



**Woodrow Wilson: Self-Determination and the
Dissolution of Empire**

Ty Clevenger

Undergraduate Fellows Program

Approved by: Betty M. Unterberger
Thesis Director
D.T. Finkel

Introduction

One of the most relevant and current topics today in international law is that of self-determination. Not since World War II has there been a greater cry for change in the political makeup of the world. The Palestinians continue to press for a Palestinian state independent from Israel. Northern Ireland is still torn by demands for independence from Great Britain. Rumanians are making renewed demands for change in their government. Even more recently, the Kurds have begun a rebellion in northern Iraq, and in an area in where independence movements may have their most far-reaching effect, the Soviet Union is faced with demands for self-determination from even its most "loyal" republics. What should be the role of the United States? Should it intervene?

Certainly these questions are not new for the United States Government. From the French in Quebec, Canada to the Tibetans in China, our government has been presented with more claims to self-determination than could possibly be listed here. Obviously, more recent events such as the Persian Gulf War have specifically precipitated the question of whether or not to help the Kurds, particularly since the United States helped initiate the war. But most of the recent activity centers around Europe and the Soviet Union, much as it did during the World War I and inter-war period, and most of this activity began in 1989 with the revolutions of Eastern Europe. Two stages in this series of events have presented themselves. The first occurred as residents of the Warsaw Pact states demanded control of the governments under which they lived; a straightforward, "textbook" case of self-

determination and popular sovereignty. The second and far more complex stage occurs as ethnic groups within these states call for a more specific self-determination via independence for themselves. No sooner had Czechoslovakia become a democratic state than the Slovaks began calling for their independence. The two largest republics within Yugoslavia, Croatia and Serbia, are on the brink of civil war, with Croatia forming its own national guard and Serbia declaring it will fight to protect the Serbian minority living in Croatia. The Soviets face a similar crisis. Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia (the Baltic republics) made the earliest demands for independence based upon their sovereignty prior to Stalin. The Soviets have since been presented with demands for independence from the more "conservative" republics of the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and most recently Georgia, which formally declared its independence on April 9, 1991. Before Georgia had even declared *its* independence from the Soviet Union, the Muslim Ossetian minority *within* Georgia was seeking independence from the Georgians. What is the logical end of such demands?

Such is the dilemma that has faced all political leaders dealing with the issue of self-determination. The most dangerous aspect of self-determination in the absolute sense is its impending result: the dissolution of states and empires. Is it possible to support some form of self-determination policy without bringing about the breakup of these entities? If so, what difference does it make? In answer to the first question, such will be the topic of this thesis. In answer to the second, the potential impact on the United States is enormous. Consider, for example, the current situation in the Soviet Union. The Soviet

empire has only begun to show signs of dissolution, and already the Kremlin is withdrawing nuclear weapons from the outlying republics to the Russian Republic.¹ Were the Soviet Union to separate into its individual republics, nuclear proliferation would have increased at an unprecedented rate. Already this threat has been realized by the United States, with some Pentagon officials rating the possibility for a nuclear attack higher now than during the Cold War.² For example, during the Persian Gulf War, U.S. military commanders feared the possibility of a nuclear attack as a regional Soviet commander of one of the Muslim republics might decide to act alone in response to U.S. military activity near his homeland.³ Thus it is clear that self-determination and the dissolution of empire are not just historically significant topics from the Wilson era, but are topics that directly affect the national security of the United States.

