

Woodrow Wilson's Dilemma: American Neutrality and the First World War

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although he shared some of the views of his immediate predecessors, President Woodrow Wilson initially sought to limit the U.S. role in foreign affairs. Ultimately, he found this very difficult to do. During his term, the United States remained involved in Latin America, and, when the First World War erupted in 1914, Wilson was only able to postpone American involvement in the conflict.

This tutorial examines Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy in four parts:

1. Woodrow Wilson's Foreign Policy Approach

Woodrow Wilson was sworn in as president in March 1913, after a hotly contested election campaign with his two presidential predecessors, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Wilson shared the commonly held beliefs that had formed the foundation of their foreign policy:

- White Americans and their values were superior to those of the rest of the world.
- The United States should actively develop economic markets abroad.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Woodrow Wilson

Democratic president from 1913 to 1921, who pursued a progressive federal reform agenda and advocated for U.S. neutrality in World War I until 1917; he was instrumental in the creation of a postwar League of Nations and advocated for "peace without victory" in the Treaty of Versailles.

Unlike his predecessors, however, Wilson added an idealistic component to American foreign policy. He assumed that democracy was the best form of government to promote peace and stability in the world, and he believed that American values, especially individualism and free enterprise, were universally good. Although Wilson, like Taft and Roosevelt, believed that foreign policy should be based on commercial interests and geopolitics, he hoped to use it to spread democracy, self-determination, and human rights throughout the world.

Wilson reassured Latin America by promising not to rely on the **Roosevelt Corollary**.



Roosevelt Corollary

Stated that the United States would use military force to correct any action by a Latin American nation that appeared to threaten the stability of the region.

Despite his reassurances, Wilson's administration intervened in Latin American affairs more than either of its predecessors. His most notable intervention occurred in Mexico, where a revolution began in 1911. Wilson refused to recognize the new Mexican government under General Victoriano Huerta (who assassinated the previous Mexican president). Instead, he supported Venustiano Carranza, who opposed Huerta's military administration. Wilson saw the crisis as an opportunity to influence Mexico's internal politics. He demanded that Mexico hold democratic elections, but both Huerta and Carranza balked at the possibility of the United States sponsoring elections in their country.

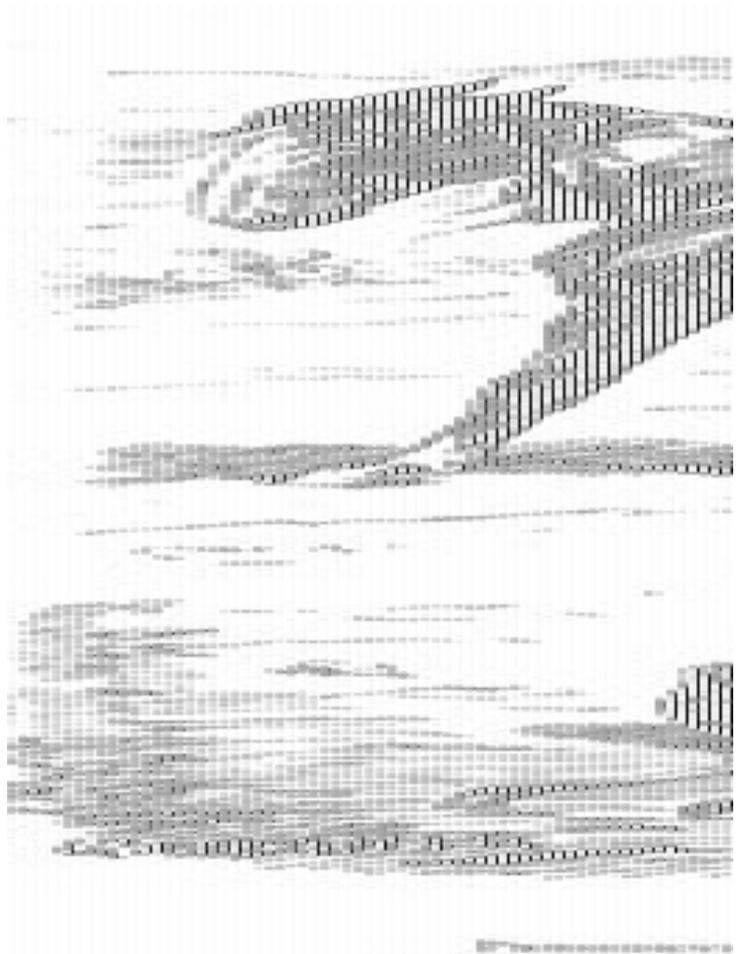


Fighting between the United States and Mexico began in Veracruz on April 22, 1914, after the United States attempted to block the delivery of weapons to Huerta's forces. The clash resulted in approximately 150 deaths, 19 of them American. The United States occupied Veracruz until November.

