WOODROW WILSON VS. AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION:
THE UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER MOVEMENT OF 1918

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Scholarly analysis of Woodrow Wilson’s peace objectives has consumed much printer’s ink over the past three quarters of a century. In the course of his distinguished career, Klaus Schwaib has made a decisive contribution to the ongoing debate on the subject. No one else has so enlarged our understanding of German-American mutual misperceptions at the end of World War I. Having taken on a democratic aloofness, the Berlin government sought to escape from the logic of defeat in 1918 by belatedly embracing the Fourteen Points. Schwaib contrasts German expectations with Wilson’s actual peace program, and he shows how the practices constraints of coalition warfare and Realpolitik limited the president’s maneuvering room.

Wilson captured the imagination of liberals on both sides of the water. His hope that a concept of right could replace the balance of power inspired two generations of American internationalists. His vision of a world made safe for democracy, suitably transmogrified, still inspires one prominent strain in American foreign policy. No wonder that scholar of World War I have focused so closely on Wilson himself - on his aspirations, policies, achievements, and failures - in war termination and peacemaking. Yet most Americans in 1918-19 did not favor the ideas we associate with a Wilsonian peace. It is easy to overlook the extent to which the president had lost control of U.S. public opinion by the time that the guns fell silent on the Western front.

Caught up in a paroxysm of war patriotism, the majority of articulate Americans came to believe that Germany figured as an incorrigible nation that had to be crushed were civilization to survive. The main organs of opinion called for an unconditional surrender and a dictated peace. And the voters elected a Republican Congress that would not indulge the president’s penchant for making foreign policy in communion with himself.

Public opinion is fickle. Even today, approval ratings for presidential actions swing wildly between one election and another. Before the development of modern statistical sampling techniques, one cannot gauge public sentiment with scientific precision. Moreover, government agencies subjected the population to such a massive propaganda barrage during World War I that it is hard to tell what people really thought in the privacy of their homes.


The United States remained at the time an ethnically divided nation. German-Americans and other hyphenates did not fully share in the war hysteria. Nevertheless, when due allowances are made, what passed for articulate public opinion found expression or reflection in the mass media and the discourse of politicians. Here the evidence seems unmistakable. In the course of mobilizing the American people to fight the war abroad, Wilson and the liberal idealists whose views he championed lost the battle for hearts and minds at home.

Fischer and his fellows have shown conclusively that the Berlin government and the High Command pursued assassination objectives from the beginning of the war to the end. Sentiment in the Reichstag varied depending on the progress of the forces in the field, but there is little to indicate that either the German people or their representatives in parliament would ever have accepted a moderate peace until military defeat obliged them to do so. Nevertheless, when General Ludendorff determined that his armies could not prevail, the Wilhelmstrasse could find mind in President Wilson’s speeches to give them hope of a tolerable outcome. President Wilson derived his bedrock views not from empirical scrutiny of the German war record, but rather from the predigions of nineteenth-century humanitarian liberalism and the Presbyterian religion. According to Wilson’s Weltanschauung, unalloyed “isms” might long for conquest and governments might make war. The “people”, however, always stood for peace. In his wartime speeches Wilson repeatedly distinguished between the “military and imperialistic minority” in the Reich and the German people, toward whom he had so feelingly “sympathy and friendship”8. Insisting that America fought as an associate and not as an ally, he presidentially hoped to impose an American program of reconciliation and reconstruction on England and France as well as on Germany. “When the war is over”, he wrote Colonel Edward M. House, “we can force them to our way of thinking, because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands”. Wilson expressed disillusionment when the Reichstag rejected the Treaty of Versailles with undisguised contempt, but his basic convictions survived intact. He disclaimed any desire “to march triumphantly into Berlin”. As late as July 1918 he continued to advocate a settlement based “upon the free acceptance of the settlement by the people immediately concerned.” European liberals, in Germany and elsewhere, did not follow American domestic politics closely so long as the United States maintained its traditional isolation from European affairs. Washington figured as a bastion post before the days of air-conditioning; neither diplomats nor foreign journalists ventured frequently into the interior. Still, the basic ground rules of American politics should have been on no sideline. The Republicans had dominated both the White House and the Congress most of the time since the Civil War. Wilson had prevailed in 1912 only because the Republican majority split, he won reelection four years later by a relatively narrow margin. Foreign observers might casually assume that Wilson’s winged words reflected not so much the policy of his administration, but also the convictions of the governing elites. In fact, the Democrats drew support largely from the South, the West, and teni-

