

Wilson's Legacy

Though Wilson may have failed in the League fight, he ultimately succeeded in bringing the concepts of multilateralism and collective security to the forefront of political consciousness. In the early twenty-first century the United States remains involved in foreign affairs and in organizations that embody the ideals found in Wilson's Fourteen Points. The United States participates in regional and world organizations promoting free trade, and supports nations and ethnic groups seeking statehood and protection from injustice. The United States often assists in reducing conflict around the world.

Some within the United States advocate a more isolationist approach. They say that Wilson's ideas have continued to fail throughout the century because humans are predisposed toward power politics rather than peaceful diplomacy, and that the United States should focus on its mounting domestic problems. Others comment that ideas such as multilateralism threaten U.S. security by preventing the United States from acting on its own to protect its citizens. They point to the UN's failure to prevent terrorism or to act quickly in emergencies. While "Wilsonian" thought is praised in some circles, others call it naive and unrealistic.

In many cases presidents and administrations have engaged in both Wilsonian and non-Wilsonian actions simultaneously. President Carter, for instance, called for international efforts to increase human rights while also announcing that the United States would use force if necessary to access Middle Eastern oil. President George W. Bush's foreign policies were driven by moral arguments as Wilson's were, but he reserved the right to act unilaterally to promote his ideals.

The involvement of the United States in global events and organizations remains a source of tension in the United States and around the world, and questions about the role of multilateral institutions and the U.S. role in the world. These debates will continue as long as Americans vacillate between pursuing a unilateral or multilateral foreign policy—or whether to be involved at all.

Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state under Presidents Nixon and Ford, wrote the following in 1994:

"The League of Nations failed to take hold in America because the country was not yet ready for so global a role. Nevertheless, Wilson's intellectual victory proved... seminal [influential]... For, whenever America has faced the task of constructing a new world order, it has returned in one way or another to Woodrow Wilson's precepts. At the end of World War II, it helped build the United Nations on the same principle as those of the League, hoping to found peace on a concord of the victors. When this hope died, America waged the Cold War ... as a moral struggle for democracy. When communism collapsed, the Wilsonian idea that the road to peace lay in collective security ... was adopted by administrations of both major American political parties."

With reference to the two sources above, how would you describe Wilson's legacy to someone who is new to studying U.S. foreign policy?