

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 160

### “Fourteen Points”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*I am the last man in the world to say that the succor which is given from America is not in itself something to rejoice at greatly. But I also say that I can see more in the knowledge that America is going to win a right to sit at a conference table when the terms of the peace are discussed. That conference will settle the destiny of nations and the course of human life for God knows how many ages. It would have been a tragedy, a tragedy for mankind, if America had not been heard there and with all her influence and her power.*

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, on the entry of the United States into the Great War.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 160. The Fourteen Points.

When the United States entered the Great War, it was a hopeful moment for the Allies. America's value to the war effort materially and militarily was potentially vast. It might even tip the balance between defeat and victory.

But there was another aspect to America entering the war, one alluded to in the statement by the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, that I just read to you. The US brought to the war its democratic reputation and its lack of material interest in the outcome. The addition of the US to the Allies, along with the February Revolution in Russia made the Allies in fact what they already claimed to be in propaganda: a vast coalition of the largest, richest, most powerful and most democratic states on Earth, banding together against an opposing coalition of imperialist, expansionist, autocratic empires.

And besides that, there was the personal credibility of Woodrow Wilson, the US President and world leader who had spent years pressing for an end to the war while other leaders were planning offensives, who had called for “peace without victory” while everyone else was pledging to fight on until total victory. Yes, Wilson’s credibility was a boost to the Allies, and he could be useful in the event that some kind of compromise peace had to be worked out. It would be easier to sell a compromise peace to the British or French publics, should that prove necessary, if it came with Mr. Wilson’s seal of approval.

Despite the public confidence expressed by British leaders like Lloyd George, though, there was some private concern in British government circles that Woodrow Wilson was still more interested in peace making than in war fighting, despite the declaration of war. These concerns began to be laid to rest as the Wilson administration moved quickly to build up the army, deploy the navy, and extend financial credits to the Allies. Forget “peace without victory,” America is now in it to win it, episode 142.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t long before Wilson began questioning Allied representatives about war aims and about the rumored secret treaties. The US had a right to ask, and the British government shared copies of the various secret treaties: the Sykes-Picot agreement on the Middle East, the Treaty of London that promised Italy substantial territories, and the treaty with Romania. Significantly, the Americans did not ask about Allied agreements on the disposition of German colonial holdings in Africa, China, and the Pacific, and the British did not volunteer information about those discussions. Whether that was because the Americans regarded these questions as less important, or simply were unaware there was anything to ask for is not clear, but no doubt the British understood that the contents of those agreements would not be received well in Washington and were happy enough not to have to own up to them. It doesn’t appear that the US government would be informed of these agreements until after the Armistice.

The British, you’ll recall, regarded this web of territorial offers the Allies had secretly woven among themselves to be the glue that held the Alliance together. But the United States was different. America hadn’t entered the war for territorial gain, it had not been promised any territorial gain, and the Wilson administration vehemently denied that the US had any territorial ambitions. America likewise did not regard itself as bound by any of those agreements made among the other powers. Wilson had always been wary of the possibility that American military strength might be co-opted by European colonial powers to expand their own empires. The US was not an empire and did not wish to become one, Wilson insisted. It had gone to war not for material gain, but for its principles, which included democracy, freedom of the seas, and the right of peoples to self-government. It is for this reason that the US never formally joined the entente alliance, and insisted on referring to itself as an “associated power.”

On June 14, 1917, Flag Day in the United States, Wilson gave a speech. In it, he promised that the first US soldiers would shortly be arriving in France, as indeed they were; he also spoke again on peace terms. The German government had expressed a willingness to enter peace talks;

Wilson now rejected this offer so long as there were German troops in Belgium and France. If Germany obtained peace while still occupying Allied territories, he argued, that would amount to conceding to the Germans what they had taken by force. More than that, Wilson spoke to the increasing militarism in the German government and the rise of Hindenburg and Ludendorff. A peace that enhanced the German military's prestige would result in a militarized Germany after the war, to the detriment of the rest of the world, including the United States. On the other hand, if Germany's imperial ambitions were frustrated, it would mean the end of Prussian militarism. The Allies were not at war with the German people, but it was only after Germany had a government answerable to its people that peace would be possible.

