

# ***Internationalism, Isolationism, and Racism: What Woodrow Wilson Inherited from Thomas Jefferson in the 14 Points***

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**Abstract:** Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson are influential American political figures who are famous for the succession and development of Jeffersonianism. Through Jeffersonian liberalism and textual analysis of the *14 Points* by Woodrow Wilson, the paper finds that *14 Points* expand American politics from domestic affairs to international political (covenants and open diplomacy), economic (freedom to navigate of all time), military (reduction of armaments), moral and cultural (national self-determinism all over the globe) issues, through the League of Nations as a way to isolate itself from European order and alliances. Besides, the colonies are excluded from independence despite some equal treatment. Expansionism, isolationism and racism are what Wilson inherited from Thomas Jefferson.

**Keywords:** Woodrow Wilson, the *14 Points*, Jeffersonianism

## **1. Introduction**

Currently, the studies on Woodrow Wilson are centered on his political science and the League of Nations, less on *14 Points*. There is research on the background, content analysis, failure causes, and legacies of *14 Points*. However, the investigations on the contents of 14 points are mostly post-colonial at the turn of the 21st century, taking it as an epitome of isolationism and open-door policy, with an aim of American leadership globally. [1] The critiques on 14 points are based on his vision privileging the ethnic nation-state above all forms of political organization in the peace conference, stifling freedom of Ireland, India, and Japanese-occupied Shandong.[2] Still, pragmatism is another perspective for 14 points whose incentive was dealing with practical problems during World War I. [3] Wilson was forced to make the decision under the pressure of the U.K. and France, and the League fitted American national interests. [3][4] Thirdly, national self-determination is utilized for *14 Points*, referring to “the right of any community to develop self-governing capacities through experience in public debate and experiments in cooperative action”. [2] Self-government--representative government giving collective identity as a union of free and interdependent individuals of common interests, Christianity, democracy, nationality and the organic state were Wilsonian ingredients of national self-determination in *14 Points*. [2] According to the literature, interventionist national government and isolationism reconcile in Wilsonian doctrine confronted with WWI. However, the aforementioned perspectives are not enough for understanding fourteen points since Jeffersonian heritage and Hamiltonian interventionism are influential in the formation of Wilsonian thoughts. The relationship between isolationism and the founding of the League has been elaborated, but the relation

between interventionism and the position of the League in the international platform is understudied. Hence, taking Jeffersonian liberalism as the perspective, the paper is divided into five parts: Jeffersonian liberalism, the origins of 14 points, the historical background of fourteen points, the analysis of fourteen points, and limitation and contributions of fourteen points.

## 2. Jeffersonian Liberalism

First of all, Jeffersonian liberalism is different from Locke's theory of natural rights. Instead of viewing property rights as inalienable rights, Jefferson views the right to pursue happiness as the priority. He holds that a democratic republic should support the right of pursuing happiness economically. That is, the republic is supposed to safeguard the rights of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.[5] Then, expansionism and isolationism were closely intertwined and complementary in Jefferson's diplomatic thought, both serving his missionary, democratic, and agrarian ideals to consolidate American independence, democratic-republican institutions, and the liberties of the people. His isolationism was not opposed to all forms of alliance, but at special times temporarily ally with others according to the interests.[6]

Wilson inherits Jeffersonian expansionism and isolation, as the League of Nations resume the avoidance of alliances and isolation from Europe, which is the most prominent feature of the *14 Points*. The same as Wilson, Jefferson's racism is criticized in his policies. Just as Wilson views American whites as the exceptionalism "chosen ones," Jefferson's sense of racial superiority and religious mission and the resulting coercion of other people. No matter how much Jefferson glorified his policy of "enlightenment" and the resulting idea of forcing other peoples to come closer to his own his sense of racial superiority and religious mission, and the resulting idea of forcing other races to come closer to his own in an attempt to eliminate heterogeneous cultures. The implementation of the expansive policy is the external manifestation and result of this expansive ideology on the Indians.[7]

## 3. Origins of Wilsonian *14 Points*

Christianity, exceptionalism and a sense of mission form Jeffersonianism in *14 Points*, isolationism and internationalism in Wilsonian foreign tradition.

Wilsonian-ism originates from a priestly family where parents grew up under the Presbyterian church as Scottish descendants, as partners abiding Christian faith.[8] Wilson believed that the evil in human nature could be transformed through faith in God and Christian doctrine.[9] While Wilson was young, his family was under the influence of the Civil War, for his father joined the Confederate States of America and made his church a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers where he witnessed the cruelty of wars.[9] His childhood made him a firm believer in peace-lover and religious scholar. However, the Lost Cause of the White South and the scars of the Civil War combined with Christian faith made him believe that northerners were putting Southern Whites "under the heel of the Black South".[10] Thus, his political ideas are intertwined with White supremacy and racial nationalism.

