

# Woodrow Wilson's

## 14 Points

The Fourteen Points was a speech delivered by United States President Woodrow Wilson to Congress during WWI on January 8, 1918. The address was intended to assure the U.S. that the Great War was being fought for a just cause and for postwar peace in Europe. Citizens in Europe generally welcomed Wilson's ideas, but Allied leaders were skeptical of the possibility of the ideas happening.

The speech was delivered over ten months before the armistice with the German Empire ended the Great War, but the Fourteen Points became the basis for the terms of the German surrender, as negotiated at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The Treaty of Versailles, however, had little to do with the Fourteen Points and so was never ratified by the U.S. Senate.

The Fourteen Points speech was the only explicit (open) statement of war goals by any of the nations fighting in World War I: some countries involved gave general indications of their goals; still others secretly wanted to gain foreign territory and so refused to state their goals openly. Many secret deals were made between nations that made accepting Wilson's points impossible.



### **Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points simplified from his original speech:**

1. All treaties between countries must be made public with no secret agreements for all nations to observe.
2. Freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, during both peace and war, except as those seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international agreements.
3. The removal of economic barriers between countries making trade unfair among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for the maintenance of peace.
4. The reduction of arms worldwide to the lowest point consistent with maintaining domestic (home) safety.
5. An open-minded adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon the principle that in determining all such questions of rule the interests of the populations involved must have equal say with the claims of the government who is involved.
6. The evacuation of Central Power armed forces of all Russian territory.
7. The evacuation of Central Power armed forces from Belgium.
8. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored to France, including lands lost by France (Alsace-Lorraine territory) during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 (Germany was formally known as Prussia).
9. A readjustment of the borders of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of Italian nationality.
10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary should be given the freest opportunity to autonomous (self-chosen) government.
11. Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated by all Central Power armed forces; occupied territories restored; Serbia given free and permanent access to the sea.
12. The peoples of the Ottoman Empire should be given a voice in determining their own self-government.
13. An independent Polish nation should be created which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, including free access to the sea.
14. A League of Nations formed so that representatives of all participating nations can peacefully settle disputes without resorting to armed conflict, and that the League of Nations will help protect the freedom of participating nations who are threatened by others.

## Influence on the Germans to surrender

The speech was widely taken as an encouragement to an Allied victory. Copies were also dropped behind German lines, to encourage the Central Powers to surrender in the expectation of a just (fair) settlement. Indeed, a note sent to Wilson by the German imperial chancellor in October 1918 requested an immediate armistice and peace negotiations based on the Fourteen Points.

The speech was made without prior talks with Wilson's Allies in Europe. As the only public statement of war goals, it became the basis for the terms of the German surrender at the end of the First World War in the Treaty of Versailles.

## Opposition from the Allies

Opposition to the Fourteen Points among British and French leaders

became clear after hostilities ceased: the British were against freedom of the seas; the French demanded war reparations (payment for damages caused by Germany and its allies). Wilson was forced to compromise on many of his points to ensure that his most important point, the establishment of the League of Nations, was accepted. In the end, the Treaty of Versailles went against many of the principles of the Fourteen Points, both in detail and in spirit. Rather than "peace without victory," the treaty sought harsh punishment of Germany both financially and territorially. The resulting bitterness in Germany laid the seeds for the rise of Nazism in the 1930s which resulted, in part, from the economic depression of the 1920s in Germany which the Versailles Treaty helped create.

## Failure of the U.S. to ratify the Treaty of Versailles

The United States Senate refused to ratify (agree with) the Treaty of Versailles, making it invalid in the United States and effectively hamstringing (crippling) the League of Nations envisioned by Wilson. The largest obstacle faced in the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles was the opposition of House Republicans because Wilson kept the leaders of the Republican-led Congress in the dark during treaty talks in Europe, and refused to support the treaty with any of the alterations proposed by the United States Senate. Another large obstacle was the League of Nations itself. Congress believed that committing to the League of Nations also meant committing U.S. troops to any conflicts that might arise. Only Congress has the power to declare war under the Constitution and involvement in the League may force America to get involved without Congressional consent. This would violate the United States Constitution.

The last vote on the treaty occurred in the Senate on March 19, 1920 and fell short of the necessary two-thirds majority required for ratification. The United States later signed a separate peace treaty with Germany and its allies but never joined the League. The failure of the U.S. to join the League of Nations lessened the League's international standing as the U.S. was considered a world power. This allowed the vengeful European nations to punish Germany without American intervention.

The United States would once again fall into isolationism and try to avoid foreign entanglements.

