

Was woodrow wilson
a naive idealist?



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Wilson had a clear and definite vision for the US's future role in world affairs, as evidenced by his fourteen points speech, his overwillingness to compromise (in trying to further domestic program agenda, and at the Paris conference), and in his allowing the League of Nations to die when it did not fit his original plans. Wilson's ideas are used even to this day, where Americans, in any conflict regarding foreign policy, see themselves as the force of morality and their opponents as being evil, or corrupted. Also, Americans still believe in the need to spread the ideals of democracy around the world. The fact that Wilson has left so strong of a legacy on Americans shows that his ideals were not naïve, but instead very well thought out and comprehensive.

Pro Summary: Wilson characterized as a noble idealist whose principles have made it difficult for later presidents to develop a foreign policy based on national self-interest. (Kissinger)

Believed that America's global influence was dependent on its selflessness

Was able to take once isolationist US into war by first asserting to the public that his administration was devoted to peace.

Affirmed that US sought no other gain than to vindicate its principles.

Based foreign policy on moralistic ideals like the spread of democracy and spread of American principles as opposed to recognizing issues with balance of power.

Had the conviction that the Anglo-Saxon race was superior and had the duty to remake world in their image

He thought peace was based on universal law and national trustworthiness instead of equilibrium and national self-assertion.

No other country has based international leadership on altruism instead of national interests.

Entrance into WWI was not based on national interests at all but rather about moral foundations and abiding by the universal law. The effect of such a moral basis leads to total victory as the only valid goal so compromise is not possible.

He didn't understand that the war was actually based on clashing of national interests and power struggle in Europe.

Fourteen Points Speech- tried to affirm that war was being fought for moralistic ideals, as opposed to power struggle.

He immaturely supported the idea of the League of Nations

Believed in morality of the universe, and that nations of the world all interested in protecting peace

He thought the war had resulted simply out of public ignorance but the actual causes were much more complicated.

Basic premise behind the League of nations was naive because in nearly all difficult cases nations tend to disagree about the nature of a threat or discrepancy ie. Italian aggressions and the Bosnian crisis

Inflexible in ideals

Caused by the moral foundation that he was built upon

Inflexibility evidenced by tenure at Princeton, and his many strict changes to the school

Con Summary: Wilson understood better than his nationalistic opponents the new international role that America would play in world affairs and was therefore not a naïve idealist. (Carleton)

Wilson is being judged by personality traits: double standard at work.

Wilson was said to be naïve even though he wanted to preserve a power balance by preventing Germany from being partitioned but FDR and TR supported harsh peace and forced unconditional surrender understood it.

Long term program for America today is still based on Wilsonian liberalism- advocacy of American values like collective security, self-determination, and democracy

At the Paris conference, European diplomats were impressed at Wilson's negotiating skills: compromised too much

He repeatedly helped make compromises between liberals and conservatives in the Democratic Party and thus was able to pass the Federal Reserve Act, the Clayton Anti-Trust Law, the Federal Trade Commission, and more.

In truth, Wilson 'compromised too much.' Claim that he is stubborn is based entirely from fight in the Senate over ratification of the League of Nations

Claim that he killed his own brainchild, the League of Nations, is unfounded in that Wilson knew that even if he attempted to appease the southerners, Lodge would eventually put enough reservations on it so as to emasculate it.

Truly shows Wilson's determination and consistency in wanting to create a fully functional League

Wilson had already attempted to satisfy Lodge with the inclusion of safeguards in the League, but Lodge continued to use the Reservations to change the entire proposal

If Wilson had tried to go on with Lodge's reservations, other Nations probably wouldn't even join because of the fact that the other nations had to become signees before America even signed on, and thus they became suspicious of the agreement.

Wilson's ideals and principles were not even naïve

Wilson's peace without Victory speech demonstrates he had a clear understanding of the balance of power.

Able to steer US from war with Mexico, despite tensions, and used diplomatic understanding to help the Mexican revolution be successful.

He understood that the only way to prevent war in the future was through collective security- League of Nations. Comparable to today's UN

Knew that dividing Germany would not help create a power balance.

Able to keep up with need for domestic social reform

Wilson's invasion of Haiti in 1915 ended bloody civil war

Administration expanded American bureaucracy and was the inspiration for FDR's New Deal.

The Treaty of Versailles was the best peace it could have been considering the circumstances and brought forth many revolutionary ideas: The mandate system helped prepare colonies for independence, preventing partitioning of Germany, success in confining German responsibilities to civilian damage and Allied military pensions instead of the whole cost of the war.