5 Proskow C. Lusnik, Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I, DuKo 1974, p. 117
6 Carl W. Wittke, German-Americans and the World War, Columbia 1936.
8 Ferry Redlin, Amritière 1913, New Haven 1946; also the Irich Ludendorff, Meine Kriegserinnerungen (1914-1918), Berlin 1929.
grants; the business community and the established classes of the East who had traditionally shaped foreign policy and who had mounted the torches for preparedness in the early years of the war remained overwhelmingly loyal to the Republicans. 12

After five years in opposition, to give the Republican side a chance to prove that it was capable of leading the country, Wilson could not accept the Wilsonian notion of a war "wanted" upon the United States owing to violations of natural rights. Instead, the pro-war spokesmen cautioned, both before and after April 1917, that German ambitions and conduct posed a direct threat to American national security. The United States should respond accordingly. As early as August 1917, the magazine editor George Harvey began his campaign in the high-profile North American Review for "Unconditional Surrender: The Only Way". 14 Denied his wish to take a volunteer division overseas, ex-President Roosevelt elaborated the theme in his syndicated newspaper column and repeatedly toured the country prosing for a fight to the bitter end. 15

Temporally, political analysis, and a Social Darwinian concept of manliness all led Roosevelt in the same direction. "First and foremost", he argued, "we have to make the world safe for ourselves". If the United States failed to win an overwhelming victory, it would "show the people of Germany single-handed". 16 Therefore, every decent citizen should feel an obligation to "make the pacifist and the home-run realist realize that a nation for a precarious peace, for a peace without victory, is seditious". 16 In contrast to Wilson, Roosevelt proclaimed that "our war is as much with the German people as with the government". The German people had "stood practically united behind their government in upholding and insisting upon the systematic infliction of hideous brutality upon their foes". 17 Roosevelt had followed Wilson's seemingly inviolate defense of American rights on the high seas, his dilatory conversion to preparedness, and his wordly advocacy of a League to Enforce Peace with mounting frustration and indignation. Stated of his Democratic successor figured as the consuming passion of Roosevelt's final years.

Privately, he denounced the President as a hypocrite obsessed with his own reputation who would "make a German peace tomorrow if he thought it for his own advantage". 20

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12 Although the biographical focus on Wilson in recent years has centered on the role of the older historians, see William E. Dodd, Woodrow Wilson and His Work, Chicago: Dodd, 1920, and Robert B. Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest in America, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.


14 North American Review, Aug. 1917, pp 177-87; see also the passionate editorial in the North American Review War Weekly throughout 1918.

15 See the collected columns in Ralph Brox (ed.), Roosevelt in the Kansas City Star, Baton coats.


19 Kansas City Star, 13 Nov. 1917.

Senator Lodge, the leading Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, attacked a
speech by a senator (or a member of the Lodge family). The speech was praised by the
Lodge family as a masterpiece of oratory.

12 See Lodge to Caesar, 6 Mar. 1919, in James M. Beck, 19 Mar. 1919, Box 50, Lodge Papers.
14 See his discussion with newspaperman Frank Obit, in John L. Hutton (ed.), The World's
homes of Europe which the Hun owned after maiming the inmates.\(^{30}\) In October the New York Times soberly reported that, while events were on a more pacific plane, the Hun soldier seems to be literally true.\(^{31}\) And Harvey's Way Weekly suggested modestly that, "as soldiers who are killing Huns for humanity's sake will experience an exaltation of soul such as the Crusaders knew.\(^{32}\)

In those far-off days before Korea and Vietnam, uninsistent Americans could indulge a Manichean view of the world. To those who saw the struggle in terms of moral absolutes - as the opposition of right against crime - there seemed but one appropriate response to Germany's continued belligerency. The mass-circulation magazine, Outlook, trumpeted in its July issue that the only suitable terms for peace with the Reich were "those which General Grant made immortal unconditional surrender.\(^{33}\) A group of Flint, Michigan, businessmen formed the "Unconditional Surrender Club." Their pledge for an end to the war was a finish against the Central Powers appeared in hundreds of newspapers on 15 August. The National Security League, the League for National Unity, the American Defense Society, the One Hundred Per Cent American Clubs, and the various war-volunteer organizations that had formed at a community level took up the cry. "Unconditional Surrender" buttons appeared in workplaces across the land.\(^{34}\)

