CHAPTER 29

Wilsonian Progressivism in Peace and War, 1913–1920

# focus questions

1. What were the main issues in the election of 1912 and how was Woodrow Wilson a minority president?

2. What was the “triple wall of privilege” that Wilson set out to deal with in his first term as president?

3. How was Wilson’s foreign policy different from that of Roosevelt and Taft?

4. What events happened in Mexico that challenged Wilson’s foreign policy?

5. What were the circumstances surrounding Wilson’s reelection win in 1916? What major challenges did the president face as Europe entered World War I?

6. What were the steps that led America to enter World War I?

7. After his campaign promise of keeping America out of the war in 1916, how did Wilson garner American support for the war?

8. How did America convert from a peacetime economy to a wartime economy?

9. What were the reasons for the failure of both the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles?

10. What were the reasons for the conflict between Wilson and the U.S. Senate, especially Lodge?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** After winning a three-way election, focused on different theories of progressivism, Woodrow Wilson successfully pushed through a sweeping program of domestic economic and social reform in his first term.

**Theme:** Wilson’s attempt to promote an idealistic progressive foreign policy failed, as dangerous military involvements threatened Latin America, the North Atlantic, and Europe.

**Theme:** Entering World War I in response to Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson turned America’s participation into a fervent ideological crusade for democracy that successfully stirred the public to a great voluntary war effort, but at some cost to traditional civil liberties.

**Theme:** After America’s limited but important contribution to the Allied victory, a triumphant Wilson attempted to construct a peace based on his idealistic Fourteen Points. But European and senatorial opposition, and especially his own political errors, doomed American ratification of the Versailles Treaty and participation in the League of Nations.

chapter summary

Wilson and his New Freedom defeated Roosevelt and his New Nationalism in a contest over alternative forms of progressivism. Eloquent, idealistic former professor Wilson successfully carried out a broad progressive economic reform of the tariff, finances, and the trusts. He also achieved some social reforms that benefited the working classes, but not blacks.

Wilson’s attempt to implement progressive moral goals in foreign policy was less successful, as he stumbled into military involvements in the Caribbean and revolutionary Mexico. The outbreak of World War I in Europe also brought the threat of American involvement, especially from German submarine warfare.

Wilson temporarily avoided war by extracting the precarious *Sussex* pledge from Germany. His antiwar campaign of 1916 narrowly won him reelection over the still-quarreling Republicans.

Germany’s declaration of unlimited submarine warfare, supplemented by the Zimmerman note proposing an alliance with Mexico, finally caused the United States to declare war. Wilson aroused the country to patriotic heights by making the war an idealistic crusade for democracy and permanent peace based on his Fourteen Points.

Wartime propaganda stirred voluntary commitment to the war effort, but at the cost of suppressing dissent. Voluntary efforts also worked wonders in organizing industry, producing food, and financing the war. Labor, including women, made substantial wartime gains. The beginnings of black migration to northern cities led to racial tensions and riots.

America’s soldiers took nearly a year to arrive in Europe, and they fought in only two major battles at the end of the war. America’s main contribution to the Allied victory was to provide supplies, personnel, and improved morale. Wilson’s immense prestige created high expectations for an idealistic peace, but his own political blunders and the stubborn opposition of European statesmen forced him to compromise his lofty aims.

As Lodge stalled the treaty, Wilson tried to rouse the country on behalf of his cherished League, but his own physical collapse and refusal to compromise killed the treaty and the League. Republican isolationists effectively turned Harding’s victory in 1920 into a death sentence for the League.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Examine Wilson’s complex personality and explain how it influenced both his great successes and his failures in politics.

REFERENCE: August Mecksher, *Woodrow Wilson* (1991).

* Examine Wilson’s idealistic approach to both domestic and foreign policy. Show how he used his eloquence and moral appeals to arouse the public and achieve his goals at home, and explain why this approach was not as successful abroad.

REFERENCE: John Morton Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (1956).

* Consider how Wilson’s attempt to promote American-style democracy in Mexico led him into military intervention and near-war. The focus might be on the difficulties even well-intentioned policies encountered in the face of a revolutionary upheaval such as Mexico was experiencing.

REFERENCE: P. Edward Haley, *Revolution and Intervention: The Diplomacy of Taft and Wilson with Mexico, 1910–1917* (1970).

