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Fighting for the Mind of Mankind

On March 5, 1917, in the inaugural address of his second term in office, Woodrow Wilson once more articulated a vision for the postwar world order. The plan he outlined then included all of the practical elements that have since come to be associated with the Wilsonian, or liberal internationalist, prescription for the conduct of international relations: institutions of collective security, the reduction of armaments, free trade. International order and cooperation, he declared once again, could not last long unless it stood on the principles of the equality of nations and of government by consent, and the United States would insist both on "the actual equality of nations in all matters of right and privilege" and on the principle that "governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed." Autocratic rulers like the German Ho-

henzollerns could no longer lay claim to legitimacy in the international arena, since they would not be “supported by the common thought, purpose, or power of the family of nations.”¹ Coming from a leader of one of the great powers, this idea was a radical departure from the accepted norms and practices of international relations. It suggested that the international legitimacy of a government—its claim to membership in the community of nations—rested not only in its ability to exercise effective sovereignty over its territory, as international law traditionally stipulated, but also on the nature of its internal regime, which had to be based on popular consent.²

A week after Wilson’s inaugural address, the most obviously autocratic regime fighting on the Allied side of the war—the Russian empire under Czar Nikolai II—succumbed to the revolution of March 1917, making it easier for the president both to imagine and to portray the war in Europe as one of democracy against autocracy. Soon after, on April 6, the United States officially declared war on Germany, joining the conflict on the Allied side, and Wilson’s peace plan now became part of the war aims of the United States. Though its details evolved over the course of the war, the essential

vision did not change much: the establishment of postwar international relations based on equality among legitimate polities governed by popular consent.³

In the address he gave on April 2 asking Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, Wilson said that the kaiser's government, lacking the demonstrated consent of its own people, was illegitimate, and that the people of Germany were little more than "pawns and tools" in Berlin's hands. The American people harbored no ill will toward them, only feelings of "sympathy and friendship," and had Germany been a self-governing nation there would have been no war. Now, the United States had to enter the fray to fight for its long-time fundamental values: "for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations."⁴ Again, Wilson explicitly cast himself and America as defenders of the weak against the powerful, of common folk against autocratic regimes, of small nations against great powers.

The president devoted special praise in his message to the recent democratic revolution in Russia, speaking in glowing terms of the Russian

people's toppling of the Romanov autocracy and the establishment of a democratic government. It seemed a perfect illustration of the worldwide trend away from rule by fiat and toward government by consent that would, he said, define the postwar world and would henceforth undergird the preservation of international peace. The Russian people, "in all their naïve majesty and might," had joined the forces that were "fighting for freedom in the world, for justice, and for peace" and could now assume their rightful place in the international partnership of self-governing peoples.⁵ In a note he sent in late May to the provisional government of Russia, Wilson reiterated that message, assuring the new government that the United States was "fighting for the liberty, the self-government, and the undictated development of all peoples." Moreover, he was not merely interested in making "pleasing and sonorous" statements but was rather committed to taking effective measures that would guarantee the incorporation of these principles into the postwar settlement. One such measure would be a yet-unnamed mechanism for international cooperation based on a "common covenant," which would defend the principle of government by con-

sent and provide an institutional framework that would reflect the “brotherhood of mankind.”⁶

The text of Wilson’s declaration of war address of April 1917 was widely reported, printed, and translated around the world. Now that the United States had entered the war, Wilson could be expected to have more influence at the peace table, and his pronouncements were therefore given much greater prominence in the world press. British and French opinion, especially liberals and socialists, generally greeted Wilson’s war message and his subsequent proclamations with enthusiastic acclaim. In Britain, groups such as the Union of Democratic Control, whose membership included such luminaries as philosopher Bertrand Russell, author Norman Angell, and Labour party leader Ramsay MacDonald, had long called for a peace settlement in which any territorial adjustment would require the consent of the peoples involved. Their ideas, marginal and isolated in British public discourse at the outset of the war, increased in popularity as the war progressed, and Wilson’s ringing rhetoric and rising prominence on the international stage greatly encouraged them.⁷ Organizations such as the League of Nations Society, founded in mid-1916 by a group of liberal British

intellectuals, called for peace based on Wilsonian principles, and the British Labour party had already announced its support for the president's proposals after his "Peace without Victory" address of January 1917. By mid-1917, Wilson had clearly emerged on the world stage as the champion of the new diplomacy of liberal internationalism.⁸

