

Dithering, Dreaming and Speechmaking: Wilson's Strategy During the First World War

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Uncle Sam and former President Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt (the Teddy bear) call the nation to preparedness in the face of rising German propaganda and attacks on American ships in 1917. President Wilson ignored the appeals from Teddy Roosevelt to prepare the nation for war, instead, clinging to the ideals of neutrality and the view of his Secretary of War, Newton Baker, that “to prepare for war violates the terms of neutrality.” Thousands of inexperienced American Soldiers would pay the cost of this unpreparedness in 1918.

The unpreparedness of the United States Army for war on the Western Front was directly linked to the national strategy that Woodrow Wilson charted during his presidency. The high losses of American Soldiers in the Meuse Argonne, for negligible gains, was the harvest of an incoherent and unrealistic policy pursued by President Wilson. Presidential leadership matters in the United States, and shapes the effectiveness and strength of its armed forces. All books on the Meuse Argonne avoid a serious discussion on how US National Strategy, and the decisions made by Wilson between 1914-1918, condemned to death thousands of young American men due to poor training, poor equipment and lack of readiness for the realities of modern war.

Wilson entered presidential politics with foreign affairs far from his mind. After winning the hotly contested 1912 presidential election, Wilson's desire was to transform America domestically. Before being sworn in, he confided to a friend, "It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs."^[1] His words were prophetic, as the fate of nations rested on his shoulders and the decisions he made, shaped our world.

What was President's strategy in the First World War? Wilson's posturing would be considered a National Security Strategy, which the United States Army War College defines as "...the art and science of developing and using the political, military, economic, and informational powers of a nation, during peace and war, to protect and promote national interests."^[2] With this in mind, the focus will be on Wilson's grand strategy, which Paul Kennedy defines as,

The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in policy, that is, in the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.^[3]

Few could predict that the assassination of Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo would trigger a global catastrophe. Yet, the shots fired on that idyllic summer day of June 28, 1914, would lead to the collapse of four dynasties, redraw the borders of vast swaths of Africa, Asia and Europe, and set the conditions for a second and bloodier world war. As the European powers stumbled towards all-out war in the summer of 1914, several of its leaders were vacationing, making the calamity of 1914 seem peculiar, if not the predestined hand of God. Yet, providence was not the reason for this calamity; rather, it was Europe's leaders, who created the complex web of alliances that caused this world war.

As vast armies clashed across Europe, President Wilson delivered a message to Congress on August 19, 1914, where he outlined the American strategy. Wilson declared, "The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action."^[4] Neutrality would be the guiding principle of American strategy for the next three years, hoping that the world would return to the status quo when war ended. Yet Wilson's declaration of neutrality was difficult, if not impossible to maintain. The United States was an exporter of manufactured goods and raw materials to both warring factions in Europe. In this, France and the United Kingdom had the advantage with their Atlantic access and geography. As the war dragged on, and German access to American markets evaporated, how could the United States maintain pure neutrality when its trade gave the British and French an advantage?

By 1915, the European powers were far from achieving their war aims. The French had failed to retake Alsace/Lorraine; the Germans did not capture Paris; the British faced a powerful German Navy; and Russia was stymied in the East. Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, was at a loss on how the neutrality of the United States could shape the outcome of the precarious European War.^[5] As the fighting continued, the Germans sought an alternate way to knock the British out of the war. The German plan was to use submarines (U-Boats) to deprive the UK what it needed to remain in the war. If successful, this would force London to withdraw its support from France and result in victory for Berlin in Europe.

Wilson's grand strategy of maintaining neutrality evolved to include using diplomacy to end the war through American led negotiations.^[6] In effect, the president wanted to "reset" relations with the Germans, French, and British, none of whom were eager to rebuff the credulity of the American proposition. Of the warring parties, Berlin offered the most hope to Wilson's diplomats for a negotiated peace. This, however, had less to do with wanting peace, than that Germany had the advantage, having conquered large sections of France and Belgium. In exasperation, the French Ambassador to the United States, Jean Jules Jusserand, rebuffed American impudence and naivety, saying, "...we would accept [peace]... when the Germans... give us back the lives of our dead ones."^[7]

