Bio:

Karis R. Durant graduated as a Distinguished Honors Scholar magna cum laude in May with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and a minor in music. Durant was the recipient of the 2007 Texas Conference for Women Scholarship and was nominated by the University of North Texas for the Rhodes, Marshall, and Truman Scholarships. She has served as an intern, intern coordinator, and field representative for Texas Senator Jane Nelson. She was the recipient of the North Texas–District of Columbia Scholarship, interning in the White House Office of Public Liaison. Durant is currently teaching piano lessons and pursuing a position in Washington, D.C. She plans to begin studies for a master’s degree or a law degree in the fall of 2009.
Abstract:

In 1917 when President Woodrow Wilson asked the U.S. Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, he promised that the Great War would be the “war to end all wars.” Unfortunately, this idealistic promise was more than anyone could deliver. My research focuses on the influences that shaped President Wilson’s idealism and how he expanded his ideals in persuading the American public to go to war. I refer to opinion and editorial sections from major newspapers across America to determine and demonstrate the degree of Wilson’s idealism in public addresses and the general public response to his views. My research offers an explanation and an assessment of Wilson’s idealism, including its expansion and significance in U.S. foreign policy since 1917.
Introduction

On April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. In his remarks, President Wilson vowed that the Great War would be the “war to end all wars.” Obviously, he had promised more than anyone could deliver. Since World War I, the United States has been involved in five major foreign affairs conflicts, costing the lives of more than 570,000 Americans. As is evident today, war persists. It has been argued that the United States is currently engaged in World War IV; some people refer to the Cold War as “World War III.” Thus, contrary to President Wilson’s ideas and the public opinion of the early 1900s, war still exists and will continue to exist. However, the objectives, or at least the public’s perceptions of American foreign policy, have taken on a new role. Americans have typically been idealists. Idealism has been present in the American mindset from its founding days and to an extent in American foreign policy; however, under President Wilson’s leadership, idealism took on an expanded role in American foreign policy.

Woodrow Wilson said on the eve of his inauguration “that his primary interests were in domestic reform and that it would be ‘the irony of fate’ if he should be compelled to concentrate on foreign affairs.” Fate would have it that President Wilson would lead the United States through the greatest war the world had ever seen. Although Wilson had limited leadership experience in foreign affairs in 1914 when war broke out in Europe, he knew how things should take place.

Early Family and Religious Influences

Maybe it was his Scotch-Irish heritage. Maybe it was his minister father’s strong influence. Or maybe it was his devotion to Presbyterian doctrine. Whatever the reason, Woodrow Wilson was not afraid to stand up for what he knew was right. Wilson had a wonderful relationship with his father; his life was shaped by the hours spent each week learning from his dad. As the son of a Presbyterian
minister, Thomas W. Wilson was reared under the teachings of the church; therefore, he held to the belief that “Presbyterians are unquestionably right, on matters of principles.” A turning point in young Wilson’s life came on July 5, 1873, when “the official record of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia states that Thomas W. Wilson… applied for membership in the First Presbyterian Church.”

The entry continues, “After a free confession in which [he] severally exhibited evidences of a work of grace in [his heart], [he was] unanimously admitted to membership in this church.”

Although his parents had hoped he would go into the ministry, the young Wilson became interested in governmental affairs and politics as a student at Davidson College in Mecklenburg, North Carolina (a Presbyterian school with Scottish traditions). He was drawn to the writings of William Gladstone. The more Wilson studied the British parliamentary system, the fonder he became of it. He even organized the “Liberal Debating Club” based on the British parliament. He saw the president of the United States as “a useless fifth wheel in the American constitutional system.” Instead, he believed that the President of the United States should play a similar role to that of the British Prime Minister: “He must play the part and play it successfully or lose the country’s confidence.” In his book Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics, he also suggested that the United States should adopt a parliamentary system like the British.