In the meantime, the revolutionary events in Russia seemed to confirm Wilson's contention that the age of autocracy was at an end. In March, a coalition of left-wing revolutionary groups had toppled the Romanov dynasty and several weeks later, on April 9, 1917—only three days after the American declaration of war on Germany—the new provisional government released a statement of its war aims. Unlike the old imperial regime, the new, democratic Russia would no longer seek to dominate foreign peoples or occupy their territories, but rather would promote and support "the establishment of permanent peace on the basis of the self-determination of peoples."⁹ That statement, composed under the influence of the Bolshevik-controlled Petrograd Soviet, represented the first instance that a belligerent government invoked the term "self-determination" as a basis for its war aims and called

explicitly for a peace settlement based on that principle.

For the Russian Bolsheviks, who were influential in the provisional government even before they overthrew it in November, the use of the term both made perfect sense and carried a specific meaning. For V. I. Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, the term implied the dismantling of colonial empires that was a crucial stage in the progress he envisioned toward world revolution. Lenin held this process to be particularly important, and the Bolsheviks issued scathing denunciations of the suppression of self-determination under imperialism. The question of national self-determination and its proper relationship to proletarian revolution had long been a topic of debate in European socialist circles, and Lenin's ideas on the subject crystallized in 1915–1916, while he was composing his major work, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and were summarized in an article on “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” which he completed in March 1916.¹⁰ For Lenin, the principle of national self-determination, which he defined as the right of peoples to secede from oppressive regimes, was an important tool for undermining the capitalist-imperialist

world order and, more specifically, for destabilizing the old regime in Russia and gaining the support of non-Russian minorities for the revolution.¹¹ As early as March 1917, Lenin declared publicly that when the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, their peace plan would include “the liberation of all colonies; the liberation of all dependent, oppressed, and non-sovereign peoples.”¹²

When the Bolsheviks seized control of the revolution in November, they published from the captured czarist archives copies of the secret treaties that the European Allies had concluded among themselves to divide the spoils of war, exposing and denouncing the imperialist designs of the “old diplomacy.” In the Bolshevik peace plan, announced on December 29, Leon Trotsky, the newly appointed commissar of foreign affairs, denounced as hypocritical Allied claims that they were fighting to guarantee the freedom of small nations, such as Belgium and Serbia. The imperial powers, he said, could not claim to be fighting for the rights of small nations in Europe while at the same time oppressing other national groups within their own empires:

Are they willing on their part to give the right of self-determination to the peoples of Ireland, Egypt, India, Madagascar, Indochina, et cetera...? For it is clear that to demand self-determination for the peoples that are comprised within the borders of enemy states and to refuse self-determination to the peoples of their own state or of their own colonies would mean the defence of the most naked, the most cynical imperialism.

Such behavior on the part of the capitalist governments of the Allies, Trotsky declared, was hardly surprising. They had shown no inclination to work for a truly democratic peace nor, given their “class character,” could they ever do so: “Their attitude towards the principle of ‘national self-determination’” was inevitably “not less suspicious and hostile than that of the Governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary.”¹³

The dual challenge of Lenin and Wilson to the old ways of European politics and the growing appeal of their proclamations for large segments of the British and French publics increased the pressure on leaders in London and Paris to announce

their support for more progressive, enlightened war aims. While the Allied leaders could dismiss Lenin's critique as that of a dangerous radical, they could not so easily ignore the president of the United States, an indispensable ally on whose supplies, credit, and arms the European Allies depended. Though the British and the French leaders, the president told his long-time close aide and confidant, "Colonel" Edward Mandell House, did not share his views on the peace, their dependence on American capital and supplies would compel them in the end to accept "our way of thinking."¹⁴