On 23 August Henry Cabot Lodge, then the Senate Minority Leader, delivered a carefully crafted foreign-policy address to set off the full election campaign. Lodge targeted national security as the pivotal issue. This could not be achieved through a treaty; for "no treaty is worth the paper it is written on when made with Germany, whom no agreement binds, to whom no signature has meaning and whose pledges are as false as dikes' oaths." A just and righteous peace must rest on a victory won "firmly and thoroughly in German territory," crowned by unconditional surrender, and followed by settlement terms reflecting the "hard physical facts" of Allied preponderance. In a word, "we must go to Berlin and there dictate peace."\(^{35}\)

Lodge's speech received bipartisan acclaim. The New Republic saw the destruction of Germany as the only alternative to a strong League of Nations, but insisted that liberals could not accept that alternative.\(^{36}\) That remained a minority view. The New York Times concluded that, "Mr. Lodge has spoken not merely the voice of a party, but of all Americans, of all the Allied peoples who understand at last what Germany is."\(^{37}\) Lodge wrote with satisfaction to Roosevelt. He trusted the speech would not make it difficult for Wason to betray the United States and the Allies by negotiating a peace with Germany with a view to the German voice in this country.\(^{38}\)

In mid-September the Central Powers' front began to crack. Austria-Hungary proposed a non-binding conversation over principles of peace. Secretary Lansing promptly rejected the offer.\(^{39}\) But release of the exchange prompted a further outpouring of domestic and international press: "Let the Hun whine, let him sing his song of peace and brotherhood," thundered the Cleveland Plain Dealer. "Our answer to his peace twaddle shall be more war." The

30 Missouri in Guard, Jefferson City MO: quoted in Literary Digest, 31 Aug. 1918, p. 33.  
33 Outlook, 24 July 1918, p. 473. As every American schoolboy knew, General S.B. Buckner of the Confederate Army proposed as yield Fort Donelson through his surrender on 18 Feb. 1863. General Ulysses S. Grant replied: "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender."  
34 Outlook, 6 Nov. 1918, p. 330.  
38 Lodge to Roosevelt, 3 Sept. 1918, in Roosevelt-Lodge Correspondence, Vol. 2, p. 558.  
Washington Post invoked the Deity. "Who will dare to stand the execution of the assassin? Who is the man who will try to interfere with God's will as voiced by his people?" Wilson sought to build a barricade against such sentiments in a carefully calibrated address at the Metropolitan Opera House on 27 September. He would make no "haste or capitulation" with the Central Empires. On the other hand, there could be "no discrimination between those to whom we wish to be just and those to whom we do not wish to be just." The majority of the press praised the address, but increasingly ignored his emphasis on the League of Nations and the warnings against self-aggrandizement by other aggressors. The logical purpose of the President's golden words, Harvey's Weekly concluded diologically, was to make clear that our answer to "Dreadful Peace proposals" would be unconditional surrender.

On 6 October the news arrived that Germany was seeking an armistice on the basis of the Fourteen Points and the Metropolitan Opera speech. Not a single national newspaper favored accepting the "Teutonic suggestions." The Baltimore Sun summed up the general reaction: "The fact to be constantly kept in mind is that this is not a war against a nation or a combination of nations, but against a great criminal which has deliberately organised to conquer and plunder the world." In the Senate the next day, Democrats voted with Republicans in sanguinary rhetoric. Senator Ashurst (D-AZ) hoped that our armies would follow "a wide pathway of life and blood from the Rhine to Berlin" and annihilate both the Kaiser and "all of his criminal Junkers." Wilson had initially prepared a mild draft reply to Germany. After reading the transcript of the Senate debate he evidently changed his mind. Colonel House noted that the president had not realized beforehand the nearly unanimous sentiment of the country for unconditional surrender. This had to be taken into account, but not "to the extent of meeting it where it was wrong." Post secretary Joseph Tumulty predicted that the revised reply would appeal to the voice-mind, although the country might not at first accept it with enthusiasm.

The rigid public reaction洗礼ed Tumulty's tempered optimism. Wilson had phrased his reply as an "inquiry" whether the Imperial Chancellor accepted the terms laid down in his addresses and whether he spoke "sincerely" for the heretofore constituted authorities in the Reich. Griten Hitchcock, Senate majority leader, weakly defended this "preliminary answer" as "well calculated to develop the issue." But a swarm of telegrams and resolutions descended on Washington from State Councils of Defense, patriotic leagues, and Chambers of Commerce all over the nation, demanding unconditional surrender.

Undoubtedly the timing proved unfortunate for the administration. With the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign in full swing, lurid features on German barbarities suffused the daily press. A U-boat, hoping to destroy the evidence, machine-painted the wounded on the decks after capsizeing a cargo transport. This further enflamed the public. Secretary of State Lansing vented his frustration in his diary. "On the crest of this wave of passion which is
sweeping the nation rides the malignant Roosevelt, the partisan Lodge, the narrow-minded politician [House Republican leader Frederick H.] Gillett, and all the lesser enemies of the Administration who have been seeking for a chance to bite."

