**HAND-OUT #3 - Peace Conferences**

**Wilson’s Fourteen Points**

Seeking to rally Americans to the war effort in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson promised a “war to end all wars,” and pledged to “make the world safe for democracy.” Making the world safe for democracy seemed a noble and just pursuit to Americans who watched as Europeans and Russians struggled with increasingly limited freedoms and leaders who acted out of vengeance, creating economic turmoil.

President Wilson believed that the United States should serve as a moral compass to the rest of the world. He differentiated the United States’ goals in the war from the goals of the other warring powers. To Wilson, the United States had not entered the war with the hope of gaining wealth or territory; instead, Americans entered the war to shape a new international climate and to ensure the well being and continued growth of democracy. Wilson’s campaign succeeded with the American public. On the home front, Americans responded to Wilson’s idealistic aims and rallied behind him and the war effort.

During the summer and fall of 1917, large numbers of U.S. troops arrived in Europe to support the Allied Powers. About two million Americans served overseas and about 75 percent of those saw combat action during the next 18 months.

America’s troops arrived as the peril in Europe increased. Russia, reeling from a revolution, established a separate peace with Germany in 1918 and pulled out of the war. With Russia no longer a threat to the Central Powers, Germany began moving troops to the war’s western front for a major offensive move into Allied territory. Fresh American troops arrived in France just in time to be catapulted against the German advance and hold off the German armies.

American troops also played an important role in the last Allied assault that took place in France in the fall of 1918—one major objective of this offensive was to cut off the German railroad lines feeding the western front. The Meuse-Argonne offensive, which at the time was the largest battle in American history, lasted 47 days and engaged 1.2 million American troops. Although more than 120,000 American troops were wounded or killed, this triumph paved the way for Allied victory.

As the war drew toward its conclusion, many began to consider what would be the outcome. Recognizing the need for a plan, Wilson devised an outline for peace that would become known as his Fourteen Points.

On January 18, 1918, Wilson delivered his Fourteen Points Address to Congress to encourage the Allies to victory. In it, he hoped to keep a reeling Russia in the war and to appeal to the Central Powers’ disenfranchised minority members. The points, which represented Wilson’s lofty goals for the future of the world, included five general principles for a peace settlement: (1) “Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at” should replace secretive diplomacy; (2) a guaranteed freedom of the seas should exist during wartime and peace time; (3) nations should be able to trade freely without fear of retribution; (4) armaments should be drastically reduced; and (5) colonial claims should be adjusted to reflect the needs of native peoples.

Most of the additional points involved specific territorial adjustments: lost territory should be returned to Russia, Belgium should be a free and independent state, France should regain the Alsace-Lorraine, and Italian boarders should be adjusted along easily recognizable lines of nationality. Under the Fourteen Points, oppressed minority groups such as the millions of Poles who lived under the rule of Germany and Austria-Hungary, would benefit from an era of self-determination. The final point called for the creation of a “general association of nations” that would work to guarantee political independence and sovereignty for all countries. This general association, an early version of Wilson’s League of Nations, would provide international order in the post-war era.

Although the reaction to the Fourteen Points was largely positive, some leaders of the Allied Powers, hoping for territorial gain, grumbled at Wilson’s idealistic aims. Republicans at home who favored isolationism openly criticized Wilson’s world vision and mocked what they referred to as the “fourteen commandments.”

## Treaty of Versailles

Nearly one year after President Woodrow Wilson addressed Congress and laid out his Fourteen Points, fighting in Europe had reached its end. In the last weeks of the war, Wilson used the promise of his Fourteen Points to persuade the German people to overthrow Kaiser Wilhelm II and establish an armistice. Under the armistice, Germany had to withdraw behind the Rhine River and surrender its submarines and munitions.

To establish the conditions of surrender for the defeated Central Powers, members of the Allied Powers came together in Paris. Representatives of the Big Four powers—the United States, France, Britain and Italy—attended the conference. Fearing his Fourteen Points would not be well received by European leaders with their own agendas, Wilson attended the conference as the leader of the American delegation. Wilson’s aim was to create a world parliament to be known as the League of Nations, an agency that would ensure international stability.

Wilson’s fear over the reception of his Fourteen Points proved to be well founded. Although Wilson was a popular figure, many European leaders felt his plans would interfere with their imperialistic ambitions. The English were mostly interested in the expansion of the British Empire, and the French wanted solid assurances that France would never be invaded by Germany again. Millions in Europe rejected the idea that there could be peace without retribution against Germany—the cry of vengeance resounded throughout the Allied European nations, and they demanded that Germany pay for its actions. Wilson, temporarily disheartened, left Paris without solidifying any specific agreement to help aid the Democratic Congressional campaign.

During the Congressional election of 1918, Wilson faced a new battle on the home front. Republicans and Democrats had minimized open partisan politicking during the war. Wilson broke the bi-partisan truce to plea for a Democratic victory in the Congressional elections of 1918. Wilson’s move backfired when Republicans won majorities in both houses. Wilson, who had staked his prestige on a Democratic victory, returned to Europe as a less influential leader.

From January to May of 1919, the Allied Powers hammered out the treaty. To preserve his prized League of Nations, Wilson made sacrifices on many of the other 13 points. Although the Allied victors would not take control of the conquered areas outright, they would be allowed to oversee the territories under the guise of the League of Nations.