As President Wilson struggled with how to talk the warring nations out of fighting, he ended up on a collision course with the German Imperial Navy, as the German leadership decided to give their fleet of U-Boats a free hand in sinking merchant vessels in the open seas in hopes of breaking the stalemate on the Western Front. Until March 1915, German U-Boats as a rule did much to ensure that only vessels in violation of law (i.e. carrying goods of war), were attacked. This often included the German U-Boats surfacing and either inspecting a vessel, or allowing its occupants to abandon ship before it was torpedoed. Merchant ships from the belligerent nations eventually took advantage of this German policy by ramming the U-Boats, or firing on them. This, combined with the stagnation on the Western Front, compelled Kaiser Wilhelm to issue orders on April 3, 1915 "...to torpedo [merchant ships] on sight." The German Foreign Office alerted neutral nations of this change in policy.[8] Just a few days before this change in policy, however, a German U-Boat sank the SS *Falaba*, on March 28, 1915 killing American citizen Leon Thrasher.[9] After this, the American ship *Gulflight* was attacked, killing two more Americans. Things came to a head with the sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915. The ship sank so rapidly that 1,195 passengers and crew died, 128 of whom were Americans.[10]

Outrage spread across the United States against Germany. President Wilson was at a crossroads, where the viability of his strategy towards the war was clearly not working. Yet, his only action was to send three diplomatic notes to Berlin, (1) affirming the right of Americans to transit the open seas, (2) the repudiation of the counter-arguments from Germany that the British naval blockade was illegal and finally, (3) any further sinking of ships with Americans on board would be viewed as "deliberately unfriendly" towards the United States.[11]

Despite the loss of American lives, and the attacks on U.S. vessels, Wilson refused to reconsider his strategy. He additionally took no serious action to prepare the nation for war, or to protect its citizens from further loss of life or material. Peace at all costs was his view, and the platform of his Democratic Party. Yet even his mild notes were too much for some of his Cabinet. So incensed was William Jennings Bryan over the harsh tone Wilson used in the second note to the Kaiser, that he resigned as Secretary of State. Bryan wanted a truly neutral approach to the situation. As he considered the starvation of the German people by the British naval blockade, he rebuffed Wilson and said, "why be so shocked by the drowning of a few people, if there is to be no objection to starving a nation." [12] Yet, the tone of Wilson's note from any perspective was not hostile or threatening. This, however, betrays the state of Wilson's Party and his administration that kept America weak and unprepared. Just three days after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Wilson gave his "Too proud to fight speech," where with inconceivable detachment from reality, he proclaimed, "The example of America must be the example not merely of peace because it will not fight, but of peace because peace is the healing and elevating influence of the world and strife is not. There is such a thing as a man being so right it does not need to convince others by force that it is right." [13]

This speech declared that Wilson's strategy towards the First World War remained unchanged. Thus, in 1916, as the war entered its second and bloodiest year, the credibility and power of the United States was tarnished by inaction and dithering. Indeed Wilson and his political party stood for "peace at almost any price." Newton D. Baker, the new Secretary of War, declared in 1916, "I am a pacifist. I am a pacifist in my hope; I am a pacifist in my prayers; I am a pacifist in my belief..." [14] History would judge that neither Bryan nor Baker could see beyond their ideology to grasp how dangerous and detached the American strategy had become. Indeed, they refused to believe that not all people were as good intentioned or as well meaning, as they believed themselves to be. Meanwhile, as Baker pontificated on his opinions on pacifism and peace, millions of men were perishing along the Western Front.

In the face of German submarine warfare, and the inability to secure a mediated peace, the "reset" had failed. Yet, the Wilson Administration would try to talk the belligerents out of fighting. President Wilson clung to the idea that he could, through high-minded speeches, cleverly crafted diplomatic letters and by appealing to the logic of learned men, negotiate an end to the calamitous war. The focus of Wilson's energies for the next year would be to find a way to end the war via American arbitration.