White House spin doctors sought to contain the damage. A source "close to the presidency" reiterated that Wilson aimed to overthrow "our power of influence" and "the vacuum in the country". A second source asserted that Wilson would seek "to dictate military terms, now already demanded, the only things in the country that will stop the war and save democracy".

Senator Cummins (R-Iowa) warned that "we must dictate terms to the Allies". He stated: "The idea of a victory in the war is that the Allies shall be made to accept our terms."

The New York Times, on the other hand, noted: "The president's note, which became available on October 2nd, actually represented a victory for Wilson's diplomacy in Berlin who hoped to strengthen Wilson's hand against the American opposition."

In conclusion, the document emphasizes the strategic importance of Wilson's note and its impact on the diplomatic negotiations. The New York Times, for example, remarked: "The New York Times, on the other hand, noted: "The idea of a victory in the war is that the Allies shall be made to accept our terms.""
on your knees." Wilson, who usually kept his own counsel, felt puzzled enough to consult his cabinet. His special assistant, Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo, backed by a few others, emphasized the financial drain entailed by continuation of the war; otherwise, the President obtained little satisfaction. Secretary of the Interior Lane wanted more recognition of German "freedom" across the Rhine. Postmaster-General Burleson feared that Foch, Italy, and Pershing might prove too brilliant. Wilson's observation that the Allies were "reaching out for more" than they should have in justicefell on insensitive ears.60

Despite these troubles within his official family, the President crafted a reply to Germany that contained enough concessions and obsequiousness to meet both his diplomatic and his political needs. On the one hand, he agreed to transmit the correspondence to the Allied leaders and to invite the generals to submit proposals for an armistice. On the other, he insisted that, if the United States had to coal with "military masters" and "monarchical autocrats," it would demand "not peace negotiations, but surrender."61

Wilson's third reply split the country along party lines. Faced to his highest peak of fury, Roosevelt shot off a public telegram to Congressional leaders: "Let us dictate peace by the hammering guns and set about peace on the accomplishment of the thinking of type-writers." But Democrats breathed easier. Senator Hitchcock interpreted the note as giving the Germans a choice between democratization and terms of peace, or unconditional surrender is they retained "the old form of militaristic government." The New York Times believed that the note implied a "surrender in either case, on either terms."62

Wilson now pressed his advantage with a call for the election of a Democratic Congress. The return of a Republican majority, he said, would be "interpreted on the other side of the water as's repudiation of my policy."63 The Republicans counterattacked. Will Hays, chairman of the Republican National Committee, declared that Wilson stood "for the unconditional surrender to himself of the Republican party, of the country, of the Allies—all to him, as the sole arbiter and master of the destinies of the world." Roosevelt replied that "today" had abandoned his "treacherous make-believe of nonaggression," and senatorial heavyweights signed daily that the idea of peace without victory "remained in the President's mind."64

Somehow, the controversy faded out at the final week before the election. A kaleidoscope of events now followed one another: the dismissal of Lusitaniad, the hastv adoption of parliamentear reforms in Berlin, the collapse of Austria-Hungary, the abrupt surrender of Turkey, Senator Key Pittman (D-NY) made a statement, "not issued without sanction from the White House," to the effect that the war had been "practically won." The German people, he predicted, would bow to Wilson's ultimatum, depose the Hohenzollerns, establish a democracy, and accept terms of armistice as prescribed by Pershing, Haig, and Foch. Only one issue remained. Did the people trust Wilson or Lodge to finish the job?65

We now know that Colonel House played ballast in order to hold the Allied promises in Paris to the White House peace programs. Wilson provided categorical instructions: "My deliberate judgment is that our whole weight should be thrown on armistice that will prevent

a renewal of hostilities by Germany but which will be as moderate and reasonable as possible within those limits, because it is certain that too much success or security on the part of the Allies will make a genuine peace settlement exceedingly difficult.\(^67\) When the premiers declined to endorse the Fourteen Points, House retorted that if they persisted in their objections, he would advise the president to ask the Congress whether the United States should continue to fight for the aims of Britain, France, and Italy. House wired his chief suggesting that he "quietly disinte[gate] the transport of troops" and begin to "shut down upon money, food, and raw materials.\(^68\) Wilson cabled back: "I am proud of the way you are handling things."\(^69\) The Allied premiers executed a strategic retreat and House reported with satisfaction: "I consider that we have won a great diplomatic victory. This has been done in the face of a hostile and influential jinnah in the United States and the thoroughly unsympathetic personnel constituting the Entente governments.\(^70\)