No single person is more associated with the concept of self-determination than Woodrow Wilson. Though the political and philosophical discussions of self-determination began centuries earlier, they never truly gained prominence until the early 20th century with the onset of the First World War. At the same time, the Wilson Administration oversaw an unprecedented change in the boundaries and even the existence of states throughout the world, as many of the various national minorities within the warring states began to demand independence. Yet the general unanimity of scholars who recognize Wilson as one of the foremost proponents of self-determination can be deceiving. There is very little consensus on Wilson's actual concept of self-determination nor its impact in changing the political face of the world. In particular, there is great disagreement regarding how, and if, Wilson was able to reconcile his support of self-determination with its impending result: the dissolution of empire. As a career academician in the field of political science, Wilson provides a unique opportunity to examine not only the actuality of his policies, but the intellectual development that brought them about. Accordingly, this thesis will examine the relevant intellectual background of Wilson, it will comparatively view his policies affecting self-determination and the dissolution of empire in Europe and China, it will review occasions during which Wilson sought to implement these policies (particularly at the Paris Peace Conference), and it will examine lesser factors that may have influenced Wilson's policies, all with the express intent of defining Woodrow Wilson's views on self-determination and the dissolution of empire.

Wilson made his appearance on the world scene at a critical

juncture in U.S. history. As Betty Unterberger points out, Wilson (without realizing it) had to reconcile two seemingly conflicting ideals espoused by two of the foremost American Presidents of all time, both of whom Wilson admired greatly.⁴ Under the leadership of George Washington the United States had been formed when the American colonies rebelled against Great Britain, decrying "taxation without representation" and seeking self-government. However, when the South sought to establish its right to self-government, Abraham Lincoln fought to prevent the dissolution of the nation. Wilson regarded Lincoln as "the supreme American of our history," an unusual view for the time from a man born and raised in Virginia.⁵ Wilson explained that Lincoln "even understood the South, as no other man of his generation did. He respected, because he comprehended, though he could not hold, its view of the Constitution;"⁶ and in regard to the treatment of the South, "...He would have secured it [the South] once more, and speedily if possible, in its right to self-government, when the fight was fought out."⁷ The latter statement may very well explain Wilson's great attachment to Lincoln, for in assuming the nature of Lincoln's post-Civil War policy he mentions a principle of great concern to himself: the principle of self-government. Although Lincoln stood vigorously for the preservation of the Union, Wilson interpreted him having a belief in the right of the South to self-government, a view later made evident by Wilson himself in terms of a desire for self-determination of peoples without dismemberment of nations. George Washington embodied the spirit of the American Revolution and the inalienable right of peoples to choose their own destiny; Abraham Lincoln represented

the Civil War and the quest to preserve the Union. Thus Washington stands for the ultimate act of self-determination (revolution) and Lincoln stands for opposition to the dissolution of empire, although it might be an oversimplification to leave the comparison at that. It has been pointed out that Wilson believed, right or wrong, that Lincoln would have fought for the speedy return of self-government in the South. At the same time, George Washington had more to his credit than the victory of the American Revolution - he had shared responsibility for crafting the Constitution, the very document that drew the states together. Interestingly, in Constitutional Government Wilson argues that in the early years of the United States, states would have had the right to withdraw from the Union.⁸ However, Wilson presents a recurring argument that governments are organic and must be capable of changing from one generation to another, an important note to make before undertaking a study of Wilson and self-determination.⁹ In the context of the Civil War, Wilson argued that the United States had developed to a point where its organic unity and contemporary constitutional interpretation would no longer allow states to secede.¹⁰ Thus Wilson's early writings on the subject are particularly important when one considers that he had to reconcile a desire for self-determination and a desire to preserve the integrity of the union, not just for the benefit of U.S. history up to that time but for the sake of his own policy toward self-determination and the dissolution of empire elsewhere in the world.

A foremost question to be asked is whether Wilson had any particular definition of self-determination and if so, how he

formed that definition. Those who espouse self-determination are often criticized for not defining "self" - who has the right to collectively set their own course. Indeed, the controversy rages on over what groups have the right to express their independent will, under what circumstances, and to what extent. Nonetheless, Wilson did indirectly provide a definition of what constituted "self" in self-determination. In Constitutional Government Wilson proposes that a "community" must exist before a constitutional government can exist, and he goes to rather elaborate lengths to define just what comprises a community. The passage is very lengthy but merits quotation:

