

Woodrow Wilson; Wartime Presidency

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Introduction

Throughout the history of the United States, the strength of the presidency reflects the strength of the government at home and abroad. Of all the men that ever been elected president, few have been able to exert as much political strength and leadership as President Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson served from 1913-1921, but his legacy has lived on through the long lasting impacts that his many social, economical and wartime decisions have made.

Progressive Era

Woodrow Wilson was elected after Presidents Roosevelt and Taft. These three presidents all succeeded in introducing progress reform to the federal government. Consequently the time period they served in was called the “Progressive Era” of American politics. The biggest changes made during this time period had to do with the role the federal government had in day-to-day American life (Progressive Era to New Era). President Theodore Roosevelt was the first progressive president and stated in an 1897 speech that, “As the people of a State grow more and more intelligent the State itself may be able to play a larger and larger part in the life of the community,” (Roosevelt). While the other two progressive presidents had slightly different opinions, the progressive mindset was perfectly described by President Wilson, “The laws of this country have not kept up with the change of political circumstances in this country” (Wilson, What is Progress). Through the implementation of new laws and policies, these three men; Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, were able to give the United States Government more power and influence than it had ever had. The laws that they made and approved have forever changed the U.S. and their legacies live on through the continued usage of their progressive policies and laws.

Election of 1912

Theodore Roosevelt left office having achieving his progressive goals and handpicked William Taft to replace him as president (Bausum 121). Taft continued Roosevelt's legacy and broke twice as many trusts as Roosevelt. He also managed to pass two constitutional amendments and he created the Department of Labor (Bausum 122). Despite Taft's accomplishments, he could never quite fill the gap left by Roosevelt. Many Republicans, including Roosevelt, believed that he didn't extend the power of the presidency far enough (William. White House). Roosevelt successfully forced Taft to alienate progressivists within the Republic Party (William. *Constitutional Amendments*).

At the time of the 1912 election, the Republican Party was completely divided. Some supported President Taft while the more progressive members supported Roosevelt. Taft and Roosevelt both campaigned for the Republican nomination, but it was eventually awarded to President Taft after he received 602 votes from delegates as opposed to only 430 acquired by Roosevelt (Gould). After losing the Republican nomination, Roosevelt decided to run on an independent ticket so that he could truly express progressive ideals (Cummins).

Although the Republican's were divided on a candidate, the Democrats were not. Woodrow Wilson won the nomination easily, beating Champ Clark by 295 delegate votes (El Paso). The election itself was won very easily for Wilson due to the division of his opponents. Wilson received 435 Electoral College votes while Roosevelt received 88 and Taft only received 8 (Presidential).

Introduction of Progressive Economic Policy

After he got elected, Woodrow Wilson recognized the need for new progressive legislation. He began with a program he dubbed “New Freedom”, so called because the proposed program gave businesses the freedom to exist without monopolies. Wilson said that, “[Concerning business] what we have got to do is to disentangle this colossal "community of interest” (Wilson New Freedom). Wilson installed this program to revamp economic competition within the United States. Wilson continued his work of New Freedom upon the passage of the Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act in 1913 (Presidential Key Events). This act brought the tariff, or taxation on imports and exports, to the lowest rates ever seen in the country (Krugman)

Following the tariff act, Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act also in 1913 (Presidential Key Events). The Federal Reserve created a central banking system that would safeguard the American economy from the previously volatile private banks. The act benefitted almost every American citizen, from farmers to businessmen, because it allowed for banks to run under the same system and to easily adjust to changing economic conditions within a specific region or as an entire country (Rebeck). President Wilson and his staff recognized that the banking and currency systems would remain unstable without a regulatory system maintained at the federal level (Federal).

Foreign Policy; Neutrality despite War

Although economic and issues during Wilson’s presidency were similar to other progressive presidents, foreign politics and situations were not. In 1914, the Archduke of Austria-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist and one month later, Austria-Hungary and Germany declared war on Serbia and their Russian allies (U.S. Entry into WWI). War had finally erupted in Europe and countries were now forced to select sides; France

and England backed Russia, Serbia and the Allied Powers. Italy joined Austria and Germany and the Central Powers.

While war was happening in Europe, Woodrow Wilson decided to keep the United States out of the war. In his 1914 speech, "Appeal for Neutrality," Wilson explains his policy of neutrality, "a nation that neither sits in judgment upon others nor is disturbed in her own counsels and which keeps herself fit and free to do what is necessary and disinterested and truly serviceable for the peace of the world" (Wilson Appeal).

In accordance to staying neutral politically, Americans also remained neutral economically. Trade with European nations such as Great Britain did not cease during World War I in fact it actually increased. In 1914, the U.S. exported about \$754 million to Great Britain. This number jumped to nearly \$2.75 billion in 1916 (McMahon 117). The reason why there was such a demand for American made products was due to the poor conditions of the war and the destruction of land. These both lead to a large demand for food, which was met by US farmers. Farming and other industries were making large profits in America while war in Europe was nearing a stalemate.

Both the Central and Allied powers felt that in order to win the war, they needed a distinct advantage over the other and consequently sought out the support of the US through the use of propaganda (U.S. Entry into WWI). When this didn't work, Britain decided that the United States should no longer trade with Germany, so they started to seize trade ships in the North Sea. The Germans were understandably angry at Britain and the United States. This was because they felt that although the U.S. was neutral, the Allied Powers had received an unfair advantage due to trade. U.S. trade with Germany, as opposed to Britain, went from nearly \$345 million worth of exports in 1914 to only \$2 million in 1916 (McMahon 117) In response to this,

the Germans sent submarines and established a war zone around Britain with orders to sink enemy trade ships. German ships began sinking every ship they saw and inevitably killed Americans in the process, yet still Wilson kept America neutral (U.S. Entry into WWI).