Administration spokesmen provided quite another spin at home. On 31 October the press reported that different points of view had arisen in Paris natural to the immensity of the interests involved, but these had disappeared under friendly examination. By election eve "complete unity and cordiality" were said to prevail.\(^71\) Election Day newspapers printed the domestic terms of the Austrian armistice. Authoritative sources stated that equally categorical terms for Germany would follow. Senator Thomas excited on behalf of the Democratic Congressional campaign concluded: "Who now doubts that the president has at all times required unconditional surrender? Who now dares to challenge his wisdom or his purposes?\(^72\)

The Republicans won the election anyway, not because of differences over strategy for ending the war. In both parties, candidates betraying an insufficiently belligerent temper had lost their footing in the spring primaries. By mid-October, the National Security League could boast that over ninety percent of the candidates answering its loyalty questionnaire had pledged themselves to unconditional surrender.\(^73\) The results at the polls turned instead on a host of economic, social, and sectional issues. Western farmers reminded the fact that the Democratic Congress had fixed a maximum price for wheat while allowing Southern cotton to find its level on the free market. War's suffrage, prohibition, tax policy and the tariff, even the postal zoning laws played a role in local votes.\(^74\) Whatever the explanation, the Republicans would have a two-vote majority in the new Senate and a forty-five seat margin in the House. Senator Lodge would become chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. And Wilson would ignore Republican proposals for peacemaking at his peril. Almost the entire press interpreted theArmistice as tantamount to unconditional surrender. "The utter submission and stripping of the Hun [...] to surrender unexampled in the history of the world\(^75\) - were typical newspaper reports. Peace came, wrote an exultant Theodore Roosevelt, not on Mr. Wilson's Fourteen Points but on General Foch's twenty-odd points, which had the flexibility, the straightforwardness, and the unequivocal clearness which the Fourteen Points so strikingly lacked.\(^76\)

Wilson and his domestic opponents continued to talk at cross-purposes. Underestimating sentiment for a harsh peace, the president expressed a quasi-theological certainty that his critics were cut of touch with the forward-looking states of the world. "There is a great voice..."\(^77\)

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69 Baker, Wilson, p. 556.
71 New York Times, 7 Nov. 1918.
74 Literary Digest, 23 Nov. 1918, p. 121.
75 Kansas City Star, 17 Nov. 1918.
of humanity abroad in the world just now which he who cannot bear in mind Wilson proclaimed upon his return to Europe. We are not obeying the mandates of justice or of policy. We are obeying the mandates of humanity." Lodge begged to differ. He reminded his British friends of pre-selling American opinion and urged them to have no opportunity for Wilson to "play the umpire." Lodge embarked his concrete proposals in a diamictite for Henry White, the single non-partisan member of the American delegation. He favored a large indemnity, a long occupation of Germany as a guarantee of payment, a possible separation of the Reich into its component parts, and the cession not merely of the Corridor but also East Prussia to Poland. The controlling purpose of the peace, urged Lodge, "must be to put Germany in such a position that it will be physically impossible for her to break out again upon other nations with a war for world conquest."

Wilson ignored the new Congress. Lodge would exact his revenge. Yet the issue went beyond personalities. Underlying the whole question of the "Versailles Treaty," Lodge would later write, "is the determination, to put an end to executive encroachments and to reestablish the legislative branch of the government and its proper Constitutional power. Mr. Wilson's comprehension of sovereignty is that of the third Napoleon, an autocrat to be elected by the people through a plebiscite and no representative bodies of any consequence in between." Lodge, despite his animus, was too kind. Like other visionaries before him, Wilson felt as inner necessity that he expressed the general will. He did not simply mold enlightened public opinion; he incorporated it. With an entirely clear conscience, the President secured a negotiated status to the war with Germany against the overwhelming sentiment of his own people. It was a famous victory. It would set the stage for his later reputation.

77 Lodge to Lord ERrns, 14 Nov. and 14 Dec. 1918, Lodge to Sir Arthur Balfour 25 Nov. 1918, Box 50; Lodge to Henry White, 2 Dec. 1918, Box 53, Lodge Papers, see Allen Nevins, Henry White, New York 1930, p. 553 ff.
78 Lodge to Lord Clarendon, 24 Jan. 1920, Box 66, Lodge Papers.
Guido Müller (Hg.)

Deutschland und der Westen

Internationale Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert

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