By late 1917, the pressure on the British government, a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives headed after December 1916 by the leader of the Liberal party, David Lloyd George, was mounting to accommodate "the development of American thinking and the public pronouncements of President Wilson" and to adopt more Wilsonian war aims.¹⁵ On December 28, the British Labour party issued a public statement that echoed Wilson's pronouncements, declaring that the war could no longer be justified unless it would make the world "safe for democracy," and that Labour would withdraw its support for the war effort unless the government redefined its aims clearly in those

terms.¹⁶ At the same time, the Bolsheviks appeared ready to conclude a separate peace with Germany at the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and take Russia out of the war, releasing the German forces on the eastern front for transfer to the west. With the Allied position thus in danger of fraying both at home and abroad, Lloyd George decided to make a declaration of war aims that would regain the diplomatic initiative for the Allies. Such a statement was necessary, his adviser Philip Kerr told him, to rally labor and liberals, both at home and abroad, to the Allied cause. Victory was still necessary, but “the old war arguments” would no longer do. The prime minister entrusted the drafting of the statement to two of Wilson’s most prominent ideological allies in British officialdom: Lord Robert Cecil, a cabinet minister and a leading liberal internationalist, and the South African general Jan Smuts, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet. Both would later work with Wilson to establish the League of Nations and the mandate system for international supervision over colonial possessions.¹⁷

On January 5, 1918, speaking before the British Trades Union League at Caxton Hall, the prime minister delivered a major address outlining Great Britain’s updated war aims.¹⁸ He designed

the speech to appeal to the British Left, to shore up Allied morale, and to sway neutral opinion by meeting the challenge of the Bolsheviks' rhetoric of liberation and presenting the Allied aims as moderate and liberal. The postwar territorial settlement, Lloyd George declared on that occasion, must respect "the right of self-determination or the consent of the governed."¹⁹ Thus, in a promiscuous rhetorical flourish, the prime minister bundled the Bolshevik term "self-determination" together with Wilson's favorite phrase, "consent of the governed," casually obfuscating the wide gap between the radical anti-imperialist agenda suggested by the former and the liberal reformism implied in the latter. The Caxton Hall speech was a pivotal moment in the emergence of self-determination as one of the most celebrated and contested principles of the postwar settlement. Wilson himself would complete this conflation in the following months, adopting "self-determination" as his own with growing gusto. The prime minister would later claim in his memoirs that his (and Wilson's) statements supporting the right to self-determination had pertained only to Europe and the non-Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire, but neither of them mentioned any such qualification at the time. In fact, in his speech

Lloyd George clearly suggested that the principle of self-determination would, for example, apply to the disposition of the German colonial possessions in Africa and the South Pacific.²⁰

Lloyd George's bold proclamation spurred Wilson to regain the diplomatic initiative and reassert his own standing as the leading world statesman. Three days later, on January 8, he came before Congress to give the most detailed exposition to date of the United States' war aims and his vision for the postwar world. The address, which quickly became famous worldwide as the Fourteen Points, enumerated fourteen planks on which peace must be based. These included the general principles of open diplomacy rather than secret treaties, freedom of the seas and of trade, the reduction of armaments, and the establishment of an "association of nations" that would guarantee the "political independence and territorial integrity" of "great and small states alike." Most of the points, however, were geographically specific: They called for the evacuation and restoration of all Russian, Belgian, and French territories and supported the "autonomous development" of the peoples of the Austrian and Ottoman empires. Contrary to popular perceptions both at the time and later, the

term “self-determination” itself was nowhere to be found in the text of the address, though several of the points—the call for a “readjustment of the frontiers of Italy” along “clearly recognizable lines of nationality” and for reconstituting a Polish state along similar lines—seemed to imply Wilson’s support for that principle, at least in some instances.