During his years as a student, Wilson began to develop theories built on the foundations of his ideals of leadership. His desire was to one day serve as a U.S. senator. To reach this objective, he decided to pursue law and attended the University of Virginia Law School. In October 1882, he passed the bar exam and was licensed to practice in Georgia. However, it did not take long for him to discover that he did not enjoy practicing law. In less than a year, Wilson had decided to enter graduate school at Johns Hopkins University. By June 1886, he had received his PhD. However, Wilson’s time spent
practicing law in Georgia was not wasted; it was there that he met and fell in love with Ellen Louise Axson. They were married on June 24, 1885.9

**Early Leadership Experience**

In 1890, Wilson joined the faculty of Princeton University, and in 1902 he became the thirteenth president of the university. His address to the campus shows his idealism. The speech was entitled “Princeton for the Nation’s Service.” His theme was that the university must serve the nation. He stated that the nation “needs efficient and enlightened men. The universities of the country must take part in supplying them.”10 As president of Princeton University, Wilson restructured classes, changed acceptance policies, and brought about a revived interest in the university. Yet even during his time at Princeton, Wilson was preparing for the White House. He observed the political attitude of the country. In one of the speeches he delivered at Princeton he said:

> The American people will tolerate nothing that savors of political exclusiveness. Their political parties are going to pieces. Only those leaders who seem able to promise something of a moral advance are able to secure a following. The people are tired of pretense and I ask you as Princeton men to heed what is going on.11

He became that leader promising a “moral advance” in 1910 when he was elected governor of New Jersey (by the second largest vote ever for a gubernatorial candidate). He is quoted as having said, “After New Jersey, I am trained for almost anything.”12 His two years as governor “confirmed his belief in the people: that they would uphold sound measures and insist upon the enforcement of good laws if only these measures were put to them clearly and reasonably.”13 His interest in the opinions of the people is a thread throughout his entire life. Success in New Jersey gave him national stature and led to his nomination for President of the United States by the Democratic Party in 1912. He won with 42 percent of the vote, thanks in part to divisions in the Republican Party. Although Wilson wanted to focus
on domestic issues, he would not have this opportunity. He inherited a long-standing policy of neutrality toward foreign wars.

The Early Presidency: The Spanish-American War

The United States had long held such a policy of neutrality. However, in 1898, America had stepped away from a policy of neutrality to become involved in a war with Spain. Historians note this as a shift in American foreign policy, because this war was the beginning of America’s involvement in world affairs. No longer were Americans fighting just to protect their own interests and security, but for a greater cause. As always, there were economic issues involved and national security reasons given for justification; however, moral obligations were given as well. For every war in which America has been involved in, historians debate various reasons the United States entered the war. U.S. interests in both economic and national security are always at the forefront of the discussion; however, in 1898, the American people were not persuaded to support the war based solely on American interests. Instead, political leaders appealed to Americans’ sense of pride, duty, and freedom to step in and stop Spain from its brutal suppression of revolution in its colony Cuba.

In 1898, American foreign policy had a decided shift. In his book *The Great Departure*, historian Daniel Smith explains, “In foreign policy, since the United States in general was a satisfied power which sought no additional territory and benefited from peace and stability, clashes between ideals and practical interests tended to be minimized.”¹⁴ American idealism has always played a role in foreign policy, but to this point it had been a side note in addition to our economic or national security interests. In 1898, politicians had real goals and objectives, but they gained the support of the American public by presenting the realistic objectives with idealistic statements and sentiments. Even with an event that was cited as a reason to go to war—the sinking of the USS *Maine*—Assistant Secretary of State William Day said in a letter to American Minister to Spain Stewart Woodford:
The President’s [McKinley’s] desire is for peace. He cannot look upon the suffering and starvation in Cuba, save with horror. The concentration of men, women, and children in the fortified towns and permitting them to starve is unbearable to a Christian nation geographically so close as ours to Cuba.\footnote{This statement made on behalf of President McKinley implied that the United States has the responsibility (or duty) to act. Idealism, of the sort expressed by Day, has been present in the minds of Americans since the beginning of the nation. In 1630, John Winthrop called the Massachusetts Bay colony “a city on a hill.” President Lincoln referred to America as the “last best hope of man.” President Wilson was no exception. To Wilson, idealism meant “…not the ignoring of practical considerations but the exalting of noble purposes and goals.” His foreign policy was shaped by the culture of idealism and the aftermath of the Spanish-American War.}