We might say, in modern terminology, that Wilson was calling for regime change in Germany as a precondition to a peace agreement. He also seemed to have said that the only way to achieve regime change in Germany was by dealing the German military a stinging defeat and thus exposing its empty promises. Or to put it another way still, President Peace-Without-Victory has seemingly become President Peace-Through-Victory. This development was greeted with delight in the British War Cabinet, since it brought America's position on the war in line with their own. And it brought dismay to the anti-war opposition, such as Labour M.P. Philip Snowden, who responded by writing, "Six months ago, President Wilson was the greatest hope for peace. Today he is probably the greatest obstacle to it."

Two weeks later, Lloyd George gave a speech in Glasgow in which he endorsed Wilson's speech. Britain, he said, would be more willing to deal with a free government in Berlin than one dominated by the military and would agree to submit to an international peace conference the future dispositions of Turkish Mesopotamia and Germany's African possessions. About the territories that were already subjects of secret peace agreements, like Sykes-Picot, he was discreetly silent.

In August 1917, Pope Benedict XV made his own peace proposal. I talked a little about the German response in episode 141. The essence of the Pope's peace proposal was that everyone should withdraw to the 1914 borders. German troops would leave France and Belgium and the Allies would restore the German colonies. Afterward, there would be arms reductions and the implementation of international arbitration to resolve international disputes, including all unsettled territorial questions such as Alsace-Lorraine, Italy's claims, and the Polish, Balkan, and Armenian questions. Freedom of the seas would be guaranteed. There would be no indemnities, but there would be restitution for damage done during the war.

Wilson's response to the Pope noted approvingly the Pope's endorsement of international arbitration by a league of nations, of disarmament, and of freedom of the seas. But as to the rest of the proposal, Wilson argued that it amounted to no more than a restoration of the 1914 status quo. This war had been caused by a large and wealthy nation with a powerful military and a greedy and irresponsible government. Unless that changed, peace would mean no more than a brief respite until Germany rebuilt its strength. The other nations of the world would have no

choice but to band together in opposition to Germany, and this was no peace at all. America, Wilson told the Pope, sought no material benefit from the war, but only a world based on freedom and self-government. Germany would be welcomed into this new world, so long as she treats other nations, great and small, as equals and respects their rights. But the United States could not treat with the present German government. It has already proved itself untrustworthy. It was not enough to end the fighting. The underlying causes of the Great War had to be addressed. It was not enough to achieve an uneasy peace. The world cried out for a lasting peace.

The Allies did not fully agree with Wilson's sentiments as he expressed them to the Pope, but they nonetheless refrained from giving their own answers. To do so might imply dissention between the Allies and the United States, and it also might also look greedy, since the other Allies' objections mostly had to do with their individual territorial claims against the Central Powers. No, it was better to leave it to Wilson. The world remembered Wilson's past peace efforts, his patience with Germany, and his reluctance to go to war. He looked the part of a statesman and an idealist, sincerely seeking a just and equitable end to the war. His was the best face for the Allies to show to the world.

[music: Fučík, *Florentiner Marsch*]

November brought with it the close of the 1917 campaign season. The year had not been a good one for the Allies, and if you don't believe me, just review the past twenty episodes. (Twenty episodes? Twenty episodes to cover one year? I am *never* going to finish this thing...)

What was I saying? Right, 1917 was not a good year for the Allies. On the plus side, the United States joined the war, the British had advanced in the Near East, and...no, that's about it. Russia had a revolution in March and overthrew the czar, but Russia's been collapsing all year. The Nivelle Offensive failed, the French Army is restless and mutinying, the Italian front collapsed at Caporetto, and Douglas Haig's Passchendaele Offensive was another bloody disaster. Even America's ground forces are still not yet present in Europe in great numbers, although America's navy and her financing were welcome, as was the prestige Woodrow Wilson lent to the cause.