The general outline of the peace plan proposed in the Fourteen Points address was similar to that of Wilson’s previous addresses. For the first time, however, the president made an explicit reference to colonial questions, calling for any settlement of colonial issues to take into account the interests of colonial populations. Colonial claims, said point five of the fourteen, would have to be resolved in a “free, open minded, and absolutely impartial” manner, and their resolution would be “based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.”²¹ Point five was hardly an unambiguous endorsement of colonial self-determination. First, it called for the “interests” of colonial peoples to be taken into account rather than their express wishes or pref-

erences, and so left open the question of just who would decide what those interests were: the people themselves or the colonial powers? In addition, Wilson also balanced those interests, however determined, against the “equitable claims” of the colonial governments, which would receive equal consideration.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of an explicit reference to the rights of colonial peoples, however tentative and equivocal, signaled the president’s dissatisfaction with the reigning imperial order in international society. Most of the fourteen points were based on the recommendations included in the memorandum that was submitted a few days earlier by members of the Inquiry, a group of experts gathered by Colonel House to advise the government on issues related to the peace settlement. But the Inquiry memorandum made no reference to colonial issues, and it was Wilson himself who added point five to the text of the address.²² House himself testified that “at first it was thought we might have to evade this [colonial question] entirely,” but “the President began to try his hand on it and presently the paragraph which was adopted was acceptable to us both, and we hoped would be to Great Britain.” Wilson did not consult the Allies

on this question, so germane to their interests, and House was clearly concerned about their reaction.²³ The decision to refer in the Fourteen Points address to the colonial question and to the interests of colonial peoples was Wilson's alone.

Why did he make that choice? One influential interpretation of the origin of the Fourteen Points has seen the address as essentially a response—a “countermanifesto”—to the challenge that Lenin and Trotsky had presented with the announcement of their own radical peace plan.²⁴ In this context, point five might be seen as a rejoinder, albeit a hedged, tentative one, to the Russian Bolsheviks' sweeping call for the destruction of imperialism and the self-determination of colonial peoples. At the same time, however, the call made in point five was consistent with Wilson's previous wartime pronouncements, as well as with his long-standing position on the nature and purpose of colonialism. While the specific timing of the Fourteen Points address reflected the recent Bolshevik challenge, its content drew on principles that had long been part of the worldview Wilson had articulated in successive speeches prior to the appearance of Lenin. The essential elements of the Wilsonian scheme for international order, both in the colonial realm and

elsewhere, had been expressed in Wilson's repeated assertions of the right to "self-government" and the requirement that legitimate governments receive the "consent of the governed."²⁵

Wilson's position on the colonial question in the Fourteen Points was still hedged and equivocal, but his rhetoric soon grew bolder. Within weeks of that address, on February 11, 1918, the president came before Congress again and delivered another speech, known as the Four Points address, outlining once more his plan for the peace. It was in this speech that he first publicly uttered the phrase "self-determination." In the coming settlement, he intoned, "national aspirations must be respected," and people may be "dominated and governed only by their own consent." Self-determination was not "a mere phrase" but rather "an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril," and "every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned." Again, as he did in point five of the Fourteen Points, he spoke of the population's "benefit," not necessarily its wishes, and there were other qualifications on the unfettered exercise of the right to self-determination. Only "well-defined national aspirations"

would receive consideration and only to the extent that they would not create or perpetuate “elements of discord.”²⁶

In invoking the principle of self-determination, Wilson incorporated the novel term into his wartime ideological lexicon, adopting this phrase as his own and assimilating it into his program for the postwar international order. Calls for a peace based on self-determination would henceforth largely replace in Wilson’s rhetoric the previously ubiquitous references to the consent of the governed. This substitution aimed to neutralize Bolshevik critiques of the Allied war aims by co-opting their language, but it did not change the essence of Wilson’s vision in his own mind. To him, the advocacy of “self-determination” was simply synonymous with calling for “self-government” and lecturing on the importance of “government by consent.”