The Early Presidency: A Disturbance in Mexico

Although President Wilson had ideas about how to handle foreign affairs, he had very little experience when World War I started in Europe. As president, his first taste of foreign affairs came with a disturbance in Mexico. General Victoriano Huerta had taken over the country and set himself up as dictator. President Francisco I. Madero of Mexico was assassinated while in the custody of Huerta’s troops. Wilson said, “Usurpations like that of General Huerta menace the peace and development of America as nothing else could.”\footnote{To the astonishment of many European nations (who had immediately acknowledged Huerta as the leader of Mexico), President Wilson refused to recognize him or any other leader who had gained power by force or any other unconstitutional means. He would not support someone who was rejected by the majority of Mexicans. Wilson believed the European countries were only seeking their own well-being and wished for stability in Mexico simply because it would help their trade. Yet Wilson said of America:}
We can have no sympathy with those who seek to seize the power of government to advance their own personal interest or ambition [plain notice to Huerta]. We hold, as I am sure all thoughtful leaders of republican government everywhere hold, that just government rests always on the consent of the governed and that there can be no freedom without order based upon law, and upon the public conscience and approval.\textsuperscript{18}

Wilson’s statements showed concern for the Mexican people. He said, “My passion is for the submerged 85 percent of the people of the Republic who are now struggling towards liberty.”\textsuperscript{19} Biographer Ruth Cranston wrote that he stood for “the millions of downtrodden Mexicans seeking emancipation from the rich feudal class to which for generations they had been practically enslaved.”\textsuperscript{20} On August 27, 1913, President Wilson took the matter before Congress “urging that Mexico was engaged in a struggle for liberty like that of France in the eighteenth century and that this country should keep hands off and give her chance.”\textsuperscript{21} Wilson believed that the opposition led by Governor Venustiano Carranza (from the northern state of Coahuila) would succeed in their revolt against Huerta. After what he expected to be Carranza’s victory, Wilson thought that the Mexican people would oust Huerta. An embargo on arms from the United States was placed on Mexico and the decision was made to wait, not helping either side. When this policy seemed fruitless, the embargo was lifted and aid provided to Carranza. In an address to Congress regarding this conflict in Mexico, President Wilson said,

We shall yet prove to the Mexican people that we know how to serve them without first thinking how we shall serve ourselves…. It was our duty at least to volunteer our good offices…. It was our duty to offer our active assistance….\textsuperscript{22}

On April 9, 1914, eight men from the USS Dolphin were arrested and later released by Mexican soldiers; when General Huerta ignored U.S. Admiral Henry T. Mayo’s demands for a formal apology, the president backed up Mayo by mobilizing warships and a Marine regiment. U.S. troops were killed,
but “war” was avoided by a Mediation Conference. The terms decided upon at the conference were not satisfactory for the United States; however, the overall outcome soon shifted in America’s favor. Huerta stepped down and Carranza came to power. This was President Wilson’s only foreign policy experience prior to World War I.

War Breaks Out in Europe: U.S. Remains Neutral

In 1914, when war broke out in Europe, it was natural and expected that President Wilson would immediately take a stance of neutrality, which he did. However, he went even further by encouraging Americans to remain neutral in thought as well as in deed. Neutrality was what Wilson was familiar with and what the American people wanted and expected. The sentiment of neutrality ran so deep that President Wilson was reelected based on the campaign slogan, “He kept us out of the war.” At that point, the American public did not want to get involved with the war overseas. Yet, the next year, when President Wilson realized America could no longer remain neutral, he had to convince the American public that war was necessary.