* Analyze why Wilson found himself headed to the brink of war with Germany over the submarine. Show how America’s traditions, geography, and interests tended to create sympathy for the Allies, while the barbarous new weapon struck directly at Wilson’s moral approach to foreign policy.

REFERENCE: John M. Cooper Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolation and the First World War, 1914–1917* (1969).

* Explore the party platforms of the Republicans, Democrats, Progressive Party, and the Socialist Party and other issues surrounding the election of 1912. Consider how this election defined the vision of Progressivism.

REFERENCE: Brett Flehinger, *The 1912 Election and the Power of Progressivism—A Brief History with Documents* (2003).

* Explain the importance of Wilson’s definition of war aims. Show why his sweeping declaration of the Fourteen Points stirred tremendous enthusiasm in both America and Europe, where seemingly meaningless slaughter had dragged on for years.

REFERENCE: Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (1992).

* Analyze America’s voluntary method of organizing for war (as opposed to the governmental coercion of European wartime regimes). Show how the feverish propaganda necessary for this approach caused war opponents to be treated as traitors.

REFERENCE: David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980).

* Examine Wilson’s negotiations at Paris. Point out how his own high idealism forced him onto the defensive, since every practical compromise appeared to be a betrayal, and how he came to focus all his hopes on the League.

REFERENCE: Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: War, Revolution, and Peace* (1979).

* Explain the defeat of the League and the treaty. Consider the way Lodge effectively exploited Wilson’s weaknesses, especially his unwillingness to compromise what he saw as absolute principles.

REFERENCES: Thomas Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (1944); Robert H. Ferrell, *Woodrow Wilson and World War I* (1985).

* Explore the causes and major events of World War I from the European perspective.

REFERENCE: Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Russell Van Wyk, *July 1914: Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Coming of the Great War—A Brief Documentary History* (2003).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Examine the events in Europe before and after the outbreak of World War I, and discuss how both Germany and the Allies tried to influence the United States.
* Compare and contrast Wilson’s and Roosevelt’s policies in Latin America. Consider how each policy might have looked from a Latin American standpoint.
* Examine the role of both British and German propaganda in the United States in the years before American entry into World War I. Consider the extent to which these attempts to shape American public opinion affected both official and popular views of the two sides (including among different ethnic groups). (See Examining the Evidence section on page 683.)
* Consider women’s issues in relation to Roosevelt’s and Wilson’s progressivism, especially such prominent figures as Jane Addams and Lillian Wald.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as Immigrants Harm American Society and New Nationalism v. New Freedom. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Have the students read George Santayana’s “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” (1913) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students read Woodrow Wilson’s ‘The Ideals of America’ (1902) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Use samples of wartime propaganda to show how the war was presented to the public and how patriotic commitment was aroused.
* Analyze the treatment of war opponents, especially socialists and German-Americans. Discuss whether stifling them was necessary for the war effort or whether it corrupted the war to “make the world safe for democracy.”
* Analyze the impact of the war on the labor movement and the rights of workers.
* Analyze the impact of the war on women and African Americans. Consider the significance of passing the Nineteenth Amendment.
* Emphasize the Wilson-Lodge feud. Consider how their great political controversies were deepened by personal hatred and pride.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as America Should Enter World War I, World War I Protesters Should Be Guaranteed Freedom of Speech, and The United States Should Join the League of Nations. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following video: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume I: 1914–1919: Shell Shock*. “World War I erupts, and with it, America suffers its greatest physical and emotional losses since The Civil War.”

# character sketches

## Louis Brandeis (1856–1941)

Brandeis was the progressive lawyer who became the first Jewish justice of the Supreme Court.

His parents came to the United States as refugees from the failed liberal revolution in Hungary in 1848. The family strongly emphasized culture and education, and Louis returned to Europe several times to travel and study at leading institutions.

Although he was a star student at Harvard Law School and a successful private attorney, the Homestead Steel strike turned Brandeis toward involvement in labor and progressive causes, to which he donated his legal services. His Brandeis brief on behalf of women workers in *Muller v.* *Oregon* made him nationally famous. His efforts on behalf of eastern European Jewish garment workers led him to a rediscovery of his own Jewish heritage and a growing involvement in Zionism.

He was frequently a Supreme Court dissenter in the 1920s, but later many of his views became accepted as law. He endorsed New Deal legislation in the 1930s but opposed Roosevelt’s Court-packing plan.