Other important sources are exceptionalism and a sense of mission. American exceptionalism convinced him that God's "chosen" people had a "special mission" for the development of humanity and society, and that the United States had an obligation to spread the values of democracy and equality around the globe. At the same time, the ultimate purpose of the mission is to help other countries build a new world of democracy and freedom by the name of God.[11] They developed Wilson's treatment of isolationism, avoidance of entangling with an alliance, and internationalism, the third force interfering with wars, mixing multilateralism and unilateralism, legality and morality.[12]

#### 4. Historical Background for 14 Points

During Wilson's presidency, WWI was in full swing and the U.S. was the biggest beneficiary globally. The war expanded U.S. markets in China, South America, and Europe, making it the world's largest creditor and exporter of capital. However, the disparities in U.S. economic power and military strength that enabled it to realize its post-war expansion plans required policies that would allow the U.S. to reap the benefits of open-door-ism and a peaceful world order. [13]

After the October Revolution, the Soviet Union announced to the world the Decree on Peace, which ended the war without cession of land or reparations, and proclaimed the abolition of secret diplomacy and of all the secret treaties concluded by the Provisional Government. The *14 Points* was Wilson's declaration for going to war in the wake of the citizens' opposition to the war after the October Revolution. Their emphasizing the development of colonies based on the principle of the open door and the establishment of a new post-war peace order under the leadership of the League of Nations were intended to rectify US-Japan diplomatic blunders and to integrate the Far East issue into the global strategy for a unified solution.[13]

On the 2nd of April, 1917, Wilson called for a declaration of war against Germany to disguise the true purpose of the United States to become the arbiter of international affairs after the war. On April 4 and 6, the United States officially entered the war.[1]

During World War I, the United States has largely stayed out of the European secret diplomacy camp except with Japan on the Asia-Pacific issue, and thus secret diplomacy is the main target of the U.S. *14 Points* attack. Secondly, as a neutral country, the United States suffered trade losses with the Allies in the maritime realm, so guaranteeing freedom of navigation was also an important element of the U.S. *14 Points*. In addition, due to the two economic crises in the early 20th century, the imperialist powers transferred the crises through the tariff protection policy, reducing commodity prices, low-interest loans and other trade protection means to squeeze into each other's domain, to seize the market and raw materials. Suffered greatly, the U.S. would like to call for the elimination of trade barriers, to promote the "opening-door" policy, so as to realize trade equality and equal benefit. Finally, the disastrous consequences of the arms race were fully realized in World War I, which made Wilson want to ensure "collective security" and arms reduction through the League of Nations.[1]

#### 5. Analysis of 14 Points from Jeffersonian Liberalism

Of all points, the first to five points centers on the new international order, the sixth points on the Russian issue after the October Revolution, the seventh to thirteenth points on national territorial sovereignty, and the fourteenth point on the League of Nations aiming at guaranteeing the political independence and territorial integrity of countries large and small alike.

The first point stresses "open covenants of peace" and no "private international understanding". According to Wilson, the highlight is "no more secret treaties". [13] Based on the past international order based on European secret covenants, the U.S. did not enjoy the benefits from colonies due to the secret covenants of Europe. Hence, one of the biggest obstacles for the U.S. was to eliminate the existing and potential secret covenants. The strategy of Wilson was consistent with Jeffersonian liberalism, which means isolating from existing order represented by secret covenants and having foreign relationships with countries through open diplomacy. The inherited Jeffersonianism expands American political policies to international relations, as well as isolating from alliance relationships based on secret covenants. The first point expands the American political area to international affairs. However, the avoidance of secret covenants serves for a new international order of colonies, instead of seeking global equality. Hence, the ethnic ideology of Wilsonian fourteen points is not different from Jeffersonian racism.

The second point highlights “absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas,” in peace and in war. In his interpretation, the root of WWI is Germany’s jealousy of the British Navy. Towards it, Wilson suggests s Conference “revise international law and particularly International Maritime Laws”. Another perspective of the second point is Wilson’s anger on U.S. rights as a neutral nation violated by belligerents in international trade and citizen security.[1] Hence, in Wilson’s opinion, the absolute freedom of navigation of all time is intertwined with citizens’ happiness and security. In Jeffersonian liberalism, citizens’ happiness is the ultimate goal of a republic. The second point takes Jeffersonian liberalism as the basis and extends it to the international dimension, which is also the combination of isolationism and expansionism.

The third point calls for the “removal of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions.” It means not only equal trade opportunities for all nations but unified regulations from the League of Nations.[13] The impeded navigation upon the sea, and economic barriers have posed challenges to American foreign trade, which got prominent during the First World War. Hence, “open-door” policies were necessary for the U.S. to obtain more benefits in the new international order. Since the old European order protected imperial nations’ interests and damaged American benefits, the removal of economic barriers and equal trade conditions should benefit American foreign trade and protect citizens’ well-being, which is relevant to Jeffersonian democracy. The point shows the economic expansion in Wilsonianism, connecting Jeffersonian liberalism with Wilsonian internationalism.

The fourth point requires the reduction of armaments “to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety”. The point echoes the armament race between German and Great Britain and the subsequent wars. Hence, consistent with Jeffersonianism, for American foreign trade and navigating security, and for citizens’ happiness and prosperity, armaments reduction is of significance.