While war raged in Europe, the world looked to the United States under President Woodrow Wilson’s leadership. Just as in other areas of life, Wilson knew the kind of leadership that the United States needed. “Early in his career,” [Wilson had] “concluded that the ideal leader was the man strong in moral fiber, determined in purpose, and audacious in vision, who could lead his people forward along the road of progressive development.” He modeled his leadership style after that of Theodore Roosevelt, “who demonstrated the potential leadership through control of public opinion.” According to historian and Wilson biographer Arthur Link, “Wilson now saw the President as potentially a powerful party leader and national spokesperson who, by appealing to the people over the heads of Congress, as Roosevelt had done, might exercise a strong influence over the course of legislation.” Wilson felt strongly that the president was the spokesperson of the country: “[The President] is the only
national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country…. If he rightly interpret[s] the national thought and boldly insist[s] upon it, he is irresistible.”27 The influence of Roosevelt’s leadership style is clear. When Wilson was president of Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and later president of the United States, he appealed directly to the public. Long before he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, he had been speaking to the American public. By the time he went before Congress, he had gained the American public’s support and therefore was assured of receiving the nod to go forward from Congress. Arthur Link writes:

His [Wilson’s] first technique of leadership was to assert the position of spokesman of the American people and to use public opinion as a spur on Congress. Theodore Roosevelt had demonstrated the usefulness of this method, but Wilson used it to greater advantage and made it inevitable that any future President would be powerful only in so far as he established intimate communication with the people and spoke effectively for them.28

When World War I began, President Wilson believed that the United States could serve as the mediator to bring resolution to the conflict. The United States had the opportunity to lead the world to peace. Wilson believed that the United States “should stand as the champion of freedom, justice and peace, and should be prepared to serve selflessly the interests of humanity.”29 Although the president and his advisors were all in agreement that democracy would be in danger if Britain lost the war, they did not think this would happen. Even though questions of American security arose, Wilson felt that strict neutrality was necessary in order for the United States to later fulfill its duty as mediator and bring the warring nations together in a peaceful conclusion. War provided the opportunity for America to demonstrate “selfless service to humanity.”30

The Allies had not been fully prepared for war, nor had they expected a long war. They were not mobilized for such a war. Britain flooded the United States with propaganda with the intention to lure
public opinion away from neutrality. President Wilson did all in his power to openly rebuke Britain’s violations of neutrality policies regarding naval operations; however, he was not as forceful against Britain as he was against Germany’s submarine warfare. When the United States protested Germany’s actions, they protested on moral and legal grounds instead of military reasons. American diplomats and leaders led by President Wilson argued “from the sense of humanity and neutral rights.”

Wilson Prepares the Nation for War

By the spring of 1916, President Wilson realized that the United States might have to enter the war and began to make his so-called “preparedness speeches.” Some say that Wilson tailored his speeches to the American public, but based on the influences in his early life, it is probably more accurate to conclude that Wilson himself truly believed the idealistic statements that he made. He believed Americans, like himself, were “a body of idealists, much more ready to lay down their lives for a thought than for a dollar.” He saw Americans as “trustees of the moral judgment of the world” and a nation that other nations looked to “to keep even the balance of the whole world’s thought.” During World War I, “his [Wilson’s] call for military armament stressed not merely our rights, but our responsibility for the salvation of the equipoise of the world and the redemption of the affairs of mankind.” Wilson saw America’s mission as one of “service to mankind.” From an idealistic point of view, the only reason a war should ever be fought is to ensure that a nation never has to do so again.

As Wilson was traveling all over the country giving speeches for preparedness, newspapers across the United States gradually began noticing his idealism. The newspapers of the early 1900s did not provide the editorials or opinion sections that they do today. In most cases, Wilson’s remarks were published in their entirety. Therefore, the American public was getting a unified, singular message from major newspapers such as The New York Times, The Atlanta Constitution, The Dallas Morning News,

The President remains immovably true to his lofty, moral attitude. On how far he will carry the country’s opinion with him in the contingencies that may arise it would be injudicious and improper to speculate. But be the issue what it may President Wilson deserves credit for standing manfully to his guns.  

