

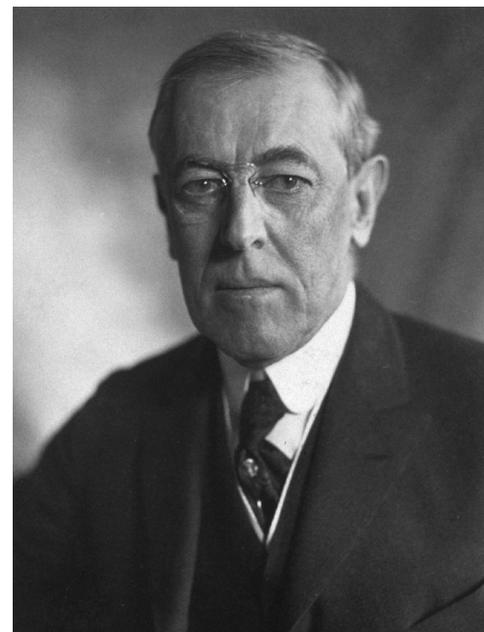


Woodrow Wilson: 100 Years Later

Woodrow Wilson's Lasting Impression

"This year marks the centennial of Woodrow Wilson's leaving the White House. Few presidents have gone out of office under more of a cloud than he did, and none have had their reputations subsequently soar to new heights of appreciation and honor. In domestic affairs, he was **one of the three great legislative presidents of the twentieth century**, along with Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, and his monumental achievements— including the **Federal Reserve, the income and inheritance taxes, federal aid to farmers, wage and hours legislation for workers, and prohibition of child labor**— paved the way for the programs of those later presidents. In foreign affairs, he not only **led the nation to victory in its first large-scale overseas war**, but he also **laid down the design for a new international order to prevent such wars** and reform relations among nations. A quarter of a century after he left the White House, he enjoyed a posthumous apotheosis as a prophet of peace and American leadership in the world."

— John Cooper, Wilson Center Global Fellow



Wilson's Foreign Policy in Action

- Before President Wilson, U.S. foreign policy had focused on avoiding **'entangling alliances.'**
- After World War I, President Wilson introduced his **Fourteen Points**, which called for freedom of the seas, free trade, arms reduction, and the creation of a League of Nations.

Wilson's Contradictions

- There was a **disconnect** between Wilson's focus on democracy, and his policies constituting racism and imperialism.
- Wilson spoke of the idea of **'self-governance,' but intervened in the Mexican civil war** in 1914.
- The Wilson administration also **imposed martial governance** in Haiti (1915) and the Dominican Republic (1916).



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Woodrow Wilson: 100 Years Later

The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson: “Playing for a Hundred Years Hence”

“President Woodrow Wilson’s legacy—for American and the world—is not just complicated but hotly contested. Was he the **radical reformer who did more to combat economic inequality** in the United States than any president save (perhaps) Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson? Or was he the **timid and racially prejudiced conservative** who, in permitting cabinet officers to segregate their departments and in responding slowly to wartime violence against black communities, undermined the economic, social, and physical security and prospects of African Americans for generations? Is Wilson’s international legacy defined by **chauvinist intervention in Latin America and imperialist complicity in Europe, Asia, and Africa after World War I**? Or is it defined by his efforts to **turn the greatest imaginable tragedy of his chauvinist and imperialist milieu into an opportunity**, not for national aggrandizement, but for gradually democratizing the relationships among more and less powerful peoples?

Rather than define Wilson’s legacy in toto, it may be more fruitful to identify what is truly unique about it. No US president has so clearly **articulated both a vision and justification of the hard, courageous, yet ultimately humble work that the world’s most powerful nation must undertake**—for itself and humanity. That vision and call are as provocative and relevant today as in his own time:

[Many Americans] believe that the United States is so strong...that it can impose its will upon the world... that the processes of peace can be processes of domination and antagonism, instead of processes of cooperation and good feeling. I therefore want to point out to you that only those who are ignorant of the world can believe that any nation, even so great a nation as the United States, can stand alone and play a single part in the history of mankind.

Wilson elsewhere described this approach as ‘**playing for a hundred years hence**’—subordinating immediate, exclusive advantage to measured, mutually beneficial action with long-term benefits far outweighing the upfront costs. Whether or not that is or has been Wilson’s legacy, it is in our power to make it his legacy—and ours.”

– Trygve Throntveit, Wilson Center Global Fellow

Quotes from Wilson Scholars

John Cooper & Trygve Throntveit

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