Evidently, if a constitutional government is a government conducted on the basis of a definite understanding between those who administer it and those who obey it, there can be no constitutional government unless there be a community to sustain and develop it, - unless the nation whose instrument it is, is conscious of common interests and can form common purposes. A people not conscious of any unity, inorganic, unthoughtful, without concert of action, can manifestly neither form nor sustain a constitutional system. The lethargy of an unawakened consciousness is upon them, the helplessness of unformed purpose. They can conceive no common end; they can contrive no common measures. Nothing but a community can have a constitutional form of government, and if a nation has not become a community, it cannot have that sort of polity. It is necessary at the very outset of our analysis, therefore, that we should form a very definite conception of what a community is, and should ask ourselves very frankly whether the United States

can be regarded as a community or not. Only in that way can we determine the place of the United States in constitutional development; and only practical historical tests will answer either the one question or the other.

The word 'community' is often upon our lips, but seldom receives any clear definition in our thoughts. If we should examine our implicit assumptions with regard to it, I suppose that we should agree in saying that no body of people could constitute a community in any true or practical sense who did not have a distinct consciousness of common ties and interests, a common manner and standard of life and conduct, and a practiced habit of union and concerted action in whatever affected it as a whole. It is in this understanding of the term that we speak when we say only a community can have a constitutional government. No body of people which is not clearly conscious of common interests and of common standards of life and happiness can come to any satisfactory agreement with its government, and no people which has not a habit of union and concerted action in regard to its affairs could secure itself against the breach of such an agreement if it existed. A people must have the impulse and must find the means to express itself in institutions if it is to have a constitutional system.¹¹

Certainly any definition of a concept so broad as self-determination must involve elements of the arbitrary, but rarely does one find so succinct a definition of self-determination, and certainly it would not be fair to accuse Wilson of advocating a vague principle whose definition he had not considered. Certainly he may not have *fully* considered the consequences of the

principle he advocated, as his initial public references to self-determination were a provoked response to Bolshevik propaganda. Wilson was, however, well aware that many had misunderstood his espousal of self-determination. At one point he told the Senate that he had not realized the grief that was to have been caused by his use of the term.¹² Clearly, though, Wilson had given some prior consideration to the principles he espoused.

Prior to his entry into politics, Wilson was foremost a student of government and of politics. Accordingly, one can review his early writings and find a number of themes that undoubtedly influenced his view of self-determination and the dissolution of empire. Wilson was consistently a proponent of magnanimity in politics, whether it be the conglomeration of various entities to form the United States or the creation of supranational entities such as a Pan-American union or the League of Nations. As early as 1885 in Mere Literature, Wilson cites Edmund Burke, a member of the English Parliament: "Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom; and a great empire and little minds go ill together."¹³ He compliments Burke for his "eminently practical system of thought." In the same speech Burke had argued for granting freedom to the American colonies, saying that the Americans had developed a different identity, and that force would be impractical to keep the empire together. Wilson had noted all this, further quoting Burke, "Obedience is what makes government....freedom, and not servitude, is the cure of anarchy."¹⁴ These qualities of a separate identity and the need for force to preserve union are later used as reasons for Wilson's recognition of Czechoslovakia. Wilson disdained the use of force

under any circumstances, and the necessity of its use to preserve an empire seems to have been one of his criteria for allowing an empire's dissolution. In regard to Burke's later statement, Wilson's quest was to find the best way of providing that freedom which was the cure of anarchy. One means of providing such freedom was guaranteeing it in law. Not surprisingly, Wilson was a great proponent of constitutional government, having written a book by that title. He firmly believed in governance by rule of law as opposed to the arbitrary rule of mankind. At the same time, though, he believed that such institutionalized governments were superior because they could institutionalize the process of change:

The ideals of government cannot be fixed from generation to generation; only its conception can be the large image of what it is. Liberty fixed in unalterable law would be no liberty at all. Government is a part of life, and, with life, it must change, alike in its objects and in its principle of liberty, that there must be the freest right and opportunity of adjustment.¹⁵

Wilson believed in the right of peoples to revolt, a right portrayed by George Washington. Accordingly, he wished to do everything possible to prevent revolution from becoming the only means of change available. In context of Constitutional Government, this most directly applied to internal self-determination, the right of people to change the government under which they lived. However, one can easily relate the principle to external self-determination, the right of peoples to set their own course without duress from outside forces. Herein would lie the basis for a supranational constitution, a League of Nations.

