



Wilsonian Idealism: War and Peace in World War I

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Abstract. During World War I, U.S. foreign policy underwent a series of significant shifts — from strict neutrality to pro-Allied partiality, and finally to full military intervention. Whether adopting "war" or "peace," all these policy changes were fundamentally rooted in Woodrow Wilson's international political idealism. This article traces the evolution of U.S. policy across three distinct phases: the impartial neutrality period (1914-1915), the pro-Allied tilt (1915-1917), and the interventionist phase (1917-1918). Drawing on archival materials and recent historiography, it argues that Wilson's idealism was neither naive moralism nor a calculated disguise for imperialist expansion, but rather a coherent strategic framework that fused liberal internationalist principles with a pragmatic assessment of American national interests. While the ultimate failure of Wilsonianism at the Paris Peace Conference and the Senate's rejection of the League of Nations marked a significant setback, Wilson's vision fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of American foreign policy and continues to inform contemporary debates over the U.S. role in global order. Understanding this paradox at the heart of Wilsonian idealism — its simultaneous embrace of universal moral principles and particularistic national interests — is essential for comprehending the deep structure of modern American foreign policy.

Keywords: Woodrow Wilson; Idealism; World War I; U.S. Foreign Policy; Liberal Internationalism.

1 Introduction

Woodrow Wilson is known as the quintessential "idealist" in modern international politics. He condemned the pursuit of power and the balance of power as products of Europe's "old world" autocracy ^[1]. This ideology was tied to America's rapid rise in national strength and a "new expansionism" that promoted great power cooperation and informal empire over territorial conquest ^[2]. World War I, a war of unprecedented scale, marked a pivotal moment for great power relations. For Wilson, it was a once-in-a-millennium opportunity ^[3]. American scholars tend to praise Wilson as a progressive statesman, while Chinese scholars have been more critical following the Paris Peace Conference. As Hans Morgenthau famously asserted, the final language of international politics is national interest ^[4]. This article examines Wilson's "war" and "peace" policies during World War I to reveal the essence of his international political idealism.

2 The Impartial Neutrality Policy

Before the war broke out, Wilson was actively committed to building international mediation and arbitration mechanisms. Secretary of State William J. Bryan signed more than thirty arbitration treaties with other countries, hoping to prevent the outbreak of war through postponement, mediation, and arbitration when a war crisis arose. Nevertheless, the European war erupted. Wilson lamented that if the war could have been delayed a little longer, allowing more communication among nations, countries might have united as America envisioned, and the disaster of war might never have occurred. Clearly, before the war, the United States was already playing the role of promoting and leading great power cooperation, putting its new expansion strategy — distinct from traditional European expansion — into practice ^[5].

After the war broke out, between August 4 and November 6, 1914, the Wilson administration issued ten documents, largely identical in content, offering mediation and stating its neutral position. At the same time, the administration conducted extensive neutral propaganda among the American public. In a speech on August 19 promoting neutrality policy, Wilson called on American citizens to restrain themselves: "Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned" ^[6]. He warned: "We must be impartial in thought as well as in action, must put a curb upon our sentiments as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another" ^[7]. Recognizing the difficulty of maintaining impartiality in the midst of such a widespread European conflict — especially given that a large proportion of Americans had European ancestry — Wilson emphasized: "America is not made up of separate groups. A man who still thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group in America has not yet become an American" ^[8]. In the economic sphere, Wilson authorized the State Department to issue the "Bryan Prohibition," banning any loans of any nature to either belligerent.

Wilson's "impartial" neutrality policy received widespread support at home. Democrat Bryan praised Wilson's peace mediation policy in biblical language: "He has sent forth the dove from the ark to find dry land — may Providence bless it and bring it back soon with the olive branch" ^[9]. Colonel House wrote to Wilson: "Your neutrality speech is the finest thing you have ever done. It is universally commended" ^[10]. Even a war-monger like Roosevelt believed: "It is certainly very desirable for us to remain neutral. Only an emergency would make it necessary to abandon neutrality and support one side or the other" ^[11].

The Wilson administration's neutrality policy was favored by many. Some were influenced by traditional inertia — the United States had historically not involved itself in European disputes. Others, including some political elites, judged based on objective conditions that America's military strength was insufficient for direct participation. For Wilson himself, however, it was not merely a matter of "playing the role of a disinterested friend." Rather, it precisely aligned with the national interest demands of new American expansionism. This neutrality was not passive non-intervention as in past European wars, but an active role as mediator. The world war presented Wilson with an opportunity to realize his dream of transforming the world by leading great power

cooperation in peace. Only by maintaining neutrality could the United States demonstrate the "moral advantage" of "peaceful," "democratic," and "progressive" forces, maintain influence over both belligerents, promote a negotiated peace, and create conditions for realizing the American vision of international social reform ^[12].

3 The Tilt of American Neutrality

As the battlefield stalemated, Wilson adjusted his policy. Impartial neutrality no longer served U.S. interests. Wilson had always favored the Allies. Influenced by the "civilization history" perspective, he saw Germany as a militaristic autocracy and Britain as constitutionally superior. He concluded: "The German government must undergo profound change, and Austria-Hungary will completely disintegrate" ^[13]. Britain, France, and Russia posed no major threat to American security; only Germany threatened America's liberal democratic system. Consequently, Wilson sought to ally with the Allies to force Germany to accept an American-brokered peace.