By the spring of 1916, the Mexican Revolution threatened to cross the American border. Frustrated by Wilson's support of Carranza, Pancho Villa (pictured left), the leader of a rival revolutionary faction, confiscated property in northern Mexico that was owned by Americans. On March 9, 1916, he led his forces across the border to attack and burn the town of Columbus, New Mexico. Over 100 people died, including 17 Americans.

Wilson responded to Villa's attack by sending approximately 10,000 troops under General John Pershing to Mexico to arrest him. This campaign, dubbed the "Punitive Expedition," failed to capture Villa, and, after a brief engagement with Carranza's forces brought both nations to the brink of war, Wilson reluctantly ordered a withdrawal in the spring of 1917.

Wilson sympathized with the goals of the Mexican Revolution. His dealings with Huerta and Carranza reveal his belief that he could guide the Mexican Revolution to a democratic outcome—similar to the outcome of the Revolutionary War. The incidents at Veracruz and along the border, however, revealed that the United States was willing to intervene in another country's affairs when its commercial or geopolitical interests were threatened.



This political cartoon, published in November of 1913, depicts Wilson as a hapless cowboy who is unclear on how to harness the challenges of the Mexican Revolution, saying “I wonder what I do next.”

2. The First World War Erupts in Europe

By avoiding a prolonged occupation and conflict in Mexico, the United States was able to prepare to intervene in another conflict: the First World War.

The murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by a Serbian nationalist on June 29, 1914, sparked conflict between several European mutual-defense alliances:

1. Serbia failed to comply with Austro-Hungarian demands in the wake of the archduke’s death.
2. Austria-Hungary, with the support of Germany, declared war on Serbia.
3. The actions of Austria-Hungary and Germany brought Russia into the conflict because of a treaty in which Russia agreed to defend Serbia.
4. Germany declared war on Russia, which brought France into the conflict because it was allied with Russia.
5. Hoping to destroy France quickly before dealing with Russia, Germany invaded France through Belgium (which hoped to remain neutral).

6. A German attack on Belgium brought Great Britain into the war because it was allied with Belgium.

By the end of August 1914, as a result of these alliances, Europe descended into war.



The First World War pitted two major alliances against each other. The Triple Entente (also known as the Allied Powers, in green) was an alliance of France, Great Britain, and Russia. They were opposed by the Triple Alliance (also known as the Central Powers, in brown). This alliance originally included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. The Ottoman Empire subsequently joined the Central Powers, while Italy left the Triple Alliance and joined the Allied Powers.

The First World War, known at the time as the Great War, was unlike any military conflict that preceded it. New technologies transformed warfare, taking it from open battlefields into the trenches. Artillery, tanks, airplanes, machine guns, barbed wire, and poison gas strengthened the defensive positions of both sides and turned each offensive into a sacrifice of thousands of lives in return for minimal territorial gains.



A map of Europe in 1914 depicting Allied Powers (pink), Central Powers (yellow), and Neutral Powers (green). The black line represents the Western Battlefront, and the red line represents the Eastern Battlefront.



The Royal Irish Rifles, a regiment in the British Army, in a trench on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1916.

➔ EXAMPLE During the Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916), Great Britain suffered 400,000 casualties. By the end of the battle, British forces had achieved no significant change in their position.



A French regiment in a trench near Verdun, 1916.

By the end of the war, which lasted from 1914 until 1918, the military death toll was 10 million, along with 1 million civilian deaths attributed to military action. Another 6 million civilians died during the war from famine, disease, and other causes.

3. The Challenge of Neutrality

President Wilson attempted to maintain American **neutrality** as the war in Europe began. Few Americans wanted the United States to enter the war, and Wilson did not want to risk losing the reelection in 1916 by ordering an unpopular military intervention. He also considered the war a European affair and wanted to maintain working—that is, commercial—relations with European nations.



TERM TO KNOW

Neutrality

American foreign policy at the beginning of World War I and World War II in an attempt to remain officially unaligned and uninvolved, if not impartial, in the conflict erupting in Europe.