Another principle which Wilson emphatically supported was "consent of the governed." This was later expressed in Wilson's second Inaugural Address among "...things we shall stand for, whether in war or in peace,":

That governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed and that no other powers should be supported by the common thought, purpose, or power of the family of nations."¹⁶

Wilson had long been a proponent of "consent of the governed," but of particular importance is his extension that "no other powers should be supported" who did not meet these criteria. Not only did Wilson admire this guarantee of internal self-determination in the U.S. Constitution, he expected it to be present in other nations before any means of guaranteeing external self-determination could be formulated. In Wilson's well-known speech to a joint session of Congress requesting a declaration of war against Germany and advocating, "The world must be made safe for democracy," he also asserts that "self-governed nations" do not provoke such wars. Wilson argues:

It was not upon their [the German people's] impulse that their government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval. It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools.

Self-governed nations do not fill their neighbor states

with spies or set the course of intrigue to bring about some critical posture of affairs which will give them an opportunity to strike and make conquest.¹⁷

This political and philosophical predisposition of Wilson played a critical part in formulating his views on self-determination and the dissolution of empire.

A final intellectual trait of Wilson to consider, more for the benefit of understanding his position on the dissolution of empire than his concept of self-determination, is his belief in the need for subdivisions of power. His fondness for magnanimity in politics has already been observed, but coupled with this principle is his belief in the need for subunits of government. Wilson even considered political subdivision to be the cause of political success in the United States: "The distribution of the chief powers of government among the States is the localization and specialization of constitutional understandings; and this elastic adaptation of constitutional processes to the various and changing conditions of a new country and a vast area has been the real cause of our political success."¹⁸ On the necessity of subdividing power among the states in the United States, Wilson wrote, "It is not, at bottom, a question of sovereignty or any other political abstraction; it is a question of vitality. Uniform regulation of the economic conditions of a vast territory and a various people like the United States would be mischievous, if not impossible."¹⁹ Later this belief would be expressed in Wilson's initial opposition to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for economic reasons. The Inquiry, appointed by Wilson to study questions of boundaries and national sovereignty,

based most of its decisions on their presumed economic impact. Thus this belief in subdivisions of power most certainly influenced Wilson on matters of self-determination and dissolution of empire. All of Wilson's political preconceptions mentioned thusfar directly affected his policies on self-determination and dissolution of empire. His support for "consent of the governed" would later manifest itself at Paris when he insisted that transformation of national boundaries and disposition of colonies take into consideration the wishes of the people. His affinity for constitutional government as a means of peaceful change led to a League of Nations and support for collective security, while a sympathy for magnanimity in politics via federations of subunits would be seen in attempts to create autonomous states within Austria-Hungary while trying to preserve the empire.

Thusfar we have seen some of the developmental political beliefs of Wilson, including consent of the governed, constitutional government with capacity for peaceful change, and magnanimity of politics coupled with political subunits. The next logical question to consider is how Wilson applied these principles when given the opportunity. As early as 1901, he said, "We might not have seen our duty, had the Phillipines not fallen to us by the willful fortune of war; but it would have been our duty, nevertheless, to play the part we now see ourselves obliged to play."²⁰ Certainly this played a part, but the ensuing hostilities that led to World War I truly began to precipitate opportunities for self-determination and thus dissolution of empire. Wilson was thus called upon to put these principles into practice. Generally, most discussions of Wilson's views of self-determination deal almost exclusively with Europe. As a result,

