

Describe Wilson's  
fourteen points, why  
did Congress fail to  
ratify the peace  
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The term 'Wilson's Fourteen points' refers to the ideas enunciated by the USA's president of 1917 Woodrow Wilson (often described as an idealist). These points were to serve as the framework for the Treaty of Versailles. Wilson started working on his Fourteen Points soon after America joined the First World War in April 1917, and he published them in January 1918. In his speeches that followed the publication, he developed his ideas, which were based off of four main principles, mentioned mostly in his first five points.

He wanted no more secret treaties leading to deals, rash promises and entangling alliances. He called for no retribution, unjust claims or huge fines that could cause future wars. He called for more stringent arms control and even went so far as to suggest disarmament to lower the risk of war. Finally, he wanted to create a League of Nations to provide collective security. It was to act somewhat as an international government with laws, courts and police, and could intervene in disputes and even outlaw offending nations.

One of the main notions found in Wilson's Fourteen Points is the idea of 'self-determination', but this expression has remained unclear. It is hard to judge just what was meant by it. Wilson could have meant an extension of democratic self-government, or he could have meant that any people who called themselves a nation had a right to have their own state (less likely, as Wilson did not sympathize with the Irish Nationalists, rationalizing that they should work it out democratically). But this term certainly encouraged some nationalist movements. The Fourteen Points were also popular with liberals and among Europe's political and diplomatic elites.

They provided a moral background at the peace talks, and inspired Arabs, Koreans, Poles and Chinese students. Even Germany had the wisdom to see that the Fourteen Points were their best chance for moderate peace terms and called for an armistice based off the points. But the victorious powers would regrettably not accept this and made a few modifications – the French demanded compensation for the damage done, and the British would never accept giving up their control of the seas. When the Peace Treaty was signed, the Germans protested saying that the treaty didn't respect the points. Popular historians would later blame the treaty for everything that went wrong in the 20s and 30s, but they forgot the accomplishments. One can perhaps say that the Fourteen Points probably prevented the terms from being far worse than they could have been.

They served perhaps as a moral scale for the delegations at the peace conference. b) When Wilson returned in late 1919, the country had changed. He had spent over 6 months abroad in Europe and was 'out of touch' with his country. He returned with the Peace Settlement and high expectations after battling hard to make sure the Fourteen Points were followed as much as possible.

But he had made a fatal mistake when he left for the Peace Conference. Wilson was a deeply religious and moral man, but was ruthless with those who crossed him. He was stubborn once he had made a decision. Those who opposed him were not simply wrong, they were wicked, which is why Lloyd George described him as "kindly, sincere, straightforward" and "tactless, obstinate and vain". When Wilson left for Europe, he took no Republicans with him as he neither liked nor trusted them. He had deliberately offended <https://assignbuster.com/describe-wilsons-fourteen-points-why-did-congress-fail-to-ratify-the-peace-settlement/>

the Republicans, even though several of his Fourteen Points were supported by some of them.

So while Wilson was out of the country, the Republican Party spent its time trying to sway public opinion away from him. When the president returned, the Republicans simply refused to sign the peace treaty as they had no 'ownership' of it. They particularly disagreed with the League of Nations: they refused to be governed by an international body and did not want to lose their national sovereignty, which was seen as unconstitutional, and collective security suggested that America might be dragged into Europe's wars again. There was also not much benefit for the US in the treaty, which irked some people who claimed that it was not worth the loss of life.

Other opponents had also been organizing themselves: the isolationists from the West who had been against the war in the first place; the progressives who felt like he was betraying his own principles; the Irish Americans who were disappointed with his position on the Irish Question; even some Democrats who could not trust him, and all the other enemies Wilson had made throughout his career. In the mid-term election of 1918, Wilson had made the peace conference a party issue, hoping to secure for himself a strong Democratic Congress. But the plan backfired and the Republicans took over both Houses. He did not try to make concessions with them, and did not offer the possibility of amendments to them.

For him, it was an 'all or nothing' issue. The Republicans signed a 'round-robin' letter, refusing to accept the Treaty. And when the Foreign Relations Committee of Congress presented an amended Treaty, Wilson had the

Democrats vote against it, and so the necessary two-thirds majority was not obtained. Wilson, instead of trying to convince Representatives and Senators to vote for the treaty, went on a tour around the country to build support, but he suffered a stroke that left him partly paralyzed and the trip was in vain. On the international level, the Peace Treaty was already being discredited. The creation of the 'successor states' in Eastern Europe made unstable governments, and these nations were easy prey for Nazi Germany.

The mandates allowed France and Britain to keep imperialist control in certain areas like the Middle East but with another name. And the treaty overall created a lot of resentment in Germany (they called it a diktat) and many of its political parties were determined to see it destroyed. The ratification of the treaty died in Congress. The deadlock between the parties and the growing amount of criticism led to entirely separate treaties with Germany and Austria Hungary, and the USA never did join the League of Nations.

c) In 1920, the Republicans regained control of Congress and had gotten Warren Harding (often seen as the worst American president ever) elected. Harding and his Vice-President and successor Calvin Coolidge were convinced that America's role globally was economic and not political. Harding assured America that his policy would be one of 'normalcy', while his VP famously said "America's business is business". And although America stayed as much as possible out of European affairs, it continued to be a reluctant player on the world stage through its economic influence and interests in Latin America and Asia.