This paper also highlighted statements made in other major newspapers on February 25, 1916. The American public was still against the war, wishing to maintain the policy of neutrality; however, the President’s resoluteness that war is necessary began to cause many people to waver in support of the war. On April 14, 1916, the front page of The Chicago Daily Tribune read: “Humanity is Issue, Slogan of President: Hearers Wonder Whether He Means Mexico or Europe.” The paper referred to a speech President Wilson gave to the Common Counsel (an organization made up of administration Democrats) at the Jefferson Day Dinner the previous evening. The Los Angeles Times also mentioned this speech in an article entitled “Pray United States Will Not Be Drawn into an Outside Quarrel.”

On September 2, 1916, President Wilson formally accepted the Democratic nomination for president for another four years. The following day, the New York Times remarked that the audience was the least receptive when the president mentioned his policy with Mexico. The paper continued by saying:

It was in his references to his dealings with European powers and with Mexico that the President seemed most in earnest, and he uttered his words so distinctly that no one could miss their force. He again used emphasis when he gave an outline of his view of American’s obligations for the future.
The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that applause followed Wilson’s statement that “America must do its part in laying the foundation for world peace.”

On September 3, 1916, *The Los Angeles Times* quoted Wilson as saying,

> We are to play a leading part in the world drama whether we wish it or not. We shall lend, not borrow; act for ourselves, not imitate or follow; organize and initiate, not peep about merely to see where we may get in.

*The Chicago Daily Tribune* published the entirety of his speech; however, they also printed a response by the Republican congressional candidate Medill McCormick. The title of the remarks read, “G.O.P. Candidate for Congress Goes to Maine after Stinging Attack on President.”

Just the day before, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* had also taken a different approach than many newspapers by publishing an essay in the opinion section entitled “Roosevelt and the Truth About Wilson.”

The essay written by a Roosevelt supporter claims, “He ‘kept us out of the war,’ is the most demoralizing campaign cry which has been raised in the United States in a generation.”

The essay continued by accusing Wilson of being weak and warning that countries will take advantage of that weakness just like Mexico had.

> “The business of neutrality is over,” the president said, as reported in *The Dallas Morning News* on October 27, 1916. In none of the major newspapers across the country was there any published reaction to this statement, yet all of the papers published the text of Wilson’s speech in full. A few days later on November 1, the *New York Times* published “The War Situation: by the military expert of the New York Times,” in which the situation in Europe was discussed, but not in relation to any action by the United States.

In the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, on November 2, 1916, Wilson was quoted as having said:

> We are waiting for the call for which we have always waited…. We have always fought for humanity. God forbid that we should ever fight for self-satisfaction or for aggression. We are not
going to be drawn into a quarrel which means nothing to us. We are not interested in seeing one nation or group of nations prevail against another.49

In the same paper an opinion section criticizes Wilson for his “yellow campaign” and “yellow morals.” “Too Proud to Fight’ and ‘Thank God for Wilson’ are slippery phrases, soft cushion phrases, pork chop phrases. They are phrases of a degenerating, demoralizing materialism. They are yellow phrases. They are dangerous, trouble inviting phrases.”50 Not all papers had an opinion section that day. The Dallas Morning News simply reported on November 3 that the president received a very warm welcome in New York where he delivered a speech and the “cheering last[ed] thirty minutes.”51

On January 23, 1917, the day following an address President Wilson made to Congress in which he laid out the “essential terms for peace,” The Atlanta Constitution printed reactions published in other major newspapers from across the United States. The Philadelphia Public Ledger read, “President Wilson’s address was inspired by lofty idealism and voiced the aspirations of the whole world for a lasting peace founded on justice and liberty.”52 The New York Sun reported:

Mr. Wilson is sworn to execute faithfully the office of president of the United States, and to the best of his ability to preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the United States. He is not sworn to execute faithfully the office of president of humanity.53