there are clear benefits to an examination of Wilsonian policy in another region of the world, preferably a region of substantial difference from Europe. One of the first international issues to face the Wilson Administration was whether to continue supporting the U.S. role in a banking consortium loaning money to China as the Taft Administration had done. Interestingly, Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan were both unfamiliar with the banking ordeal in China.²¹ (For that matter, Wilson was not particularly familiar with China as a whole). The U.S. minister to Peking, William J. Calhoun, had reported: "The outlook is such that there can be no hope of early signature. To my mind, it is no longer a question of friendly international cooperation to help China but a combination of big powers with common interests to accomplish their own selfish political aims."²² Wilson and Secretary of State Bryan agreed that such "dollar diplomacy" should be reversed because it constituted an oligopoly from the standpoint of showing preference to a select group of American bankers who would represent the U.S. in the agreement, but more importantly because the lack of U.S. latitude for independent action would not allow it to control enforcement and collection of the loan.²³ This incident provided an early indication of the Wilson Administration's policies toward self-determination: not only was the U.S. going to refuse to undermine the sovereignty of China through economic duress, it intended to remove itself altogether from the loan process so that it might prevent the lenders from manipulating China. This support for Chinese self-determination was prophetic of the proactive role Wilson would take in supporting such rights for weaker nations.

Incidentally, the Chinese government was later compelled to accept the terms of the other powers which Wilson had outright condemned, and the international situation in China eventually became such that Wilson found it necessary to reverse his policy and initiate the formation of a new consortium for the very reason he pulled the U.S. out of the first one: to protect China's sovereignty.²⁴ At the same time, Wilson was considering whether or not to recognize the new Chinese government, led by Yuan Shih-kai, which had overthrown the Manchu dynasty. Wilson demonstrated great sympathy for the people of China, and was the first world leader to step forward and recognize the new government of China. On April 6, 1913, Wilson announced to other governments that he planned to recognize the government of China, at which time they unanimously rejected the offer to join him, each for various self-interested reasons.²⁵ Thus Wilson bucked the "Old Order" early on by recognizing the right of the Chinese people to revolt and organize a new government. Britain had argued that it needed formal confirmation of the rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by its citizens in Chinese territory.²⁶ Ironically, Japan had argued that recognition would undermine the self-determination process because it would amount to internal interference in favor of Yuan Shih-kai's forces.²⁷ But an intercepted circular telegram to Austria-Hungary revealed its true interest - enforcing prior obligations on China.²⁸ Even the Kuomintang governor of Kiangsi, although personally opposed to the rule of Yuan, expressed gratitude for Wilson's recognition of Yuan's government.²⁹ In Nanking, the local Kuomintang called a special meeting and sent

several representatives to the American consulate to express their thanks for recognition of Yuan's government.³⁰ Early on Wilson had expressed distaste for the "Old Order" by acting in what he perceived to be the best interest of the people involved and ignoring any conflicting material interests of others, Americans included. Noted Wilsonian scholar Arthur S. Link, chiefly responsible for the compilation of Wilson's papers, observed, "There is not a single instance on record when Wilson ever sought to obtain for any American citizen monopolistic concessions or preferential treatment in investment and trade."³¹ In contrast to the early recognition of China, the United States was the last major power to recognize Czechoslovakia. Although the two events might seem difficult to reconcile, there are some considerations that clarify the apparent inconsistency. First, China experienced an internal revolution involving no dissolution of empire, a key consideration. Second, Aside from Yuan's government there would have been anarchy. Thus Wilson acted in what he believed was the best interest of the Chinese.

The Wilson Administration, in fact, went to substantial lengths to prevent undue interference in the internal affairs of China. The Administration was very reluctant to criticize domestic Chinese affairs, even when some of Yuan's methods became somewhat dictatorial. American minister to China Paul S. Reinsch interpreted Yuan's centralization of power not as a reaction against democracy but rather as a necessity to create national unity and internal peace, (FRUS May 5, 1914, Reinsch to Bryan).³² Bryan observed Yuan had adopted "something of Huerta's methods,"³³ but later toned down his criticism when social and

financial conditions in China improved, saying that although Yuan was somewhat dictatorial, one could hardly pass judgment.³⁴ The U.S. government flatly refused to recognize any treaty between China and Japan that impaired "the political or territorial integrity of the Republic of China." [May 11, 1915].³⁵ Even when the Chinese were considering reestablishment of the monarchy, the acting U.S. minister in Peking suggested American policy should be determined largely by its acceptability to the Chinese people, and in fact the U.S. chose not to condemn reestablishment of the monarchy.³⁶ Wilson commented to Lansing:

"Could we not give a very plain intimation to the Japanese government and the governments which seem to be acting with in this matter that we agree with the Chinese in their position that a change in their form of government, however radical, is wholly a domestic question and that it would in our opinion be a serious breach of China' sovereignty to undertake any form of interference or even protest without such evidences as are now wholly lacking that foreign interests would be imperiled which it is our privilege to safeguard..."³⁷

Lansing added:

"...while the Government of the United States may feel a natural sympathy for republican forms of government which fulfill the hopes of the people of other countries, we recognize [the]right of every nation to determine [the] form of its government and that the people of China have our good wishes for undisturbed peace and prosperity."³⁸

Although these issues pertaining to China predate the Paris Peace Conference, they clearly show the attitude of Wilson and his administration toward those who would thwart self-determination.

World War I, of course, was the occasion that prompted Wilson to regularly address the issue of self-determination and dissolution of empire. The Bolshevik Revolution was the crisis in particular that forced Wilson to meet the ideological challenges issued by Lenin and Trotsky. Following Bolshevik publication of the secret treaties, Wilson felt an urgent need to respond to their propaganda as they were clearly gaining ground exposing the underhandedness of the "old order" of diplomacy. They had called for self-determination for all peoples and demanded that both the Allies and the Central Powers state their war aims. Prior to U.S. entry into the war, Wilson had called upon both sides to state their peace terms, saying, " Each side desires to make the rights and privileges of weak peoples and small States as secure against aggression or denial in the future as the rights and privileges of the great and powerful states now at war."³⁹ In January, he added: "I am proposing, as it were, that the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people...that all nations hence forth avoid entangling alliances which would draw them into competitions of power."⁴⁰ By May 26, 1917, in direct response to the Bolsheviks, Wilson was making self-determination as well as at least some boundary changes part of the war aims of the U.S.: "She [The U.S.] is fighting for no advantage or selfish object of her own, but for the liberation of peoples everywhere from the aggressions of

autocratic force," later adding "We are fighting for the liberty, the self-government, and the undictated development of all peoples, and every feature of the settlement that concludes this war must be conceived and executed for that purpose."⁴¹ In June, 1917, Wilson increases the belligerency of his self-determination rhetoric even further: "These men [German military leaders] have never regarded nations as peoples, men, women, and children of like blood and frame as themselves, for whom governments existed and in whom governments had their life. They have regarded them merely as serviceable organizations which they could by force or intrigue bend or corrupt to their own purpose. They have regarded the smaller states, in particular, and the peoples who could be overwhelmed by force, as their natural tools and instruments of domination."⁴²

It has been noted that from the time of the Magna Carta through the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the French Revolution, the subject of "rights" focused almost exclusively on the individual, whereas the latter 19th Century found itself discussing the rights of states and nations. Clearly, though most of Wilson's rhetoric focused on states, he did not forego concern for the rights of the individuals within them. Furthermore, Wilson defines nations as being composed of peoples (drawing upon his belief in self-government), an apparently self-evident and mundane point, but nonetheless significant in light of the precedence in which governments, not peoples, were sovereign.