But three years of campaigning have left the Western Front essentially where it was at the end of 1914. Enemy forces are on French soil, Italian soil, and Russian soil, not to mention Serbia, Belgium, and Romania. Three years of campaigning have not brought the Allies any closer to victory; indeed, looking forward, the Allies can't even see a clear path to victory. Certainly not in 1918, not if Russia quits the war. Perhaps by 1919 or 1920, if the Americans actually deliver on their promise of two million more soldiers on the Western Front...?

You can't quantify fighting spirit, or morale, or prestige, but these things matter in a war, and the Allies could use a boost. They were going to get the opposite. First came the Bolshevik coup in Russia; the new Russian government was calling for peace on the basis of no annexations and no indemnities. Neither Britain nor France was willing to embrace that formula. Colonel House, who was in London at the time, met with Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour, the British foreign

secretary, and told them that if the Bolshevik formula wasn't good enough, it was necessary that the Allies make some kind of declaration of what they would regard as an acceptable agreement to end the war.

Then on November 23, as you'll recall, the new Russian foreign minister, Leon Trotsky, made public the secret treaties he found in the Russian government archives, episode 156; treaties in which the European allies had already made arrangements to divide up the spoils of war after their victories, treaties even Woodrow Wilson was aware of, though he hadn't endorsed them. This further increased the pressure on the Allies to give some kind of account of themselves and exactly what they were fighting for.

Colonel House drafted a proposed resolution in which the Allies and the United States renounced aggression and indemnity and declared they were fighting so that "nations shall have the right to lead their lives in the way that seems to them best for the development of their general welfare." But the British wouldn't go along. And Wilson wouldn't go along with any statement that mentioned territorial claims, although he was willing to make one exception: Alsace-Lorraine.

The other shoe dropped on November 29, with the publication of a letter in the *Daily Telegraph*, written by the 72-year old Lord Lansdowne. Lansdowne was a Liberal Lord who had served in a couple of Gladstone's governments back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He'd joined Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists after the split over Irish Home Rule and served as Governor General of Canada and Viceroy of India under Conservative governments. In 1900, he took over the Foreign Office portfolio from Lord Salisbury and held that position until the Liberals took power in 1905 and replaced him with Sir Edward Grey. As the leader of the Conservative and Liberal Unionist alliance in the House of Lords, he had played a major role in using the Lords' veto to block Liberal legislation during the Asquith ministry, as we saw back in episodes 46 and 56. After the war began, Asquith invited Lord Lansdowne into government as a minister without portfolio.

So in other words, we are seeing here an elder statesman, a peer of the realm, a man with extensive experience in both Liberal and Conservative governments. While he was minister without portfolio in 1916, he was horrified by the Battle of the Somme and later by the Battle of Passchendaele. Lansdowne found his thinking increasingly aligned with those who believed that modern warfare had the potential to end civilization and thus it was vital to end the war quickly at whatever price. He began to make this case in Cabinet, urging a generous peace offer be made to Germany in order to achieve a quick end to the war, a view his colleagues firmly rejected. When David Lloyd George replaced Asquith as Prime Minister, Lord Lansdowne was not invited into the new government. But he persisted in his advocacy of a quick peace and sent memoranda to the Cabinet pressing his position.

By late 1917, the Cabinet had lost patience with him and was ignoring him altogether. Still convinced that the stakes were too high to simply give up, Lansdowne went public. He drafted a letter arguing his case for peace. After the editor of *The Times* refused to publish it, Lansdowne's

letter found a home in *The Daily Telegraph*. The reaction in Westminster was sharply negative, with Lansdowne's own Conservative Party colleagues denouncing him, as did much of Fleet Street, especially Lord Northcliffe's newspapers, although the Manchester *Guardian* praised the letter, as did the German press. Lansdowne received a great number of letters from the general public, mostly supportive of his position, which must have worried the Cabinet.