1916 was a presidential election year, and with reelection his primary focus, Wilson's approach to the Great War did not change.[15] The Democratic party invoked the slogan, "He kept us out of the war," [16] and during the 1916

Convention, Wilson pledged to keep the nation neutral, and lambasted his Republican rivals as amateurs when it came to foreign affairs.[17] It was he, an enlightened leader of an enlightened party, who would lead the nation into a “new age.”[18]

Despite regurgitating the oft-repeated lines regarding neutrality, it was evident in 1916 that the war would forever change Europe. Because of this realization, Wilson's vision for the post World War World began to modify. In a speech delivered to the League to Enforce Peace, Wilson called for international institutions to prevent such a calamity from occurring again. This idea would become the basis for the League of Nations. Wilson went on to list three fundamentals that would forever change the old international order. His first fundamental attacked colonialism and declared the right for all people “to choose the sovereignty under which they live” (self-determination). Wilson's second fundamental, influenced by the tragic situation in Belgium, asserted that all nations, small or large, have the right to territorial integrity. His third fundamental was that the world should live in freedom and peace.[19] This final idea hinted that only a democratic (republican) form of government could make this possible. The relevance of Wilson's calling for a new international order, and his three guiding principles should not be lost to the reader, as these were key concepts for the Clinton and two Bush administrations in 1990-2008.[20]

Yet, Wilson seemed less in touch with reality in the months leading up to America's entry into war in April 1917. Relying upon lofty speeches, and high-minded expression, Wilson spoke of achieving “peace without victory.”[21] The hollowness of his profound rhetoric was mere background noise to the now exhausted and bloodied participants of the war. He pontificated how a peaceful future would include a new balance of power, with cooperation among the nations to maintain peace, freedom of the seas (and freedom of trade) and a new birth of freedom and justice (democracy) around the world.[22]

The lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, the reality of the war would soon crash upon the United States. In an endeavor to break the British, Kaiser Wilhelm ordered unrestricted submarine warfare to resume on February 1, 1917. As more than 100 German U-Boats sank half a million tons of shipping in just twenty-eight days, Wilson was compelled to sever diplomatic ties with Berlin.[23] Yet, beyond this, Wilson dithered on how to respond. Further complicating matters for him, the British released an intelligence intercept in which German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann, pledged support for Mexico if they attacked the United States.[24] This, combined with the effects of the unrestricted submarine warfare was too much for the United States. Facing overwhelming public pressure, Wilson acquiesced. On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare a state of war against Germany.[25]

Wilson's war speech was a dramatic turn when he called for the nation to defeat the German Empire. This would encompass mobilizing the nation for war and rapidly expanding the army and navy. The goals that he laid out in this wartime strategy included upholding his three principles, world peace, liberation of the oppressed peoples and creating a partnership of democratic nations to ensure the peace in the future (which he would later call the League of Nations), so that, “The world must be made safe for democracy.”[26]

Despite the declaration, the United States Army was not ready to fight a modern war. The American Army in April 1917 encompassed barely 220,000 men, smaller than the 1914 Belgian Army. To compound matters, the United States Army only had experience and doctrine for fighting small counter insurgency wars. Yet, this small force would expand to more than 4 million. Two million of these would serve in Europe by the end of the war. Raising the manpower to create a large army was only part of the challenge. The equipping, training and readiness of this large army required *time*.

As the Americans belatedly mobilized for war, there was a crisis in Europe. British manpower was weakening, a portion of the French Army mutinied and Russia fell to a revolution. In the midst of this, the Americans needed a year to get a substantial force to France and it seemed that it would be too late. With the French down, and the Russians out, Germany seized upon the opportunity. During the winter of 1917-1918, a million German soldiers moved from the Eastern Front and launched five large offensives on the Western Front to knock the British and French out of the war before enough Americans arrived to make a difference. The German gamble nearly succeeded.[27]

Meanwhile, after declaring war, Woodrow Wilson appointed General John J. Pershing to lead the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). In their only meeting during the war, General Pershing and the Secretary of War (Newton Baker), met with President Wilson on May 24, 1917. President Wilson delegated considerable discretion to Pershing in the organization and operations of the AEF.[28]

As the AEF hastily prepared for war, Wilson outlined his wartime grand strategy in January 1918 in a speech dubbed “The Fourteen Points.” Thus was borne the ideals of Wilsonianism.[29] The key concepts in this revolutionary vision for the future encompassed five basic fundamentals, which some have referred to as “Liberal Imperialism;”[30]

1. Democratic states provide peace and stability
2. Free trade key to global prosperity
3. International laws and international institutions are essential to maintain order, peace and security
4. Collective security as must to maintain peace
5. The United States is “chosen” to lead this new world order.[31]

These emerged as foundational principles of how the United States would interact with the world, during the negotiations at Versailles in 1919 and especially after the Second World War. However, there were still eleven months of fighting before Wilson would see his ideas considered.

