

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points

Ten months before World War I ended, United States President Woodrow Wilson drew up a program he hoped would provide for a fair peace settlement and help prevent wars in the future. This program came to be known as the Fourteen Points.

Wilson's Fourteen Points had three goals. First, it called for the elimination of some of the factors that had the potential to cause war: trade barriers, secret treaties, and arms races among nations. Second, it stressed the importance of self-determination, or the right of people to live under a government of their choice. Finally, it envisioned the establishment of an association of nations (later called the League of Nations) that would guarantee the independence of large and small nations alike and keep future wars from occurring.

Wilson's plan was idealistic and conflicted sharply with wartime agreements made by the Allies. Although the President didn't know it when he went to Paris for the peace conference in January 1919, the major Allied nations had postwar plans of their own. Great Britain wanted to make Germany pay financially for starting the war. France wanted to see Germany pay through reparations (payments for war damages) and loss of territory. Italy, which had joined the Allies in 1915 after being promised lands controlled by Austria-Hungary, expected to receive those lands. Such demands on the part of the Allied nations conflicted with the ideals Wilson had put forth in his Fourteen Points.

Although disillusioned by what took place at the peace conference in Paris, Wilson did win support for the establishment of the League of Nations. However, it is ironic that after this European triumph, he returned home only to have the Senate deny permission for the United States to join. His continual struggle on behalf of the League contributed to a stroke that left him an invalid the rest of his life. The League of Nations was formed in January 1920 and officially dissolved in April 1946, after World War II. Since it did not have the membership of all the world's large nations, the League lacked the power to stop a second world war.

1. What were the three goals of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points?

2. Why did the League of Nations fail?

3. What might be another way to prevent future conflicts between nations? Explain.