Harding left the running of international affairs to his Secretary of State, Charles Evans Hughes, and his Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover. Neither of these two men were really isolationists. But between them, they formulated what would be the two pillars of American foreign policy during the 1920s: diplomatic involvement and economic involvement. The first was concerned with maintaining world peace, especially in the areas of interest to the US. The Washington Treaty of 1922 which concerned navy sizes for Britain, America, France, Italy and Japan, was meant to deal with the Japanese 'threat'.

The mostly symbolic Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 produced an optimistic agreement signed by 15 nations in Paris, rejecting war as a way of solving international disputes. Although completely useless, it showed willingness on America's part to engage diplomatically, and expressed a hope for peace. In practice though, it had no actual effect. Despite this, the USA failed to join the World Court in The Hague, and continued to refuse to join the League of Nations, and simply had an agent in Geneva to communicate the US' views to League officials.

The identity of the agent was kept secret as public opinion for the League was very low in America. The second pillar was concerned with encouraging and developing the European economies while also providing more opportunities for American investment. This objective would lead to the Dawes Plan of 1924 (which tried to solve the Ruhr Crisis by giving Germany loans to repair its industries and pay the reparations) and the Young Plan of 1929 (which cut reparations payments radically to 9\$ billion, to be paid over 59 years). These strong economic ties meant that Americans were simply <https://assignbuster.com/describe-wilsons-fourteen-points-why-did-congress-fail-to-ratify-the-peace-settlement/>

under the impression that they had removed themselves from European politics, when in reality they were deeply involved. During the 1920s, America's influence in Latin America continued. Between 1922 and 1925, American troops were withdrawn from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua (after a direct intervention).

Colombia was paid 25\$ million in compensation for the Panamanian revolution incited by the US. American investment in the region doubled, and in 1929 arms were sent to Mexico to support President Callas. The Roosevelt Corollary was repudiated in the Clark Memorandum. When Roosevelt was elected in 1932, he pledged non-intervention in the affairs of Latin American countries, and withdrew troops from Haiti. He cancelled the Platt Amendment in May 1934, following a treaty signed with Cuba.

This was called the ' Good Neighbor Policy', and represented a major shift in American foreign policy in the area, and resulted in a large amount of support (although Latin America will always resent the US) for the US when war would break out in 1941. Public opinion, which had been substantially pro-isolation in the 1920s (especially after the war, despite what could be considered as small losses compared to Europe's casualties) became extremely so during the 1930s. Pacifist opinion, which was popular in Europe, was practically main stream in America. This added to the belief that the Americans had been tricked into the war by a conspiracy of politicians, bankers and industrialists wanting to make a profit. A poll from April 1937 claimed that 67% of Americans saw the First World War as a mistake.

The peace treaty was considered unfair, and was not thought worth fighting for. There was all the more reason to be opposed to the treaty after the weak responses of the League of Nations to Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. On the other hand, all European states except for Finland (go figure) couldn't pay back their war debts to the USA, and American trade interests in investments on the Old Continent nose-dived at the same time. After the Johnson Act of 1934, which forbade Americans from lending to money to other countries that had not paid back their war debts, the isolationist feeling in Congress grew. The series of Neutrality Acts from 1935 to 1937 banned arm exports, war loans or credits to belligerent nations and prevented US citizens from travelling on those nations' ships.

The 1938 Ludlow Amendment only just barely failed to pass, which would have made the declaration of war impossible without a referendum first (a ludicrous suggestion to make, but summarizes the strong pacifist feeling of the time). FDR repeatedly tried to modify and even repeal the Neutrality Acts, arguing as late as November 1939 to allow arms exports only on a 'cash and carry basis'. The president was aware of the growing threat of the dictators of the 30s, well before US public opinion had begun to be, but he was forced to try to deal with them as there was the preoccupation of economic recovery – which showed that isolationism remained even after the Second World War had begun. Despite this, Roosevelt was especially worried about Japan's aggression towards China.

When Japan went to war with China in 1937, America answered by placing a gradual embargo on goods (notably gasoline and airplane parts). As war

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drew closer, the president called for naval re-armament in early 1938. In 1939, Congress voted in extra money in order to expand the armed forces. By the late 1930s, American public opinion was set on neutrality (wanted to stay isolationist) but was at the same time hostile to fascist dictators, and the German successes of 1940 worried the US. Neutrality was therefore rather biased.

Roosevelt was quite clear on his thoughts concerning “ the enemy” in a message sent to Churchill in May 1940, but the American ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy, thought it was futile to help a soon to be defeated country. In the 1940 presidential election, one of the main issues on the agenda was the risk of another war, and with the draft reinstated in September 1940, fears were running high. At the same time, FDR started the Manhattan Project, which would lead to the creation of the atomic bomb. In July 1941, the US imposed a total embargo and froze all Japanese assets. America was forced to abandon isolationism and enter the Second World War on the 7th of December 1941 when Japan, seeking to eliminate America’s naval power in the Pacific, launched a preemptive aerial bombing run on Pearl Harbor.

Germany declared war on the US a few days later. Although this gives the impression that the peaceful innocent US was dragged into the war, America had seen growing involvement all throughout 1941 - isolationism had been an overstatement of the US’s position in the world. Thus, the USA experienced strong counter-reactions to the war and the worsening economic situation during the 1920s and 1930s and chose to isolate itself from the world. But with its growing economic influence, the US unwittingly <https://assignbuster.com/describe-wilsons-fourteen-points-why-did-congress-fail-to-ratify-the-peace-settlement/>

put itself in a position where isolationism could no longer be a viable solution, and neutrality was not an option.