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**Woodrow Wilson**

Woodrow Wilson was one of the finest presidents the United States has ever had. He regarded himself as a personal representative of the people and was known to hold the belief that no one but the president seemed to be expected to look out for the general interest of the country (whitehouse.gov). Wilson took this view and used it to strengthen the role of the executive branch while in office and faced one of the most difficult times in United States history, World War I. Woodrow Wilson took the United States into war and came out victorious, and afterwards was a key creator of the league of nations, which unfortunately he failed to put into action, at least in the United States. Wilson also was one of the first Americans to focus on public administration and helped strengthen the power of the presidency with his work in this area. However first to understand these accomplishments one must look at his earlier life and see what impacts this may have had on his role as president.

**Rise to the Presidency**

Starting at the beginning Woodrow Wilson was born in Virginia in 1856 to his Father Joseph Wilson and his Mother Janet Wilson. He would primarily be raised in Georgia and South Carolina and some of his earliest memories included the end of the civil war, he stood and watched as Union soldiers marched into town, he saw his mother tend to Confederate soldiers in the local hospitals, he witnessed General Robert E. Lee pass through town after his surrender at Appomattox Court House, and he was there to witness the process of reconstruction (American President: Woodrow Wilson). So Woodrow was not unaccustomed to the effects of war, he witnessed first-hand the poverty and devastation that War can cause. Due to the destruction of the Civil War much of his earlier education would be done at home by his father until he entered Princeton in 1875, then known as the College of New Jersey and would soon graduate in 1879. Later on Wilson had a brief stint in Law School at the University of Virginia but would mostly study on his own until he passed the Georgia bar exam. He would then become a lawyer until he found the career boring and pursued a doctorate in history and Political Science at John Hopkins University. From there Woodrow Wilson pursued an academic career as a professor at the universities of Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan, and Princeton and would become president of Princeton in 1902. While at Princeton his efforts to reform the University gained him the attention of the New Jersey Democrats who would approach him to run for governor of the state.

Woodrow Wilson was willing to accept the bid to run for governor under one condition, that there would be “no strings attached.” The party at the time was looking for an honest leader who could win back democratic voters and they believed that Wilson could do just that. However they were also looking for someone that they could easily control and they believed that as a college professor he would be politically “naïve”. Wilson became a first ballot nominee and immediately surprised professional politicians by going against the norm and distancing himself from party bosses (American President: Woodrow Wilson). Wilson went on to win in the general election over his republican counterpart and quickly went to work on reforming New Jersey. First up was the machine politics. In only two years Wilson made it so candidates must run more open campaigns by forcing them to file financial statements relevant to the campaign. He limited campaign expenditures and banned corporate contributions outright to political campaigns. Additionally, Wilson was a strong advocate of a public utility commission who would be in charge of setting utility rates and also supported a workers compensation law that would enable the families of workers who had been killed or injured on the job to receive benefits (American President: Woodrow Wilson). He accomplished all of this by 1911 and had caught the eye of the nation’s progressive leaders and in 1912 he was nominated for the Democratic Party representative for President of the United States of America.

In the party convention of 1912 Woodrow Wilson managed to win but it was no easy victory. The party was quite divided. Champ Clark of Missouri, Oscar Underwood of Alabama, Judson Harmon of Ohio and William Jennings Bryan along with Woodrow Wilson were all possible candidates. In fact it took forty-six different ballots to have Wilson nominated and his nomination only happened after a deal to make Thomas Marshall of Indiana the Vice President. As the presidential candidate Wilson ran on his New Freedom program, which had a strong emphasis on individualism and states’ rights. Some of the individual campaign claims according to American President: Woodrow Wilson included “limits on campaign contributions by corporations, tariffs reductions, new and stronger antitrust laws, banking and currency reform, a federal income tax, direct election of senators, a single term presidency, and the independence of the Philippines.” He also differed from Theodore Roosevelt and no longer just wanted to put strict restrictions on monopolies but wanted to break them up altogether, by claiming they were all harmful to the nation.

