The Fourteen Points for Peace and the Treaty of Versailles
AP World History
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In January 1918, Woodrow Wilson unveiled his Fourteen Points to the U.S. Congress. The speech was a natural extension of the proposals he had offered in his "Peace without Victory" address and his request for a declaration of war. Presuming an Allied victory, the President proposed freedom of the seas and of trade, arms reductions, and fair settlement of colonial claims and possessions. He insisted that "open covenants of peace, openly arrived at," must be the benchmark of postwar negotiations. He suggested that a repentant and reformed Germany would not be oppressed, but rather welcomed into the international community. That community, Wilson concluded, would be bound together in a league of nations devoted to keeping the peace through collective security and spreading democracy.

Although the Allied powers cautiously agreed to use the Fourteen Points as a treaty template, the circumstances of the war and the specific postwar aims of numerous nations combined to make a formidable obstacle. In 1915, the secret London agreements had proposed ceding the German territory of the Saar (rich in coal) to France, and South Tyrol, controlled by Austria-Hungary, to Italy. Japan hoped to take German claims in the North Pacific and China, while Great Britain hoped to secure claims in Africa and south of the equator in the Pacific.

By the war's end, in November 1918, these tensions had mounted. France and Great Britain both wanted Germany to pay extensive war reparations. Great Britain, with an eye toward protecting its far-flung empire, also resisted freedom of the seas. Wilson hammered out a compromise. Together, the Allies would precisely define "freedom of the seas," and Germany would have to pay some reparations. Meanwhile domestic political tensions were rising. In the midterm elections, Republicans gained control of Congress. Nevertheless, Wilson opted only for token Republican representation on the U.S. delegation headed to Versailles, France, the site of the postwar peace proceedings, which began in January 1919. This snub did not pass unnoticed by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-Mass.), who now chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The proceedings at Versailles were raucous and confusing. Wilson, who had rejected advice that he might better fulfill his Fourteen Points by remaining in Washington, immersed himself in the day-to-day negotiations. His greatest challenge was the spirit of vengeance that animated the other Allied leaders. Not only did they want to punish Germany, they also wanted to use victory to obtain new territory in Europe and to divvy up Germany's colonial possessions. Wilson struggled to balance pragmatism and idealism. On the colonial question, he agreed to substitute the "mandate system" for full and fair self-determination. Under this system, the Allied powers assumed governing control over the colonies of Germany and areas such as Syria and Lebanon

that had belonged to the Ottoman Empire. The expectation was that the Allied powers would eventually free their "mandates." He also accepted the transfer of some one million square miles of territory between nations; in return, the covenant of the League of Nations was embedded into the Versailles Treaty.

In June 1919, Germany's defiant representatives, who had been excluded from the proceedings, grudgingly signed the Versailles Treaty. Wilson's decision to now present the Versailles Treaty to the Senate was quite risky. Republican doubts about the League had hardened; indeed, a group of Senators known as the "Irreconcilables," led by William Borah of Idaho, had proclaimed they would not support American membership in the League. Much opposition resulted from Article Ten of the League's covenant, which committed nations to the protection of the territorial integrity of all other members. This seemed to undermine Congressional authority to declare war, though the precise obligations of the United States were not clear. Lodge and the "Reservationists" were, at least initially, ready to act on the Versailles Treaty if Wilson separated the covenant. They also seemed willing to accept U.S. membership provided Congress kept the power to decide whether or not the United States would intervene militarily on behalf of the League. But Wilson refused to yield, as did Lodge and his allies. The debate over the League spilled over onto the 1920 presidential campaign, and while the election of Republican Warren G. Harding, who declared his opposition to the League, cannot be assessed only as a referendum on Wilsonian diplomacy, it was clear that the American public had grown weary of crusades, domestic and international. The United States never joined the League, finally ending the official state of war with Germany in the summer of 1921 through the Treaty of Berlin.

Ultimately the Treaty of Versailles had mainly negative impacts upon the world. The punishments against Germany simply weakened the country and angered its population. Japan was allowed to keep the territories it acquired before the war and was unchallenged in East Asia as a result. Italians wanted more land than was provided to them in the treaty. Overall, most countries were even more nationalistically inclined after the war than before it.