**Quote:** “Refuse to accept as inevitable any evil in business (e.g., irregularity of employment). Refuse to tolerate any immoral practice (e.g., espionage)…. [Democracy] demands continuous sacrifice by the individual and more exigent obedience to the moral law than any other form of government.” (1922)

REFERENCE: Philippa Strum, *Louis D. Brandeis: Justice for the People* (1984).

## Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924)

Wilson was an influential academic scholar and administrator before he became president. He held public office for only two years before his election to the White House.

Brought up under the close guidance of his Presbyterian pastor father, Wilson seldom played with his childhood peers. He failed as a lawyer before pursuing graduate studies in political science at Johns Hopkins. His book, *Congressional Government* (1885), was a classic study of the American legislative process.

As president of Princeton after 1902, he battled against the snobbish eating clubs and tried to establish a more democratic system on campus but was defeated.

Wilson first fell seriously ill during the Paris Conference in April 1919. There is now substantial medical evidence that he suffered a series of minor strokes over several years before the massive stroke that nearly killed him on his western tour. After his collapse, his second wife kept him in virtual isolation from all advisers, including his most intimate friend, Colonel House.

**Quote:** “Those senators do not understand what the people are thinking. They are far from the people, the great mass of the people.” (1919)

REFERENCE: Kendrick Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson* (1992).

## Francisco (“Pancho”) Villa (1878–1923)

Villa was the so-called Robin Hood of the Mexican Revolution, whose raids into the United States provoked Wilson to intervene in Mexico.

Born to a poor peasant family, Villa became a thief and cattle rustler who was accused of several murders. He eventually headed up a large gang of desperadoes, but in 1910, he announced that he was joining the Mexican Revolution’s fight for social justice against oppressive landlords and foreign interests.

He did sometimes redistribute land and goods to the peasants, but he also became wealthy himself through questionable means. Among his enterprises were meat-packing plants and gambling casinos. Villa was at first friendly with Americans and was even rumored to have received funds from powerful Americans such as Hearst. Because of his thorough knowledge of northern Mexico, he successfully eluded Pershing, but he finally laid down his arms in 1920. Three years later, he was gunned down in his home village by unknown assassins.

**Quote:** “It is unfair for some to have a lot when others have nothing. The poor who work but earn too little have a claim on the wealth of the rich.” (1915)

REFERENCES: Manuel Machado, *Centaur of the North: Francisco Villa, the Mexican Revolution, and Northern Mexico* (1988); Clarence C. Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa* (1961).

## George Creel (1876–1953)

Creel was the progressive journalist who became the energetic head of the American propaganda effort in World War I.

Creel quit high school after one year to become an ardent progressive journalist. He founded a newspaper, the *Kansas City Independent,* which crusaded against the Pendergast machine, prostitution, and child labor. Creel was a flamboyant figure who married a vaudeville actress and liked to associate with boxers and other athletes.

Besides war propaganda, Creel organized a massive effort to spread a wholesome view of the American way of life throughout the world via films, magazines, and books. Creel remained a liberal California journalist through the New Deal, but during and after World War II, he became an extreme right-winger who called for harsh vengeance against Germany and Japan.

**Quote:** “[I decided that] the desired results could be obtained without paying the price that formal law would have demanded.… Better to have the desired compulsions proceed from within than to apply them from without.” (1920)

REFERENCE: Stephen L. Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Line: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (1980).

## John J. Pershing (1860–1948)

Pershing was the commander of the Pershing expedition into Mexico and of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I.

He attended a normal school before winning a competition to enter the U.S. Military Academy. His first service was among the Indians, and for a time, he led a company of Sioux scouts. His nickname, “Black Jack,” came from his having commanded a black cavalry unit but was also a reference to his tough drillmaster methods.

In the Mexican campaign, he applied new devices such as radios, airplanes, and machine guns to military uses. His ability to stay within the strict political guidelines given him in Mexico won him Wilson’s favor and command of forces in World War I. Pershing was a model soldier—square-jawed, of rigid bearing, calm, forceful, discreet. Many of his junior officers later became the great American commanders in World War II.

**Quote:** “The most important question that confronted us in the preparation of our forces of citizen soldiery for efficient service was training.… Few people can realize what a stupendous undertaking it was to teach these vast numbers their various duties when most of them were ignorant of practically everything pertaining to the business of the soldier in war.” (Memoirs, 1931)

REFERENCE: Gene Smith, *Until the Last Trumpet Sounds: The Life of General of the Armies John J. Pershing* (1998).