Under Wilson’s plans, the League of Nations was to consist of 42 Allied and neutral countries, with five permanent members: the U.S., France, Britain, Italy, and Japan. Wilson’s concessions led to the establishment of the League Covenant, a constitution for the League of Nations. Under the Covenant, the League’s chief goal was collective security among all nations. The Covenant required all League members to protect the “territorial integrity” and “political independence” of all other members.

Signed on June 28, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles outlined several provisions for peace. A “guilt-war” clause, clause 231, placed sole blame for the war on Germany and required Germany to pay reparations to the Allies, which totaled about $33 billion. The treaty required Germany to accept military restrictions and a loss of territory and barred Germany from joining the League of Nations. The Treaty also granted national sovereignty to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Finland, and the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Yugoslavia.

Germany, which had capitulated based on assurances that it would be granted a peace based on the Fourteen Points, felt betrayed by a treaty that only included about four of Wilson’s original points.

The treaty, however, did little to advance Wilson’s quest to establish freedom of the seas, free trade between nations, and military disarmament. Always the optimist, Wilson believed that such oversights could be easily addressed through the powers of the League of Nations. He believed that once convened, the League would have the authority to solve these problems through arbitration and negotiation.

When Wilson went to Europe to fight for his Fourteen Points and negotiate the Treaty of Versailles, he was largely viewed as a worldwide hero. Once the treaty was signed and he returned to America, he was greeted with a cold reception. American isolationists feared greater international entanglement through participation in the League of Nations. Anti-German critics believed the treaty did not go far enough to punish Germany, while many liberals found the treaty too harsh and heavy-handed toward the German people. With opposition in America, the treaty faced a difficult road toward ratification in the U.S. Senate.

## Defeat of Treaty in U.S.

President Woodrow Wilson felt optimistic about returning to America with the completed Treaty of Versailles. His return, however, was marked with a mixed reaction from the public and the Congress. Initially, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who had ardently opposed the treaty, had little hope of defeating it in the Senate. Instead, Lodge and other Republican Senators hoped to amend the treaty, so that they could take credit for the changes. These individuals were known as “reservationists,” since they were willing to accept the treaty with modifications. If someone was opposed to the idea of the U.S. moving toward internationalism altogether, then they were called “irreconcilables.” Lodge’s delay tactics, which included reading the 264-page treaty aloud in a committee meeting, helped to muddy the once-favorable pubic opinion.

Wilson was concerned that any modification to the Treaty by the Senate would encourage the Europeans allies to also make modifications, and he was afraid that too many amendments would lead to elimination of his League of Nations altogether. To galvanize public support for the treaty, Wilson began a speechmaking tour in spite of the urging of his wife and physicians to stay home. Republican “irreconcilables” such as Hiram Johnson of California and William Borah of Idaho followed behind Wilson and made speeches against the treaty at every stop Wilson has been. Although the Midwest reacted coldly to Wilson's pleas, he experienced tremendous support in the Rocky Mountain region and the Pacific Coast, two areas where he also had a solid political base. During a speaking stop in Colorado, Wilson collapsed from physical and nervous exhaustion. Taken by train back to Washington, Wilson had a stroke a few days later that paralyzed one side of his body. Wilson recovered in the privacy of the White House for the next seven months.

With Wilson removed from the political spotlight, Lodge took control of the treaty debate. Although Lodge was unable to amend the treaty outright, he mockingly created Fourteen formal reservations, known as the “Lodge Reservations,” to it—a reference to Wilson’s Fourteen Points—and attached the reservations to the treaty for all to review before they voted whether or not to pass it. Lodge and other critics had particular disdain for Article X, which morally bound the United States to aid any League member who was victimized by external aggression. Rather than morally bind the government to act, Congress wanted to reserve the power to declare war for itself.

Wilson, who had little respect for Lodge, rejected the Fourteen Reservations outright. Although Wilson was willing to accept some compromises, he believed that Lodge’s reservations contradicted the pact’s spirit. Wilson sent word to all Democrats to vote against the treaty, which now included Lodge’s reservations. In November of 1919, loyal Democrats, who had once strongly supported the treaty, voted against ratification.

In March of 1920, strong public support of the treaty required the Senate to once again vote on the treaty. Again, Wilson asked Democrats to vote down the treaty with Lodge’s reservations attached. For a second time, the Senate voted against ratification, thereby ending any chance for the treaty’s ratification in America and creating a deadlock in Washington.

Wilson believed that the Election of 1920 would serve as a “solemn referendum” on the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations and eliminate the political impasse the country faced. Since Wilson did not run for another term, Democrats nominated James M. Cox from Ohio, a strong supporter of the League. Republicans, hoping to bring a sense of “normalcy” back to the country, nominated Warren G. Harding, a Senator from Ohio who remained intentionally ambiguous about the League.

Although Democrats attempted to make the election a referendum on the League, the public had grown tired of high-browed idealism and turned to Harding’s message of normalcy. In the end, a Republican landslide elected Harding as President. Republican isolationists turned the election’s results into a mandate against the League of Nations. American participation in the League, Wilson’s long-held dream, would not be a reality. Because of the U.S.’s refusal to enter the League, it never had the power that Wilson had envisioned.

In July of 1921, Congress officially ended the war with the Central Powers by passing a joint resolution. Separate peace treaties with Germany, Austria, and Hungary were ratified on October 18, 1921.