Wilson’s speech, according to the Washington Post, “constitutes a shining ideal, seemingly unattainable while passions rule the world, but embodying nonetheless the hopes of nations both large and small.”54 The Nashville Tennessean and American said that Wilson’s speech had “the look of being the beginning of the great movement in all history for a universal democracy.”55
The United States Goes to War

After having spent over a year convincing the American public that war was the correct course of action for the United States, President Wilson appeared before Congress. In 1917, when he asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany, he went beyond attainable or realistic objectives and appealed to Congress and the American public on the basis of making “the world safe for democracy,” and of making the “world itself at last free.” President Wilson urged Congress and the American public to go to war to fight for liberty and democracy, American ideals, and principles. He vowed, “We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.” He continued:

…we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy… for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

President Wilson appealed to Congress with the same idealism that he had used in appealing to the general public. He sought to gain their support through tugging at the principles in the core of every American—nationalism, pride, honor, freedom, and duty. One congressman wrote:

We always come away feeling that we have been convinced, not by Mr. Wilson—certainly not driven or bossed by him—but with the feeling that we are all—President, Congress, and people—in the presence of an irresistible situation. Here are the facts, he says; here are the principles, here are our obligations as Democrats. What are we going to do about it? He has a
curious way of making one feel that he, along with all of us, is perfectly helpless before the facts in the case.\textsuperscript{59}

President Wilson often used the word “duty.” For him, that was the main reason America should go to war. Even before America entered the war, he stressed “duty” over “rights.” Wilson said in August of 1914 that neutrality was the “proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace.”\textsuperscript{60} However, in 1917 things had changed and America now had a moral responsibility to wage war.

According to historian Robert Ferrell, the decision to go to war was an emotional one:

\begin{quote}
…grounded in the belief, indeed conviction that right, in the person of the Allies, was battling wrong, personified by the Central Powers. Wilson and his fellow Americans believed a highly organized, savage campaign against decency and morality [was taking place abroad], and in the early spring of 1917 evil was weighing heavily in the balance against good….\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

The way Wilson presented his foreign policy was based on moral principles and selfless service to mankind—not national interests. Congress had voted in the Senate by an 82-to-6 vote in favor of war, and in the House, by a 373-to-50 vote in favor. The American public and the Congress were behind the president. Robert Ferrell writes, “The American people, to the entire disbelief of contemporary foreign observers and to the disbelief of their own children of the next generation, were willing to take a stand in the world for principle.”\textsuperscript{62}

Conclusions: Lessons for Today

Under President Wilson’s leadership, the United States’ foreign policy expanded to cover at least two main objectives—to defeat the enemy and then share the blessings America enjoys with others (peace, democracy, and freedoms). This idealism eventually led the public to become disillusioned with war. Wilson had promised more than anyone could deliver. They were destined to be disappointed with the outcome of “the war to end all wars.” Perhaps too much idealism and not enough realism had set up
unattainable goals and left Americans with a sense of defeat. Americans needed a good balance between the idealism and the realism in leaders’ public statements. When World War II broke out, President Roosevelt had the difficult job of persuading the American public that war was necessary and the objectives were real. However, he also stressed that America had an obligation to act, and that American action was the “right” thing to do. Recently, Time Magazine published this statement:

Today ... you don't hear many conservatives echoing the grand Wilsonianism of Bush’s second inaugural [sic], in which he claimed that ‘America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.’ The fastest growing species on the foreign policy right is what National Review editor Rich Lowry calls 'to hell with them' hawks: conservatives who don't care how non-Americans run their societies as long as they don't threaten us in the process. Among Democrats, hawkishness is out of fashion, but humanitarianism remains strong.63

Today, Americans have not, will not, and should not eliminate their idealism, but perhaps by studying the past, Americans will be able to create a better blend of idealism and realism for the future.
References


Notes

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 16.
8. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 79–80.
12. Ibid., 91.
13. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 129.
20. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 5.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 24.
30. Ibid., 26.
32. Ibid., 513.
34. Ibid., 30.
35. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
62. Ibid.