Some of Wilson’s contemporary critics, including his secretary of state, Robert Lansing, observed early on that Wilson used the novel term self-determination to convey old ideas. Lansing, an international lawyer with a conservative bent of mind, noted that the term self-determination was essentially equivalent, in Wilson’s usage, to

the time-honored liberal principle of consent of the governed. It was, Lansing said, a theoretically appealing idea that was nevertheless “unsusceptible of universal application,” since any such attempt would lead to excessive “change and uncertainty” in world affairs. Lansing, in common with other critics of Wilson’s performance in Paris, observed in the aftermath of the peace conference that the principle of self-determination, loudly proclaimed in wartime pronouncements, had been violated repeatedly in the terms of the peace treaties. At the same time, it served as an “excuse for turbulent political elements in various lands to resist established governmental authority.”²⁷

Partly, the disappointment in the principle and its leading champion was a result of the ambiguous and multiple meanings that attached to the term at the time and since. Although Wilson did borrow the term self-determination itself from the language of the Bolsheviks—socialist and Marxist theorists had been using the term for some time—he gave it a different meaning and used it for a different purpose. For the Bolsheviks, who always talked specifically about “national” self-determination, it was a call for the revolutionary overthrow of colonial and imperial rule through an appeal to the

national identity and aspirations of subject peoples. Wilson, on the other hand, rarely if ever qualified self-determination as specifically national. Rather, he used it in a more general, vaguer sense and usually equated the term with popular sovereignty, conjuring an international order based on democratic forms of government. He did at times, as in the cases of Poland or Italy, advocate redrawing borders according to ethnic lines, but he still saw the principle involved as one of consent rather than of ethnic homogeneity as such. Indeed, acutely aware as he was of the multiethnic character of American society, his model of a self-determining people, he could hardly have thought that ethnic homogeneity was a prerequisite for the exercise of the right to self-determination.²⁸

In addition, while Lenin saw self-determination as a revolutionary principle and sought to use it as a wrecking ball against the reactionary multiethnic empires of Europe, Wilson hoped that self-determination would serve precisely in the opposite role, as a bulwark against radical, revolutionary challenges to existing orders, such as those he saw in the Russian and Mexican revolutions. If revolution, as he and other progressives believed, was a reaction to oppression by autocratic, unac-

countable regimes, then the application of self-determination, defined as government by consent, would help remove the revolutionary impulse and promote change through rational, gradual reforms. In the case of colonialism, as already noted, he envisioned that self-determination would emerge through gradual processes of reform carried out with the cooperation of the colonial powers, rather than through the abrupt overthrow of colonial rule.²⁹

However, these distinctions between the Wilsonian and Leninist versions of self-determination, compelling as they may appear in retrospect, were hardly so clear-cut at the time. To many around the world, and especially in the colonial world, Wilson and Lenin appeared to be more similar than different. Both advocated a new, open diplomacy, both were sharply critical of imperialism, both called for a radical transformation of international relations, and both advocated a peace based on the principle of self-determination. There was one important difference, however. In 1918, Wilson appeared by far the more prominent and powerful of the two in the international arena, and the one far likelier to wield direct and decisive influence on the upcoming peace negotiations.

Wilson's adoption of Bolshevik language, though leaving his vision largely unchanged in his own mind, lent a more radical hue to his rhetoric in the eyes of those groups, in Europe and elsewhere, that were already anxious for a radical change in the way international society operated. Thus, just as Wilson appropriated the notion of self-determination from the Bolsheviks and assimilated it into his own program for international transformation, so too would colonial nationalists move to adopt and appropriate that language from Wilson and adapt it to their circumstances and purposes.

By the summer of 1918, as the tide of the war began to turn decisively in favor of the Allies, Wilson's rhetoric grew bolder still. On the Fourth of July, in a brief Independence Day address he delivered at George Washington's former estate at Mount Vernon, the president described his vision for the postwar world order in sweeping terms. Anchoring his ideas in the most sacred images of American iconography, he invoked the legacy of the founding fathers in support of his own mission. They, he said, had "entertained no private purpose" and "desired no particular privilege" in their historic endeavors, but were "consciously planning that men

of every class should be free” and were striving to make America a haven for “the rights and privileges of free men.” The United States went to war for that same goal, to secure not only the liberty of the United States “but the liberties of every other people as well.” The war was an epic struggle between autocratic regimes whose time had passed and the progressive ideals of the present. The aftermath of this conflict would see American ideals extended over the entire globe, embraced by many races and in many regions:

On the one hand stand the peoples of the world,—not only the peoples actually engaged, but many others who suffer under mastery, but cannot act; peoples of many races and in every part of the world....