In the United States, Theodore Roosevelt read Lansdowne's letter and declared, "Such a peace would leave the liberty-loving nations of mankind at the ultimate mercy of the triumphant militarism and capitalism of the German autocracy." As for Woodrow Wilson, his administration was already at work on an American answer to the question of war aims. At Wilson's request, Colonel House had put together a private group of academics, called "The Inquiry," tasked with drawing up the United States' negotiating position for any post-war peace conference. House appointed his wife's brother-in-law, Sidney Mezes, a philosophy professor and president of the City College of New York, as head of The Inquiry, a project which would ultimately involve over a hundred American academics, who worked out of the New York Public Library. Some of them are names that should already be familiar to regular listeners: Walter Lippmann, the journalist and co-founder of *The New Republic*, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, and Abbott Lowell, the president of Harvard University.

The group was entirely male, and most of them were connected to Ivy League universities or the University of Chicago. It has to be said though, that the US of this time had very few experts on international affairs. Most of the academics who did specialize in such things studied Europe, especially Western Europe. Americans who researched such topics as the history and culture of Russia or the Balkans or Arabia, let alone China or Japan, were in short supply.

On December 4, Wilson delivered his State of the Union address to Congress. In it, he asked Congress to declare war on Austria-Hungary. He explained the request as aimed at increasing the pressure on Germany and went out of his way to declare that "we do not wish in any way to impair or to rearrange the Austro-Hungarian Empire." This was in contrast to the Allies, who, after the failure of Kaiser Karl's peace initiative, would begin encouraging revolution among dissident ethnic minorities in the Dual Monarchy. As for a possible peace agreement, Wilson reiterated his position that the post-war peace must be "permanent, not temporary."

With 1917 ending on a gloomy note, it was hard to feel sanguine about 1918. The Wilsons hosted a family gathering at the White House on New Year's Eve, but the mood was somber. The President read aloud William Wordsworth's poem, "November, 1806," which begins with these lines:

*Another year!—another deadly blow!  
Another mighty Empire overthrown!  
And We are left, or shall be left, alone;  
The last that dare to struggle with the Foe.*

Four days later, House brought to Wilson a lengthy memorandum from The Inquiry, and the two men spent two days remaking the map of the world as they would have it. Wilson distilled The Inquiry's recommendations down to fourteen short statements and set to work drafting a speech, but soon learned that David Lloyd George had beaten him to the punch.

The British Cabinet had sent the South African general, Jan Smuts, to a secret meeting in Switzerland with Count von Mensdorff, an Austrian diplomat who in happier times had been ambassador in London, as part of the negotiations with the Austrian Kaiser. Von Mensdorff suggested that it would help move the peace process forward if the Allies would make a public restatement of their war aims. Remember, too, the embarrassment of the revelations of the secret treaties and Leon Trotsky's call to the Allies either to join the Brest-Litovsk peace talks or state the reasons why the war must be prolonged. The Austrian foreign minister, Count Czernin, had given Trotsky's peace proposal qualified support. The head of the Trades Union Congress and the leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party both signed a letter to Lloyd George pointing out that the Bolshevik claim that the Allies were in the war for imperialist motives was looking more and more plausible and pressed the Prime Minister to give a public statement of British war aims.

For all these reasons, and maybe also because the British were aware that President Wilson was working on a war aims statement of his own, on January 5, 1918, Lloyd George spoke before the Trades Union Congress in Glasgow and set out the British Empire's war aims. He concluded with these words:

*If, then, we are asked what we are fighting for, we reply as we have often replied: we are fighting for a just and lasting peace, and we believe that before permanent peace can be hoped for three conditions must be fulfilled; firstly, the sanctity of treaties must be established; secondly, a territorial settlement must be secured, based on the right of self-determination or the consent of the governed, and, lastly, we must seek by the creation of some international organization to limit the burden of armaments and diminish the probability of war.*

*On these conditions the British Empire would welcome peace; to secure these conditions its peoples are prepared to make even greater sacrifices than those they have yet endured.*

Wilson thought at first that Lloyd George had stolen his thunder. Indeed, he had in many ways gone beyond where Wilson was willing to go. Notably, Lloyd George had used the words "self-determination" for the first time—before Wilson. Wilson was not willing to push for the dissolution of the Austrian or Ottoman Empires as Lloyd George seemed to be suggesting. He thought that would be too destabilizing. On the other hand, Lloyd George had not repudiated the secret treaties, nor had he endorsed freedom of the seas, which had been a Wilsonian goal since the early days of the war.