As was mentioned earlier, Wilson had a fondness for George Washington and his leadership in both the Revolution and in

establishing the government that followed. Wilson believed in the people's right for revolution; the ultimate expression of self-determination. Thus it is very significant to note that Wilson compared the war with the American Revolution, excepting the fact that this time it was being fought for the benefit of others.⁴³ Wilson presented the war as an effort to grant the indigenous peoples of the world "control of their own destinies." One might ask, as many have, about the extent to which Wilson sought to have this principle applied. Ultimately, the question becomes clearer at the Paris Peace Conference and thereafter. Nonetheless, Wilson began addressing the issue at the early stages of the war, and even at this early date it was clear he was not a unilateral supporter of independence movements as many presume him to have been. In December 1917 he said, "You catch, with me, the voices of humanity that are in the air...They insist that the war shall not end in vindictive action of any kind; that no nation or peoples shall be robbed or punished because the irresponsible rulers of a single country have themselves done deep and abominable wrong. It is this thought that has been expressed in the formula 'No annexations, no contributions, no punitive indemnities.'" ⁴⁴ Although, in context, he does not express any particular limits to his support of claims to self-determination, he mentions, "no annexations, no contributions, no punitive indemnities." Later, this was more clearly expressed as his opposition to "handing peoples about..."⁴⁵ By January 1918 there is more clear indication that although Wilson strongly favored self-determination, his distaste for the dissolution of empire (and thus the dissolution of political magnanimity) made him hesitant

to support independence movements. Lansing wrote, "The President has indicated a purpose to preserve the Dual Monarchy intact. I do not believe that it is wise to do thus. I think that the President will have to abandon this idea and favor the erection of new States out of the imperial territory and require the separation of Austria-Hungary. This is the only certain means of ending German power in Europe."⁴⁶ Point Ten of Wilson's Fourteen Points Address specified a desire to preserve Austria-Hungary if possible. When a representative of the Serbians opposed Point Eleven, Presidential Advisor Edward M. House regard him as impudent and advised Wilson to ignore him, which he did.⁴⁷ The Serbians, in fact, were rather upset by Wilson's and Lloyd George's statements.⁴⁸ At the same time, Wilson was being criticized by the Italians, who represented a different motive in changing national boundaries, having hoped to obtain strategic new territory.⁴⁹ Even outside parties perceived that Wilson's intentions toward Austria-Hungary involved no dissolution of the empire - the Papal Legate in Switzerland called on Charge' d' Affairs Charles Wilson to urge that the President reply to Czernin's speech of January 24, because it and the Fourteen Points were almost in accord.⁵⁰ Other Allies were much less interested in preserving any of the entities they were fighting. When Wilson told Sir William Wiseman that he still supported a policy of "no annexations and no punitive indemnities," Wiseman was disturbed by the insistence on "no annexations" insofar as it might apply to the colonies.⁵¹ He retorts by pointing out the danger of Germany purposely misinterpreting "no annexations" and

accepting it as an offer to return to the status quo.⁵² Wiseman's greater interest, though, was clearly that Britain be able to lay claim on Germany's colonies, a great source of contention at the Paris Peace Conference. Wilson and his colleagues were very much alone among the allies in considering an undivided Austria, and were mildly but firmly criticized for it:

"We know by experience that a mere rumor of negotiations in Vienna on the basis of undivided Austria not only causes great alarm in Italy but is at once used by Austrian diplomats as a proof that the Entente has abandoned the cause of all the subject nationalities under the Hapsburg rule. A support which greatly weakens our friendships and heartens our enemies."⁵³

Wilson believed strongly in the sovereignty of nations as demonstrated by his desire to preserve Austria-Hungary if at all possible. However, as the war progressed, this issue became more difficult. In the case of Russia, Wilson faced conflicting desires to respect the sovereignty of the Russian people and to intervene on behalf of their best interest. On May 30, 1918, according to William Wiseman, "He remarked that he would go as far as intervening against the wishes of the Russian people - knowing it was eventually for their good - providing he thought the scheme had any practical chance of success."⁵⁴ Two weeks later, though, he told Wiseman he would not support intervention without intervention from the de facto government or some representative of Russian opinion.⁵⁵ The two comments would appear to be in conflict, although the later statement was made with particular reference to Japanese intervention in Russia, and allied

suspensions of Japanese intentions was growing. Although Wilson had great apprehension regarding interference in the internal affairs of other states, his statement regarding intervention for their own good (regardless of their opinion) reflects a condescending attitude seen on other occasions with regard to other peoples and cultures. This cultural bias will be further examined later.

