settlements [at Paris] . . . is well known. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that if you had made your fight in the open, instead of behind closed doors, you would have carried with you the opinion of the world . . . and might have established the “new international order based upon broad principles of right and justice” of which you used to speak. I am sorry that you did not fight our fight to the finish and that you had so little faith in the millions of men, like myself, in every nation who had faith in you.

Wilson, ironically, had sought to democratize international relations in camera.84

A host of factors probably contributed to the manifest decline in Wilson’s leadership between the Fourteen Points address and the Senate’s rejection of the Versailles Treaty. Wilson’s anxious desire to have the weight of world opinion backing his assault upon the old diplomacy might explain his failures to distinguish between the internationalist ideal he embraced and the ethnonationalist ideals his rhetoric inspired. Then again, once “self-determination” had gained currency, he might simply have found the phrase convenient—convenient as a propaganda tool or, more likely, as an occasional substitute for his preferred terms “self-government,” “autonomous development,” and “common counsel,” which gained far less traction in the international discourse on war aims. As for his refusal to discuss the details of the settlement, or at least the League, before war’s end, Wilson himself gave at least two reasons. First, he feared that the “Magnolia Covenant” for a powerful League, drafted in the weeks following the

Fourteen Points address, would incense “Senators of the Lodge type.” This in
turn would embolden the resistance of Allied leaders to the curtailments of
national sovereignty his plan entailed. Second, he thought that the League’s
specific structure should “grow” from the discussions at the peace conference,
while the “method” of fulfilling its members’ “mutual pledges” should likewise
develop “case by case.” 85 Finally, Wilson’s health was clearly a factor in the
Senate’s rejection of the League. This became final in March 1920, when the
president ordered his own party to vote against ratifying the Versailles Treaty
with Republican reservations. Cooper has succinctly analyzed the scholarship on
Wilson’s health during this period, concluding that by the time of the League
fight, Wilson’s deteriorating cardiovascular and neurological condition had so
exacerbated his “promethean traits of boldness and willingness to gamble for
great stakes” that he was “literally incapable of compromise.” 86

But this is not the place for a conclusive determination of the circumstantial,
political, psychological, or physiological reasons for Wilson’s failure of leader-
ship. Instead, it should be asked just what was lost by that failure. Bullitt, though
right to judge that the fight for a “new international order” had been lost, was
mistaken about which “broad principles of right and justice” Wilson hoped
would define it. Bullitt’s mistake, the moral of the traditional fable of the
Fourteen Points, is pernicious. What was squandered at Paris was not the
opportunity to realize political independence for every community groaning
under the weight of a foreign yoke. 87 Rather, it was the opportunity to establish
an international community that saw such burdens as shared; helped replace the
yoke with the mantle of self-government for all citizens, under any state, what-
ever its origins; and thus obviated the desire for the type of ethnic polity that has
so often been consumed by its own particularism in the twentieth century. The
tragedy of Wilson’s lone-wolf act is that nations and would-be nations around
the world adopted the role as well, while self-styled leaders of various ideological
packs have too often hunted for themselves.

Nationalist and other fissiparous ideologies offer challenges to international
security and cooperation as powerful today as in Wilson’s time. But the brand of
internationalism that has characterized American foreign policy since Wilson
exacerbates the difficulties. Though U.S. policymakers have often assumed the
congruence of national interests with those of the international community, they
have too rarely assented to a genuinely cooperative formulation and pursuit
of those interests. Post-Wilsonian internationalism has therefore precluded

to House’s original draft of the Magnolia Covenant, see Knock, To End All Wars, 152–53.
86. Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, 414–23; quoted at 422, 423.
87. The impossibility of such a settlement is anyways obvious. As Arthur S. Link put it, all
Wilson or anybody could hope to do in Central Europe was “draw the least absurd boundaries
America’s sustained commitment to the ideal of global self-government embodied in the Fourteen Points. The challenge of a pluralistic world does not discredit that ideal, but rather suggests its value: the potential to alter the deceptively parochial outlook and policies of the “American” Century that eclipsed a “Wilsonian” Century before it dawned.