Opposed to them, masters of many armies, stand an isolated, friendless group of governments who speak no common purpose but only selfish ambitions of their own which can profit but themselves...governments clothed with the strange trappings and the primitive authority of an age that is altogether alien and hostile to our own.³⁰

No compromise, therefore, was conceivable, not only with the Central Powers but also with the prewar principles of international relations. The postwar order, Wilson said, would have to be based on popular legitimacy rather than on great power interests. It would be predicated on “the settlement of every question, whether of territory, of sovereignty, of economic arrangement, or of political relationship, upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned.” The peace settlement would have to replace an international system based on power with an international society in which interaction among nations would comport with the “principles of honour and of respect for the common law of civilized society that govern the individual citizens of all modern states in their relations with one another.” An international organization to deter aggression and arbitrate conflicts would embody and manage this arrangement: “What we seek is the reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind.”³¹ The address at Mount Vernon was Wilson’s boldest formulation yet of his postwar plans, and as we will see, it resonated widely around the world.

In the following months, Wilson continued in his public rhetoric to present the war, and the United States' role within it, in idealistic terms. The purpose of the war, he declared repeatedly, was to secure the right of peoples to determine their own futures, to establish the principle of equality among nations, and to defend the rights of weak nations against the might of strong ones. The peace settlement, he said, would have to reflect "full and unequivocal acceptance of the principle that the interest of the weakest is as sacred as the interest of the strongest."³² It was during these months that he made the statements denouncing lynching and in support of female suffrage, explaining that American society must present itself to the world as a model of the principles of righteousness and justice for which it was fighting abroad. Once he arrived in Europe, moreover, Wilson continued to insist from every podium that the peace settlement would have to follow these principles: at the Sorbonne in Paris, at Buckingham Palace, in London and Manchester, in Rome and Genoa, in Milan and Turin.³³ The British economist John Maynard Keynes, who would become one of the most scathing and influential critics of the Versailles Treaty and of Wilson himself, wrote that in the

immediate wake of the war, the president “enjoyed a prestige and a moral influence throughout the world unequalled in history.”³⁴

Throughout the final years of the war, the machinery of global communications carried Wilson’s increasingly heady rhetoric to audiences around the world. International news agencies and wartime propaganda organs alike reported and reproduced the messages, and disseminated them through the cable and wireless networks that by then spanned the globe. The use of telegraphic communications began in Europe and North America in the 1840s and then spread elsewhere, often following the logic of imperial expansion and administration. The first dependable telegraph cables to the British domains in Egypt and India were laid in the 1870s, and they soon became among the busiest in the world. In China, telegraph lines began to spread in the 1860s, following the path of European penetration into the domains of the crumbling Qing dynasty. After the turn of the century, the use of wireless communication as an alternative or supplement to the cables grew more common, and by 1914 the wireless reached deeply into Asia and the Middle East. The rise of telegraphic communi-

cations dramatically reduced the time that it took information to move across continents and oceans, and news that previously would have taken weeks or even months to travel from America or Europe to the Middle East, India, or China could now arrive in a matter of hours.³⁵

The spread of the telegraph and its revolutionary impact on the speed of information travel led to the growth and expansion of international news agencies that supplied wire copy to thousands of newspapers around the world. Charles Havas, a news service pioneer, founded his eponymous agency in Paris in 1835. Initially, Havas used pigeons for the speedy reporting of news across the English Channel, but he soon began to employ telegraphy as it spread in Western Europe in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1850, Julius Reuter, who had immigrated to England from Germany, established his own news service in London. Reuter's agency also relied on pigeons at first but quickly moved to telegraphy, and by 1865 it became a public company, the Reuters Telegram Company. The first major journalistic scoops that made its reputation were the reports on the start of the war for Italian unification in 1859 and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865. News from Reuters'