On February 22, 1916, British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey and President Wilson's personal agent, Colonel House, reached the so-called "House-Grey Memorandum," a "mediation-intervention" plan aimed at relying on Allied cooperation to jointly contain Germany. Its key terms included: restoring Belgium; returning Alsace and Lorraine to France; securing an outlet to the sea for Russia; and compensating Germany's territorial losses with territories outside Europe. If Germany refused to attend the conference, the United States "might" go to war with Germany. Although America's commitment was ambiguous, this agreement marked the gradual tilting of American neutrality towards the Allied side ^[14]. Because both the United States and Britain pursued their own interests — Britain truly caring about American entry into the war, and the United States caring whether European nations followed its arrangements — when Grey publicly declared in the spring of 1916 that the Allies would not welcome American mediation as long as they had hope of victory, the "House-Grey Memorandum" became a dead letter.

Moreover, the United States supplied the Allies with vast quantities of military supplies and massive war loans, effectively serving as the "supply depot" for Allied war materiel and credit. Long before changes in mediation diplomacy and neutrality policy, America's loan policy had already been adjusted. In August 1914, Bryan announced a prohibition, arguing that lending to private belligerents violated neutrality. But just two months later, the prohibition was overturned. The State Department reasserted that government loans to belligerents violated neutrality, but private loans were legal. As the Allies' gold reserves were increasingly depleted, the State Department formally announced in July 1915 that it had no objection to France and Britain directly negotiating a \$500 million government loan with the United States. Thereafter, large amounts of American capital and military supplies flowed into the Allied camp, powerfully sustaining the Allies' war effort ^[15]. America's "impartial" stance existed in name only.

However, the United States did not truly want either side to win. Its pro-Allied policy was merely more conducive to maintaining immediate financial interests and securing future dominance over the world order. After Britain repeatedly rejected America's

mediation proposals, Wilson even tried to cooperate with autocratic Germany. On January 22, 1917, Wilson said in a speech to the Senate: "If Germany truly wants peace, it can have peace, and it will have it quickly, provided it confides in me and gives me the opportunity" ^[16]. Yet Germany and Austria-Hungary explicitly rejected this proposal and decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson's last hope for a negotiated peace was shattered. The Wilson administration's failure showed that controlling the global situation and rebuilding world order according to American wishes would require another path.

4 War to End War and Policy Failure

By early 1917, both belligerents were determined to resist American mediation and defeat their opponents utterly. This attitude, combined with Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, ultimately led the Wilson administration to decide on intervention. On April 2, 1917, Wilson delivered his war message to a special joint session of Congress. He declared: "Our objective remains the same as before — to defend the principles of peace and justice in world life against selfish and autocratic power" ^[17]. This speech fully revealed the objectives and essence of Wilson's international political idealism, while also demonstrating that whether neutral or belligerent, America's fundamental objectives remained unchanged. On April 4 and 6, the Senate and House of Representatives voted 82-6 and 373-50, respectively, to declare war.

After entering the war, the United States not only actively provided naval support and financial and material assistance but also continuously dispatched army forces to the European front. Wilson clearly stated: "If necessary, we will use all our country's power to stop and crush the enemy's intentions and forces" ^[18]. Wilson did not want to limit the U.S. role to naval, financial, and material support; he wanted the American military to have a significant impact on the course of the war, thereby gaining political capital for America's post-war domination of the peace conference. The U.S. Army was mainly concentrated on the Western Front. By the end of 1917, the number of American troops in France had reached 130,000; by the end of the war in 1918, the number had exceeded 2 million, surpassing the number of British troops in France.

Despite entering the war, Wilson insisted on keeping his distance from the Allies, indicating that he did not support their war aims. Wilson's goal remained to promote a compromise among the great powers under American leadership, creating conditions for post-war realization of the American-style "world transformation" program. Although at war, Wilson still denied the role of force, declaring: "Conquest by force is only temporary conquest, while conquest of the world by winning respect will be permanent conquest" ^[19]. Wilson portrayed America's intervention as a righteous action to "end war" and save "democracy," but in fact he always sought to position himself as a "world leader," striving to establish a new world order under American domination. This is reflected in the serious disagreements between the Allies and the United States over the extent to which Germany should be defeated. Wilson pursued a "peace without victory" and did not intend to excessively weaken Germany. Therefore, even as he sought to maximize the use of American military force, the Wilson administration

simultaneously maintained secret contacts with Germany, urging it to avoid the worst outcome through early compromise ^[20].

By autumn 1918, Germany was decisively defeated. At the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson proposed the "Fourteen Points," emphasizing "open covenants," "freedom of the seas," "free trade," and a "League of Nations" ^[21]. But the Allies wanted to cripple Germany. Wilson, prioritizing the League, compromised on territorial, reparations, and colonial issues. Germany lost 13% of its territory, 10% of its population, and all its colonies, and Wilson was branded a "hypocrite" ^[22]. On the Shandong question, he sacrificed China to appease Japan. Ultimately, the U.S. Senate rejected the League, marking the failure of Wilsonian idealism.

5 Conclusion

Wilson's policies often seemed contradictory—cooperating with Germany while planning intervention with Britain—but all followed the same guiding framework: advancing U.S. interests through a reconstructed world order ^[23]. His fundamental objectives were to lead great power cooperation, direct changes in great power relations, promote American-guided international reform, establish a U.S.-led peaceful order, and realize the American dreams of "leading the world," "transforming the world," and "new expansion" ^[24]. On the surface, Wilson's own stance kept shifting—he could simultaneously seek cooperation with Germany on submarine warfare while conspiring with Britain on intervention—yet all these seemingly inconsistent moves were coherently guided by his idealist vision: reconstructing international society according to American interests and values. Although these goals ultimately failed, Wilsonian idealism has maintained an important place in both American diplomatic history and international relations scholarship. It is widely recognized that modern international relations as a discipline emerged after World War I, and Wilson's international political idealism became its first mainstream school. This idealism never disappeared. As Kissinger observed, whenever the U.S. faces the task of building a new world order, it returns to Wilson's ideas ^[25].

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