## Henry Cabot Lodge (1850–1924)

Lodge was the aristocratic New England scholar and senator who successfully battled against Wilson’s League of Nations.

A descendant of the ancient Lodge and Cabot lines of Massachusetts, Lodge married his cousin Ann Cabot Davis. He studied history under Henry Adams and wrote scholarly but strongly pro-Federalist biographies of Washington, Hamilton, Webster, and his grandfather George Cabot.

He was a close friend of Theodore Roosevelt and was also a friend of Wilson’s antagonist at Princeton, Dean West.

Although highly intelligent, Lodge was narrow in outlook and comfortable only with those of his own background and class. He was rigid and opinionated and, like Wilson, tended to turn political disagreements into personal animosities.

**Quote:** “We have twice succeeded in creating a situation where Wilson either had to take the Treaty with strong reservations…or else was obliged to defeat it. He has twice taken the latter alternative. His personal selfishness goes beyond what I have seen in any human being. It is so extreme that it is entirely unenlightened and stupid.…” (Letter, 1920)

REFERENCE: William C. Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy* (1980).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1919–1920):

Versailles Treaty and League of Nations. Should the United States ratify the Versailles Treaty and join the League of Nations?

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| ***Yes:*** Pro-League forces, led by President Wilson and his administration; most Democrats, led by Senators Pittman and Williams; many eastern business interests and international law advocates, led by former President Taft. |  | ***No:*** Anti-League forces, including strong reservationists, led by Lodge, Elihu Root, and Senator Cummins; irreconcilables, led by Senators Borah and Johnson; many Midwesterners, Irish-Americans, and other ethnic groups. |

ISSUE #1: The treaty. Would the Versailles Treaty ensure a just and workable peace?

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| ***Yes:*** Pro-League President Wilson: “The Treaty is a readjustment of all those great injustices that underlie the whole structure of European and Asian society.… The heart of the Treaty is that it undoes the injustice that Germany did…[and] organizes the world to see that such injustice will in the future be impossible.… [I]t has very, very few compromises in it, and is, most of it, laid down in straight lines according to American specifications.” |  | ***No:*** Anti-League British economist John Maynard Keynes: “In the first place, this treaty ignores the economic solidarity of Europe, and by aiming at the destruction of the economic life of Germany it threatens the health and prosperity of the Allies themselves. In the second place, by making demands the execution of which is in the literal sense impossible, it stultifies itself and leaves Europe more unsettled than it found it. The treaty, by overstepping the limits of the possible, has in practice settled nothing.” |

ISSUE #2: Warmaking power. Would joining the League of Nations amount to a surrender of the sovereign power of the United States to decide matters of war and peace?

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| ***No:*** Pro-League President Wilson: “Article Ten has no operative force unless we vote that it shall operate. The member of the Council representing the United States has to vote ‘aye’ before the United States or any other country can be advised to go to war under that agreement.… There is no compulsion upon us…except the compulsion of our good conscience and judgment. So it is perfectly evident that if, in the judgment of the people of the United States the Council adjudged wrong and that this is not a case of the use of force, there would be no necessity on the part of the Congress of the United States to vote the use of force.” |  | ***Yes:*** Anti-League Sen. Charles Townshend: “We are to be linked up in a league of more than thirty nations.… If trouble occurs in Europe, which under the League and the Treaty the United States is bound to enter, our government must settle the trouble and pay the bills, even though a majority of its men are sacrificed and its whole treasure is exhausted, for morally we cannot turn our back or surrender when we enter the contract. In a partnership each partner is responsible for all the obligations of the firm.… American boys from American homes will have to serve in both Europe and Asia for many years.” |

ISSUE #3: Monroe Doctrine. Would the League permit international interference with American privileges under the Monroe Doctrine?