Should Wilson go ahead with his speech anyway? He thought not. But House advised him to proceed and predicted that his speech would “smother” Lloyd George’s and that it would cement his position as “spokesman for the Entente and indeed, for the liberals of the world.”

Well, it was true that the US was not formally a member of the Allies. Lloyd George did not and could not speak for America. Only Wilson could do that. And so he did, appearing before Congress on January 8. He praised Lloyd George’s speech of three days earlier before setting out his own peace terms, in what history will know as the Fourteen Points. They are important enough that I think it worthwhile for me to read them out in full, so here goes:

1. Open covenants of peace must be arrived at, after which there will surely be no private international action or rulings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

2. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

3. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

4. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest points consistent with domestic safety.

5. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the population concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

6. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.

7. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the



nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

8. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.

9. A re-adjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.

11. Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.

12. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.

13. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

14. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

The underlying principle, Wilson explained, was “the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of the structure of international justice can stand.”

Wilson's speech attracted the attention and captured the imaginations of the entire world. His language was not as soaring as Lloyd George's and his promises were more modest. He did not use Lloyd George's term "self-determination" yet, although he will, don't worry. He did not call for the breakup of Austria-Hungary or the Ottoman Empire, merely for "autonomy" for their peoples.

And yet it was this speech, and not the British Prime Minister's, that everyone remembered, just as Colonel House had predicted.

Why was that? Perhaps because though it may have been more limited, it was more concrete. It laid out a blueprint that could be envisioned and grasped. It put meat on the bones of Wilson's earlier calls for "peace without victory." It was an effort to synthesize the highest ideals of all the Allies, and even the Bolsheviks, and even the German Reichstag, and to offer the peoples of the Allied nations a set of principles to rally around. And it must be said that it carried the weight of America's, and Wilson's, moral authority.

It was a statement of liberal principles for liberals everywhere, not only among the Allies, but among the Central Powers as well. To the liberals in Germany, Wilson was making an implicit offer; that the Allies were prepared to offer a reasonable peace on liberal terms and to welcome Germany back into the international community as an equal partner. The obstacle to a just peace for Germany, he was suggesting, was not the Allies. It was Hindenburg and Ludendorff and the Kaiser. The militarists in your own government.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you all for listening, and I'd especially like to thank William for his donation, and thanks to Per for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the podcast going, and I appreciate each and every one of you. And if you aren't yet a donor or patron, I hope you'll consider helping out if you're able. Just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I'll be back in two weeks' time with a whole new year. 1918! I can hardly believe it. But the year 1918 begins badly for the Allies with Russia out of the war and a series of German offensives about to begin. *Kaiserschlacht*, in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In today's episode, I mentioned the dearth of expertise in the history and culture of other nations, especially non-European nations, among American academics. In June, 1918, just five months after delivering their memorandum to the President, some of the academics from The Inquiry began meeting regularly in New York City. They called themselves "The Council on Foreign Relations." The organization became incorporated and grew, taking as its mission to bring together US government officials, academics, and business and corporate figures to develop a more informed US foreign policy. In 1922, they began publishing a journal on international relations called *Foreign Affairs*.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Council on Foreign Relations would become the most influential private academic organization—what we today might call a “think tank”—in the field of foreign relations, and successive American administrations would frequently appoint foreign policy officials drawn from the membership of the Council on Foreign Relations, while *Foreign Affairs* would become the pre-eminent journal of American foreign policy. Both remain highly influential even in our time.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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