Lucky for Wilson at the time he was facing a divided Republican Party who had previously been the majority party since the 1890s, which allowed him to win the Presidential Election. He only managed to win 42% of the popular vote, but he was the overwhelming favorite in the electoral vote. Without this divide Wilson may not have become president in the first place. However, Wilson always held a Presbyterian’s confidence that God had guided his way to victory.

In office, Wilson strove to install tariff reduction, reform of the banking and monetary system, and new laws to weaken abusive corporations and restore economic competition. He also continued to push for his New Freedom agenda that he campaigned for, and he was able to enact three crucial pieces of legislation, the Underwood act, Federal Reserve act that was the foundation to today’s current system, and Federal Trade Commission. As the 1916 election came nearer a few more pieces of legislation that dealt with railroad workers workdays and child labor was enough to win him reelection along with the slogan “He kept us out of War”.

In his second term he unfortunately had to go against his campaign and urged Congress in 1917 to declare war on Germany, which brought America into the War. The United States’ effort not only overseas but also at home was the turning point in the war and it soon came to an end. The Fourteen points that Wilson had presented to Congress in 1918 was an interest to create “A general association of nations” that would “[afford] mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” (Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points, 1918). In his travels to France when the Versailles Treaty was written Wilson did just that, he created what would become known the League of Nations. The problem is that Congress never enacted the League of Nations so the United States never became a member. Often academics in the field of International Relations look at this as one of the major cause of World War II. A strong international body with the ability to solve disputes could have been created; unfortunately the failure of the United States to join caused the League of Nations to lose a lot of its credibility and it was never able to live up to its potential.

During Wilson’s attempt to get the League of Nations enacted Wilson unfortunately suffered a stroke that left him broken for the rest of his term. He would eventually leave office in 1921 and would retire to a house he owned in Washington DC. He would attempt to create a Law partnership with his former secretary of state that would eventually dissolve. Wilson lived out the rest of his life silently until he died in 1924.

Quiet clearly Woodrow Wilson was a fantastic president and had a quick and monumental rise to power going from a professor to the president of Princeton, to Governor of New Jersey then finally to the President of the United States. However some areas of his life have only been briefly covered or overlooked altogether in this quick biography and these are areas that deserve too much attention to fit in neatly. For example his written work on public administration entitled “The Study of Administration” has played a huge role on the power of the Presidency moving forward. Also World War I was a monumental event in not only United States but also World history so much so that it deserves to further attention. Finally Wilson’s work on the League of Nations if successful could have possibly prevented World War II. So now some time will be spent going back and looking in depth into these different areas.

**A Study of Administration**

In November of 1886, Wilson published his article “The Study of Administration” which was one of the most influential works on public administration in the United States. Wilson had a strong belief that it is harder to run a constitution than to frame one (The Study of Administration). This is a powerful statement and the reason for this according to Wilson is that the field of Public Administration is made more complicated than it needs to be. Wilson attempted to explain public administration but also he tried to simplify it.

“Administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action; it is the executive, the operative, the most visible side of government, and is of course as old as government itself.” (The Study of Administration). Wilson obviously thinks quite highly of public administration but there is one part in that quote that really stands out as dealing with the president, “[…] it is the executive,”. This phrase right here helped to revolutionize the presidency, as we know it. Up until this point the president or the executive branch dealt with some parts of public administration while other parts were dealt with by the legislative. This however would lead to an attempt to bring efficiency into public administration and would greatly strengthen the presidency because powers would soon be moved into the hands of the executive branch. The reason for this is because it is far easier and more efficient to have one man in charge of these tasks than the larger bodies of congress. In the years following Wilson’s times in office you would begin to see a shift of power when dealing with public administration from the legislative to the executive. The founder’s fear towards a strong executive was beginning to fade in the United States and Wilson used this to help argue why it was imperative to begin the process of moving powers and responsibilities from the legislative to the executive.