Wilson first indicated that the United States would remain neutral on August 20, 1914:

President Woodrow Wilson, August 1914

“The effect of the war upon the United States will depend upon what American citizens say and do. 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

I venture, therefore, my fellow countrymen, to speak a solemn word of warning to you against that deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality which may spring out of partisanship, out of passionately taking sides. The United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name 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.”



THINK ABOUT IT

How does Woodrow Wilson define neutrality?

One of the terrifying new developments in military technology directly challenged American neutrality: the German *unterseeboot* or **U-boat**.



TERM TO KNOW

U-Boat

German submarine that preyed on merchant and military ships in the Atlantic Ocean.

To break the British naval blockade of Germany and turn the tide of the war, Germany dispatched a fleet of U-boats to Great Britain in early 1915 to attack military and merchant ships, including those that carried American goods and American civilians. Rather than surfacing and forcing the civilians and crew members to surrender, the U-boats attacked the ships without warning from below.

➔ **EXAMPLE** One of the most notable U-boat attacks occurred on May 7, 1915, when the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship traveling from New York City to Liverpool, was sunk. Prior to its departure, the German Embassy in the United States announced that the ship was subject to attack because it was transporting ammunition: an allegation that was later proven true. Almost 1,200 civilians died in the attack, including 128 Americans.



The sinking of the *Lusitania*, depicted in the drawing above (a), resulted in the death of over 1,200 civilians and galvanized support for the war against Germany in Great Britain, as shown in the British recruiting poster (b), as well as in the United States.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* and other ships by U-boats revealed that economic factors were driving the United States toward war and away from neutrality. From the earliest days of the war onward, Great Britain and the Allied Powers relied on American imports for their survival.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Between 1914 and 1916, the value of American exports to the Allied Powers quadrupled: from \$750 million to \$3 billion. Many private banks in the United States made large loans—in excess of \$500 million—to Great Britain during the war.



THINK ABOUT IT

Contrast the actions of American banks and manufacturers in issuing goods and loans to the Allied Powers with President Wilson's statements on neutrality (provided above).

The British naval blockade virtually eliminated American exports to Germany. However, the goods and money that the United States sent to Great Britain and its allies made it clear that the United States had an economic stake in an Allied victory.

4. The United States Enters the War

President Wilson ran on a platform of “He Kept Us Out of War” and was reelected after a close race in 1916. Although he tried to avoid sending American troops overseas, Wilson began to see the war as an opportunity for the United States to influence the peace process and expand democracy, free enterprise, and self-determination. On January 22, 1917, Wilson outlined this agenda as a “peace without victory”:

President Woodrow Wilson, January 1917

“The present war must first be ended; but we owe it to candor and to a just regard for the opinion of

mankind to say that, so far as our participation in guarantees of future peace is concerned, it makes a great deal of difference in what way and upon what terms it is ended. The treaties and agreements which bring it to an end must embody terms that will create a peace that is worth guaranteeing and preserving, a peace that will win the approval of mankind, not merely a peace that will serve the several interests and immediate aims of the nations engaged . . .

No covenant of cooperative peace that does not include the peoples of the New World can suffice to keep the future safe against war, and yet there is only one sort of peace that the peoples of America could join in guaranteeing.

The elements of that peace must be elements that engage the confidence and satisfy the principles of the American governments, elements consistent with their political faith and with the practical convictions which the peoples of America have once for all embraced and undertaken to defend.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to Wilson, what should peace to end the First World War entail?
2. Why does Wilson insist that this peace must include “the peoples of the New World”? What did he mean by this phrase?
3. What do you think Wilson meant by “peace without victory,” and how might European countries have responded?



BRAINSTORM

Compare Wilson’s comments on peace in January 1917 with his call for American neutrality in 1914. Do you notice any similarities or changes in Wilson’s approach to the European conflict?

Wilson’s speech was not well received by either side in the war. Neither wanted to stop fighting until they were sure of the spoils of victory. More importantly, the speech revealed Wilson’s vision for American foreign policy, one in which the United States acted as a mediator while advancing its political and economic interests.

Continued actions by Germany challenged American interests and, in doing so, threatened American neutrality. In February 1917, less than a month after Wilson’s speech, Germany broke its promise to limit submarine warfare. This promise had been made in an attempt to end the war quickly—before Great Britain’s blockade caused Germany to run out of food and supplies.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In February 1917, a German U-boat sank an American merchant ship, the *Laconia*, killing two passengers. In late March, U-boats sunk four more American ships.