Woodrow Wilson won his campaign for reelection in 1916 with the slogan “He Kept Us out of War” (Bausum 128). Wilson won in a closely contested race against Charles Evans Hughes. Wilson received only 23 more electoral votes than Evans (National). Even though it was close, Wilson had once again proved that his citizens trusted his outstanding leadership abilities.

Entrance Into World War 1

However, neutrality would not last for long. Germans remained sinking ships despite requests to stop. But sinking ships wasn't the tipping point. In 1917, German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmerman, issued a telegram that informed the US about Germany supposedly supporting Mexico in a revolution against the U.S. The Germans requested in the telegraph that Mexico and Germany would, “make war together and make peace together”, and that, “Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona” (Zimmerman). By sending this telegram, Germany directly violated the Monroe Doctrine, which stipulates that, “It is impossible that the allied powers [Europe] should extend their political system to any portion of either continent, without endangering our peace and happiness” (Monroe). This meant that European countries were not supposed to interfere in matters in the Western Hemisphere. President Wilson could neither ignore the violation nor the German threat to take American territory and give it Mexico. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson addressed Congress and declared war on Germany. Wilson believed the U.S. should enter the war because, “the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured” (Wilson Joint).

Home Front

President Wilson realized that in order to win the war he had just entered into that he had to get the American public to back the war effort. He did this by establishing the Committee on Public Information on April 17, 1917, 15 days after war was declared on Germany (World). The Committee was the first modern propaganda agency in the United States. George Creel, head of the COPI, utilized all the tools of journalism, advertising, and business to effect rousing support for the government's war effort (Over). Creel and Wilson were successfully able to enlist the American public as well as American soldiers. In May 1917 President Wilson signed the Selective Draft Act of 1917, which required all male persons between the ages of 21 and 30, both inclusive, shall be subject to registration (United States).

President Wilson, in an attempt to control the U.S. home front during World War 1, drastically expanded the power of the federal government. He did this by creating government agencies to regulate life in America for example, the War Industries Board to oversee the production and movement of materials and basically run the economy (War), the Railroad Administration to achieve a coordinated railway system for the emergencies (Claussen), and the Food Administration to conserve food resources for the war effort (Commentary). Wilson described his thinking around creating new agencies in his conscription address, "it is not an army that we must shape and train for war, it is a nation" (Wilson Proclamation).

Another important factor of the U.S. home front during World War 1 was the Women's Suffrage Movement. The movement had gained significant ground under the leadership of the National Women's Party, headed up by Alice Paul (Women's). Paul and company argued that the U.S. should not be preaching the spread of democracy when its key principles are not available to everyone within the country. Paul drafted an amendment to the constitution that

guaranteed that, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex” (Paul). Due to the overwhelming popularity of the movement, Wilson signed the amendment because, “This is a people’s war and the people’s thinking constitutes its atmosphere and morale” (Wilson Women’s).

In many ways, World War 1 was extremely beneficial to the Progressive Era because of how much federal power was gained. George Creel, the head of the Committee of Public Information and active progressivist believed that, “[World War I] would accelerate movement towards solving the age-old problems of poverty, inequality, oppression, and unhappiness” (Hapter 780). Creel was referring to the progressive benefits of World War 1. Wilson’s presidency successfully provided a wartime standard of government regulation as well as a long lasting impact made in social reform.

Post World War 1

The United States involvement in World War 1 was relatively brief. The war ended on November 11, 1918 (Presidential Key Events), after about one year of U.S. intervention. The Allied Powers won the war and now had to decide a proper way to punish the Central Powers at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. Having been a deciding factor in the war, the United States and Woodrow Wilson felt that their opinions should be heard. So President Wilson proposed his notorious Fourteen Points for Peace concerning a reasonable outcome of World War 1. Wilson addressed both houses of congress, before the war was even over, on January 8, 1918. Wilson stated that all that the United States demanded was for, “the world to be fit and safe to live in” (Wilson Fourteen) and that all nations adopt a, “government by the consent of the governed” (Wilson Peace).

Despite Wilson's efforts however, the majority of the Fourteen Points were, in large part, ignored. In fact the only point taken into serious consideration was number fourteen (Terms of the Treaty of Versailles), which demanded the formation of, "A general association of nations," (Wilson Fourteen). The final draft of the Treaty of Versailles included this measure and several others that were extremely harsh on Germany and, according to Norman Stone, Germans felt as if they had been "stabbed in the back" (Stone 189).

Legacy

President Wilson left one of the most well established legacies in the history of the United States presidency. Wilson was classified as a progressive president because of the amount of power that he gave to the federal government through the passage of significant laws and acts before and during World War 1. Laws that Wilson passed and implemented are still relevant today, for example; the continued usage of the Federal Reserve System, and the passage of the 19th Amendment which granted Women's Suffrage.

Wilson also provided the federal government with significantly more power during World War 1 through the creation of several regulatory government institutions. The Committee on Public Information was the first American agency specializing in propaganda and it paved the road for the extensive American usage of propaganda in World War 2 and other foreign involvements. The creation of regulatory agencies such as the CPI created a wartime standard within the U.S. that the government must become more involved in the average person's life enable to create a strong war effort and home front.

Woodrow Wilson also managed to leave his mark on international foreign policy. After World War 1, Wilson proposed a, "A general association of nations," (Wilson Fourteen). This later became the League of Nations. While the League of Nations ended up failing its main

responsibility; to avoid another major war, it became the foundation of what would become the United Nations. The UN's influence today is remarkable and wouldn't have been were it is today without the work of Woodrow Wilson.

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