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| ***No:*** Pro-League President Wilson: “I spoke to the conference in Paris, and they at once inserted the provision which is now there that nothing in that Covenant shall be construed as affecting the validity of the Monroe Doctrine.  … At last, in the Covenant of the League of Nations, the Monroe Doctrine has become the doctrine of the world.” |  | ***No:*** Anti-League Senator Henry Cabot Lodge: “In the first draft of the treaty that was presented to us the Monroe Doctrine was left somewhere among the voices heard in the air and the visions that are seen by capable visionaries, and we were told that the doctrine was safe because it had been extended to the whole world.… Now, however, there comes back a second draft with a direct statement in regard to the Monroe Doctrine putting it in a far worse position, in my judgment, than it was under the first draft, and that was bad enough.” |

ISSUE #4: Would the League violate America’s long tradition of “no entangling alliances”?

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| ***No:*** Pro-League President Wilson: “When men tell you that we are, by going into the League of Nations, reversing the policy of the United States, they have not thought the thing out. The statement is not true.… The point is that the United States is the only nation in the world that has sufficient moral force with the rest of the world.… What Washington had in mind was exactly what these gentlemen want to lead us back to. The day we have left behind us was a day of alliances.… This project of the League of Nations is a great policy of disentanglement.” |  | ***Yes:*** Anti-League Senator William Borah: “If I have had a conviction throughout my life, it has been the conviction that we should stay out of European and Asiatic affairs. I do not think we can have here a great, powerful, independent, self-governing Republic and do anything else; I do not think it is possible for us to continue to be the leading intellectual and moral power in the world and do anything else.… Let the people of this country who are opposed to entering into an alliance with Europe, who are opposed to surrendering the policy of Washington and the doctrine of Monroe, understand that reservations…are made to get votes.…” |

REFERENCES: Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (1944); Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (1945); Ralph Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight Against the League of Nations* (1970); William Widenor, *Henry Cabot Lodge and the Search for an American Foreign Policy* (1980).

# questions for class discussion

1. Were Wilson’s progressive legislative achievements in his first term consistent with his New Freedom campaign? Why or why not?

2. How was Wilson’s progressive presidency similar to Theodore Roosevelt’s, and how was it different? Were the differences ones of personality or policy?

3. Why did Wilson fail in his attempt to develop a more moral, less imperialistic policy in Latin America? Were his involvements really an attempt to create a new mutual relationship between the United States and the neighboring republics, or was it just an alternative form of American domination?

4. Was the United States genuinely neutral during the first years of World War I, or was it biased in favor of the Allies and against Germany? Was it possible for the United States to remain neutral? Why or why not? (See boxed quotes on pages 670 and 673.)

5. What were the ideological results of Wilson’s proclamation of World War I as a “war to end all wars” and “a war to make the world safe for democracy”? (See boxed quote on page 674.)

6. Was it necessary to suppress dissent in order to win the war? (See boxed quote on page 681.)

7. Was the Treaty of Versailles a violation of Wilson’s high wartime ideals or the best that could have been achieved under the circumstances? (See boxed quotes on pages 685 and 686.)

8. What was the fundamental reason America failed to join the League of Nations?

**CONTENDING VOICES: CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT VS. MRS. BARCLAY HAZARD**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What traditional American principle did Catt cite to support female suffrage?

2. What did Mrs. Hazard argue would be the negative results of allowing women to vote?

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (1950).

A view of Wilson’s diplomacy as naïve idealism:

“Under the protecting shadow of this theory [Wilsonian idealism], the guns continued their terrible work for a final year and a half after our entry. Under the shadow of this theory Wilson went to Versailles unprepared to face the sordid but all-important details of the day of reckoning. Under this theory he suffered his tragic and historic failure. Under this theory things advanced with a deadly logic and precision to a peace which was indeed ‘forced upon the loser, a victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished, accepted in humiliation, in duress’—a peace that did indeed leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory, and upon which its own terms came later to rest ‘as upon quicksand.’”

* Arthur Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist* (1957).

A view of Wilsonian diplomacy as a noble effort:

“For Woodrow Wilson the Paris Peace Conference was more a time of heroic striving and impressive achievement than of failure. By fighting against odds that would have caused weaker men to surrender, he was able to prevent the Carthaginian kind of peace that we have seen to our regret in our own time; and he was able to create the machinery for the gradual attainment of the kind of effort that he would have liked to impose at once. The Paris settlement, therefore, was not inevitably a ‘lost peace.’ It could have been, rather, the foundation of a viable and secure world order and therefore a lasting memorial to its chief architect, if only the victors had maintained the will to enforce what Wilson had signed.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. How do each of these historians interpret Wilson’s overall foreign policy?

. How do each of these historians interpret the Treaty of Versailles?