The fifth point resorts to “a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims,” being in the charge of trusted institutions such as the League of Nations. The First World War broke out because imperialist countries wanted to redive colonies through wars and covenants, including the U.S. However, inherited Jeffersonian liberalism prompted Wilson to safeguard colonial people’s willingness despite ethnic ideology. Hence, in the fifth point, he added “the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable government whose title is to be determined.” The humanitarian but racist thoughts in the fifth point reflect Jeffersonian liberalism: expansionism--more American-owned colonies with willingness and national self-determinism and isolationism--colonies and American citizens.

The sixth point, the evacuation of all Russian territory, is complemented by the thirteenth point, an independent Polish state. Despite that he recognized the sovereignty of the Soviet Union, the independence excluded Poland from its territory, aiming at suppressing revolutionary movements throughout the world and parting the Soviet Russia. On one hand, The U.S. tried to stifle the ideologically different socialist Soviet Union, which was a dictatorship of the proletariat. On the other hand, Jeffersonian liberalism prompted Wilson to respect the national independence of the Soviet Union and Poland. Both are shown in the *14 Points* as isolation of the Soviet Union based on national self-determination.[1] Jeffersonian isolationism is extended as alienating and dividing Socialism countries during the First World War in Wilsonian *14 Points*.

From the seventh to the thirteenth point, national self-determinism is referred to the rights of citizens to declare independence, have autonomy, and establish government, for conforming to global nationalism, publicizing new international order and paving way for American economic expansion. He demanded the withdrawal of the occupying forces in Belgium, the return to France of the territories of Alsace and Lorraine since the Franco-Prussian War, the readjustment of the borders of Italy, the guarantee of the right to equality and development of the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the establishment of the sovereignty of the territories of Turkey under the Ottoman Empire,

as well as the recommendation of the independence of Poland. Through the promotion of national self-determinism, Wilson and his *14 Points* take the moral high ground and peddle his ideology for moral and cultural expansion.

The last point centers on the blueprint of the League of Nations “affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states.” As the basis of the aforementioned points, the fourteenth point is the first international security mechanism of a global nature, and at the same time the first extension of the security mechanism to a global scale. [14] As the Wilsonian innovation, the fourteen points inherit Jeffersonian liberalism, combining internationalism (expansionism)--administrating international affairs as the leader and isolationism--avoiding alliances and wars.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper finds that the *14 Points* expand American politics from domestic affairs to international political (covenants and open diplomacy), economic (freedom to navigate of all time), military (reduction of armaments), moral and cultural (national self-determinism all over the globe) issues, through the League of Nations as a way to isolate itself from European order and alliances. Besides, the colonies are excluded from independence despite some equal treatment. Expansionism, isolationism and racism are what Wilson inherited from Thomas Jefferson.

The Wilson Doctrine came into play when future U.S. leadership encountered a major turning point in September 1990, during the evolution of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, with the theme of “peace and security, liberty and the rule of law”. Also, he strengthened the United States’ sense of international participation and its leading role in international affairs. In addition, since taking office, Bush Jr. has emphasized a sense of destiny to dominate the world based on “American superiority”, believing that the United States has a mission to make the United States the vanguard of freedom and a force for justice in the international community. After 9/11, he emphasized that “terrorism” had attacked freedom and democracy in the world.

Inherited Expansionism and isolationism from Thomas Jefferson, Wilson reviewed the isolationist ideas of Neutralism and the Monroe Doctrine and decided to break with them, forming the “Save the World Ideology” that put American interests first as the basis of foreign policy. The Wilsonian foreign policy was based on the criteria of individual freedom and democratic politics for foreign missions, on which the promotion of democracy and the establishment of an international order to ensure peace was based.[1] The sense of mission and ideal of the League of Nations drew global attention and the Nobel Peace Prize. Besides, his vision was recognized by the U.S. Congress as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1968, which offers a platform for intellectuals to discuss public policy and society reforms by supporting research areas including humanities and social sciences. [8]

Secondly, to publicize the vision of the League of Nations, Wilson became the first president who held an open press and letter reception with the American public to hear and ask him questions. In the 20th Century, President Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy followed him to speak directly to the public during the crisis.[8]

Then, the 14 points consolidated the positions of the American bourgeoisie and state monopoly capitalism, transforming the U.S. into a financial center of global capitalism. After Wilson, American foreign policies prioritized the status of the moral and financial leader of the League of Nations.[4] Hence, the Wilsonian *14 Points* pave way for American leadership after WWI, innovate Jeffersonian liberalism into global height, and promote Christian mission.

Despite that Wilson advocates freedom and democracy, his political ideas are racist and inclusive nationalist. He believed that the Republican Congress was overthrowing President Lincoln’s moderate policy by emancipating slaves as Whites’ equals.[10] Besides, he justified the illegal violence of the Ku Klux Klan as regaining control of Southern civilization confronting threats from

African Americans, regarding White rule as the ultimate solution to Southern settled peace and natural life order. Then, he regards American civic ideals with the Anglo-Saxon race, separating White Europeans and Black Africans as the qualification of liberalism.[12] Hence, his democracy is for White people for he believed “homogeneity of race and community of thought and purpose among the people,” and “the minorities to acquiesce” one of the significant factors for democracy.[12]

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