One of the things that Wilson was arguing for was to make government affairs more business-like; to do this Wilson stated that government needed to draw on some of the other teachings of public administration such as works of Max Weber and Frederick Taylor. Wilson wanted to implement the whole top down effect that most business models strive on with a powerful executive on top that then trickles down to the street level employees. Wilson emphasized that public administration lay outside of politics. (The Study of Administration). In saying this Wilson also argued that not only should the executive be placed in charge but that also party loyalties should be left out of the issue of public administration. This meant that jobs should be issued on merit rather than through the spoils system. To him this is the only way that the country could function and after all Wilson was trying to prove himself wrong and show through his work that the constitution can be run successfully and efficiently.

Wilson’s work on public administration may have been one of his most influential works given to the American people, however it is not what he is best known for. Wilson was President during one of the most challenging times in United States History, the first World War, and his work during this time and after is what he will forever be known for. From the time we entered the war and his fourteen points, to his attempts to have the United States sign the Versailles Treaty and join the League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson was one of the most influential actors in World War I.

**World War I and The League of Nations**

In 1915 with the sinking of the Lusitania by German U-Boats where 128 Americans died you can see American attitude towards the war change. However it wasn’t until 1917 when Congress declared war, due to Germans resuming the use of submarine warfare against American vessels and the interception of the Zimmerman telegram. With war officially declared the American people moved into action, industrial production increased by twenty percent and began buying Liberty Bonds to help pay for the war. In terms of Military Congress then passed the Selective Service Act and nearly 2.8 million men were drafted into the army. With fresh new American troops the Allied forces were able to go on the offensive and by November of 1918 the German army was asking for an Armistice.

One of Woodrow Wilson’s goals with the war was to keep the eventual peace talks open and honest, to do just that Wilson presented his fourteen points to congress about his aims for the war. In it Wilson made statements that emphasized that the United States was not looking for benefits for themselves but wanted to create a world that would be safe and fit for all to live in. (14 points). To do just that Wilson outlined in the various points such claims as having “open covenants in peace,” or freedom to navigate upon the open seas, the removal of economic barriers, and most importantly a general association of nations. These fourteen points would be the start of what would later become the League of Nations.   
 In 1918 when Wilson headed to France to officially talk peace, in doing so he became the first president in office to travel to Europe, he kept his fourteen points in mind. However the leaders of the allied forces along with the people of Europe were in no mood to listen to most of what Wilson had to say and were more interested in punishing Germany. He ended up having to negotiate on most of what he wanted but was able to compromise and keep his League of Nations. The outcome of the negotiations was the Treaty of Versailles, which imposed harsh terms on Germany and looked little like Wilson’s original aim.

Wilson’s goals for free trade and safe navigation of the sea were not the highest priority for the European leaders. The leaders of Britain, France, and Italy had suffered much more during the war than the United States and had witnessed the destruction first hand. These leaders were out to punish Germany. The terms of the Versailles Treaty included: Germany surrendering the territory they had taken in Europe, they had to surrender all of their colonies as well as the demilitarization of the Rhineland, but the most egregious to the German people was the fact that they were forced to take sole responsibility for initiating the war because of this they were held responsible to repay the damages of the war (United States Holocaust Museum). These terms failed to take into account some of Wilson’s main goals with the Fourteen points and instead placed harsh penalties on Germany and these penalties are often accredited as a reason for World War II.

Woodrow Wilson may not have believed that this treaty was the best possible outcome, but he believed that it was far better than anything Britain and France would come up with if left to their own devices. So Wilson toured the country and personally tried to win support for the treaty in hopes of having it passed by Congress. Unfortunately on the road Wilson collapsed out of exhaustion and a few days later he suffered a stroke. He was never able to get the American people or Congress behind it.

Woodrow Wilson is one of the best presidents that the United States has ever had. His work on public administration has greatly strengthened the presidency and has helped the government to run more smoothly and in a more business-like manner. Also his efforts during World War I and post World War I came during some of the most difficult times in American history should be commended because he attempted to set up a system that might have brought peace to an area that has been ravaged by war for centuries. He enjoyed a rapid rise in power that led him all the way to the highest position in the United States, the presidency and while there, through his example, he helped guide future presidents to this day.

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