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## The end of Wilsonian idealism

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

The optimism, the enthusiasm, the breathless naivete: To reread Woodrow Wilson's canonic "[Fourteen Points](#)" speech, given to a joint session of Congress on Jan. 8, 1918 — 100 years ago — is to enter a world that no longer exists. Particularly when read alongside the [speech](#) Wilson made the previous year — the one arguing that the United States should enter World War I to make the world "safe for democracy" — the language almost shocks, especially compared with the rhetoric preferred by the White House's current inhabitant.

In 1917, Wilson had called for the creation of an alliance, the world's first to be based on democratic principles: He wanted the "free and self-governed peoples of the world" to oppose "selfish and autocratic power." In 1918, he imagined a Europe without empires, a world in which "conquest and aggrandizement" had given way to open diplomacy, safe navigation and "the removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions." Wilson also imagined a "general association of nations" that would offer "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike."

Even the most amateur student of history knows what happened next. Wilson's Fourteen Points raised skeptical eyebrows in Europe (the French prime minister allegedly [muttered](#) that "even the good Lord had only 10" points). His offer of friendship to "the German people," as opposed to the Prussian aristocracy, was ignored by the authors of the subsequent Versailles peace treaty, who demanded punitive German reparations instead. Free trade was replaced by tariff barriers; Wilson's "general association of nations" became the League of Nations, which the United States never joined and which failed spectacularly. The new nations of Europe fought bitterly over their new borders, Germany and Russia sought to reconquer their old colonies and a new world war broke out two decades later.

But take a longer view, and that speech looks rather different. A century has passed, and we now find ourselves living in a thoroughly Wilsonian world. Ideas that were dismissed as far-fetched and even silly in 1918 have become reality. We really have lifted many barriers to trade and commerce; the continent of Europe really is composed of nation-states that determine, more or less, their own fate, and the same is true at least some of the time on other continents, too. Many conflicts really are resolved by open diplomacy instead of secret treaties. Multiple "associations of nations" really do operate in different spheres and on different continents, helping to smooth international relations.

For the moment, U.S. diplomacy and even the U.S. military are operating within a Wilsonian framework, too. “For our own part,” Wilson declared in January 1918, “we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The program of the world’s peace, therefore, is our program.” At least in theory, American soldiers and civil servants are not in the business of pursuing “conquest and aggrandizement” for their own sake. Their ultimate aim, whatever the policies of the moment, really is “the world’s peace” — or, to translate into less embarrassing language, a world in which genocide and mass murder are reduced to a minimum, in which prosperity and democracy are on the rise, in which Americans can travel and do business according to predictable rules.

Although there are plenty of thinkers and diplomats who like to juxtapose “realism” to Wilsonian idealism, the truth is that even the most hard-eyed Americans now operate in a Wilsonian world, too. They might talk about balances of power and national interests, and they might use less starry-eyed language than the 28th president, but few of them are arguing, say, in favor of colonizing Mexico or stealing land from Canada. In 1918, both the maintenance of foreign colonies and territorial expansion were “normal” foreign policy goals, pursued by pretty much everyone who could afford them. Now they are unthinkable, at least among the “free and self-governed peoples” of the West.

The true challenge to Wilsonian thinking is now coming from quite a different quarter: not from the “realists,” but from the cynics — from the people, that is, who believe that foreign policy, like all policy, is about accruing personal advantage to the politicians involved. The Kushners and the Trumps, who conduct foreign policy while still maintaining business interests in the countries they visit; or Vladimir Putin, who wages war abroad in order to maintain a heightened state of fear and frenzy at home. Their arrival on the world stage may very well spell the end of a century’s worth of idealism. It’s not that they don’t agree with Wilson’s intentions; it’s that they don’t even comprehend them.