Of all the requirements to build and deploy this new and massive AEF, the most difficult task was to maintain an independent American Army. The Allies pressured, and at times, threatened Pershing to amalgamate their forces into existing British and French military formations. From a pragmatic perspective, this made sense. With amalgamation, the Americans could enter combat rapidly, serving with experienced units and leaders. Additionally, it seemed that the Allies might actually lose the war when the Germans unleashed their powerful spring 1918 offensives.[32] Pershing allowed a temporary/emergency assignment of American units to French and British command, but once the crisis of 1918 ended; he demanded a return of his forces to the AEF.

With the Germans culminating on the Western Front in July 1918, the Allied Supreme Commander (Generalissimo) Ferdinand Foch, summoned Pershing, the British and French Army leaders (Haig and Petain respectively) to his headquarters on July 24, 1918. Foch intimated that the Allies should take the initiative and launch a series of attacks against the Germans. The assembled leaders at first balked at the idea, but in the end, Foch won them over. The Allied and Associated Power (the USA) would launch a massive counteroffensive in September 1918.[33] This attack began on September 26, 1918 with a large Franco-American attack in the Meuse Argonne Region of France, which was followed by the other armies across the Western Front. The war would end in forty-six days, with the Americans pouring more than 1.2 million men into the fight, and holding more of the front than any nation, except France. Although late for the war, the United States earned a prominent seat at the peace talks in 1919.

When the First World War ended on the 11th hour, on the 11th day, of the 11th month of 1918, the United States emerged as a powerful force in the world. Although Woodrow Wilson entered the peace talks at Versailles with hopes of creating a new world order, it was not to be. The European victors wanted to punish Germany for the war, even as they carved up the Middle East and elsewhere to dominate. It would take a Second World War before many of Wilson's goals, and strategy would be realized.

Yet, the lack of military preparedness under the Wilson Administration was his greatest blunder. His desire for peace was noble, but as it became increasingly clear that war would eventually reach America's shores, he did nothing. In the end, the United States generated a large fighting force, but the cost came at a high price, when untrained and ill-equipped men died fighting a seasoned and modern German Army.[34] Thus is the price of unpreparedness. As Richard Striner put it:

Woodrow Wilson's self-destruction as a wartime leader started early: the mistakes that would make him his own worst enemy began... at the beginning of World War I... Wilson sank into a mental condition that rendered him incapable of strategy. However wise his decisions might have seemed at the time to some, he made his first major blunders right away.[35]

The strategy and approach of President Wilson is worthy of contemplation as there are lessons for us to ponder today. Indeed, historians have a laboratory; it is called the past. The efficacy of studying history is to understand the past, to, hopefully, create a better, if not, a more informed future. As the well-known philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." [36] People across history faced similar challenges and decisions; and their action or inaction, shaped the world in which we live today. As a writer in a 19th Century book wrote,

The vision recurs; the eastern sun has a second rise; history repeats her tale unconsciously, and goes off into a mystic rhyme; ages are prototypes of other ages, and the winding course of time brings us round to the same spot again.[37]

The lessons of Wilson's strategy in the First World War echoes across the generations to us today, 100 years later. Long and articulate speeches are no replacement for preparedness and action. Dithering and indecision is a poor excuse for a coherent strategy. America experimented with a reset of relations, and leading from behind during the First World War, and it proved disastrous.

As the world commemorates the centennial of the most catastrophic year of the First World War, it seems that there are eerie similarities to today. The wise would look to the past to avoid the mistakes of the past. The loss of lives in the Meuse Argonne Campaign was merely the result of an incoherent and incomprehensible Wilson strategy. The cost of such blunders, as demonstrated by President Wilson approach in the First World War, is too costly to contemplate.

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[3] Paul Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1991), 5.

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[5] Letter from Sir Cecil Spring-Rice to Sir Arthur Nicolson, concerning William Jennings Bryan's Opinion of the Great War, November 13, 1914. Available online at the following website: http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Letter_Concerning_William_Jennings_Bryan's_Opinion_of_the_Great_War (accessed 25 March 2016).

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- [13] Woodrow Wilson, "Americanism and the Foreign Born" May 10, 1915. Available online at the following site: <http://www.rmslusitania.info/primary-docs/too-proud-to-fight/> (accessed 25 March 2016).
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