The final factor that pushed the United States to enter World War I was the **Zimmermann Telegram**.



TERM TO KNOW

Zimmermann Telegram

The telegram sent from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German ambassador in Mexico, which invited Mexico to fight alongside Germany should the United States enter World War I on the side of the Allies.

News of the Zimmerman telegram, in which Germany offered to return to Mexico the land it lost as a result of

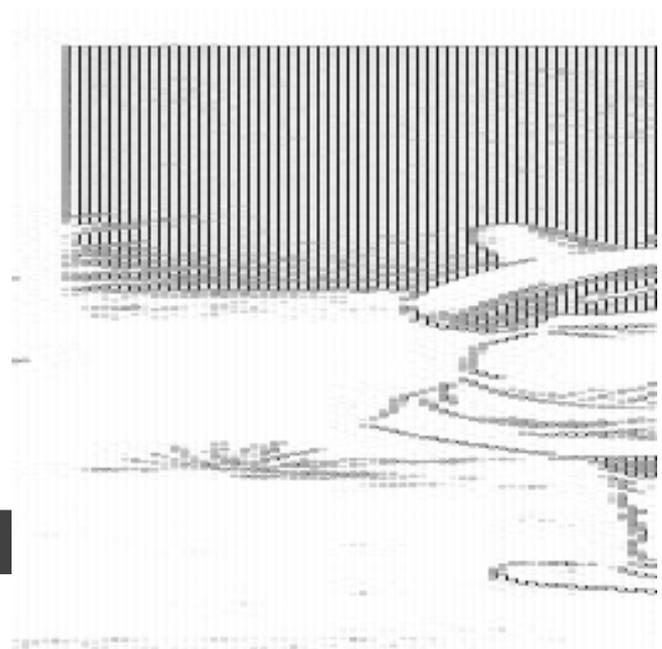
the Mexican–American War if it agreed to fight against the United States, was published in March 1917. Along with the continued U-boat attacks, the news increased pressure on Wilson from all sides.

On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, stating that “The world must be made safe for democracy.” After 4 days of deliberation (and despite 56 votes against the resolution), Congress passed the declaration and the United States entered the First World War on the side of the Allied Powers.



SUMMARY

Like his predecessors, Woodrow Wilson believed in the superiority of American values and intervened in the affairs of Latin American nations. Although he (and many other Americans) wanted to avoid involvement in the First World War, “neutrality” did not mean “isolation.” The United States maintained economic ties with Great Britain and the Allied Powers, which made American ships the targets of German U-boats. Commercial interests, combined with Wilson’s growing belief that the United States was morally bound to support the Allied Powers militarily, drove the nation to war in the spring of 1917.



“The Temptation,” which appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* on March 2, 1917, shows Germany as the Devil, tempting Mexico to join the war against the United States in exchange for the return of land that had belonged to Mexico before the Mexican–American War.

Source: Library of Congress.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax “U.S. History”. access for free at openstax.org/details/books/us-history LICENSE: **CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL**

REFERENCES

Woodrow Wilson, Message on Neutrality, August 20, 1914, Miller Center, bit.ly/2nvYuuqX

Woodrow Wilson, “A World League of Peace speech,” January 22, 1917, Miller Center, bit.ly/2nw5F21

Woodrow Wilson, Request of a Declaration of War Against Germany,” April 2, 1917, Miller Center, bit.ly/2ohwVRY



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [French regiment at Verdun](#) | License: Public Domain
- [Royal Irish Rifles Battle of the Somme](#) | License: Public Domain
- [European alliances in First World War](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Neutrality

American foreign policy at the beginning of World War I and World War II in an attempt to remain officially unaligned and uninvolved, if not impartial, in the conflict erupting in Europe.

Roosevelt Corollary

Stated that the United States would use military force to correct any action by a Latin American nation that appeared to threaten the stability of the region.

U-Boat

German submarines that preyed on merchant and military ships in the Atlantic Ocean.

Zimmerman Telegram

The telegram sent from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German ambassador in Mexico, which invited Mexico to fight alongside Germany should the United States enter World War I on the side of the Allies.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Woodrow Wilson

Democratic president from 1913 to 1921, who pursued a progressive federal reform agenda and advocated for U.S. neutrality in World War I until 1917; he was instrumental in the creation of a postwar League of Nations and advocated for “peace without victory” in the Treaty of Versailles.