An important turning point came on October 19, 1918. Robert Lansing informed the Austro-Hungarians that "because of events of the utmost importance" President Wilson could no longer accept Point 10.⁵⁶ The Czechoslovaks had been given recognition by the U.S. as a state de facto, thus Wilson changed positions on the issue to recognize not only the autonomy but the independence of the Czechoslovaks. However, one should by no means conclude that Wilson had changed his position on the dissolution of empire. The United States was the last of the Allies to recognize the independence of Czechoslovakia despite the fondness with which they viewed Wilson. This incident in fact provided one of the clearest examples of just what Wilson's views were on the dissolution of empire. He had preferred magnanimity in politics with federated subunits. He had sought to accomplish this by supporting autonomy for the various subject nationalities within the context of Austro-Hungarian federation. Specifically, he had used the "economic vitality" argument in reference to the smaller national subgroups. Clearly, all of this would have been expected to be accomplished with respect for "consent of the governed." Accordingly, when it became evident that the Czechoslovaks would no longer consent to be governed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Wilson recognized their ultimate right of self-determination, much

like Edmund Burke recognized the ultimate right of the Americans to exert their independence, and recognized Czechoslovak independence. The Chinese revolution was purely an internal change of government, and was recognized quickly by Wilson by virtue of its de facto rule and presumed acceptability to the Chinese people - a simple case of self-determination. On the other hand , Czechoslovakia added the complicating element of forcing the dissolution of an empire, much like the American Revolution had done. In this case Wilson returned to Burke's position on American independence, realizing that a certain critical mass had been achieved and a certain irreconcilability reached.

The day after Wilson let it be known that he intended to recognize the Czechoslovak independence movement because of their co-belligerency in Siberia, it becomes clear that Wilson was anticipating the changes that would be taking place at the upcoming Paris Peace Conference. In conversation with Sir William Wiseman he gave an early but clear indication of the larger picture " in his mind and how his various principles are to be achieved." The note written by Wiseman is long but nonetheless merits quotation:

"The President regards the war - or rather the peace which will follow it - as a great opportunity for remodeling the whole structure of international affairs. He is not so much interested in the adjustment of this claim or that - the limitation of one power, and the strengthening of another - but his mind visualizes a new world in which there shall be no tyranny and no war...It would be misleading, for instance, to take any one of the Fourteen Points of his

speech of January the Fourteenth and separate it from the rest of the speech. Each of the fourteen propositions put forward simultaneously by the President is numbered to indicate that it constitutes a part of a complete and consistent whole...In the President's mind, the whole future peace of the world is a single conception based on the League of Nations. If that fails, all else is useless...All the other thirteen points are benefits which flow from the main idea. Should that fail to be put into operation, its proposed component parts become meaningless and disappear with it."⁵⁷

A few weeks later he makes mention of this "larger picture" before a joint session of Congress: "We are about to give order and organization to this peace, not only for ourselves, but for the other peoples of the world as well, so far as they will suffer us to serve them. It is international justice that we seek, not just domestic safety merely."⁵⁸ In a conversation with Stockton Axson (his brother-in-law) he said: "1. There must never again be a foot of ground acquired by conquest. 2. It must be recognized in fact that the small nations are on an equality of rights with the great nations. 3. Ammunition must be manufactured by governments and not by private individuals. 4. There must be some sort of an association of nations wherein all shall guarantee the territorial integrity of each."⁵⁹ The upcoming Paris Peace Conference was to provide not only the opportunity but the imperative to put these principles to the test. Although Wilson had sought to prevent dissolution of these empires, the fact remained that they had dissolved with or without his blessing, and

now it was time to reconstruct world order, Europe in particular.

On the morning of December 4, 1918, Wilson boarded the George Washington to begin the journey overseas to Paris. Here was to be the climax of Wilson's long formulated views on self-determination and the dissolution of empire. The two principles were often in conflict, and Paris was the place where they needed to be reconciled. Interestingly, one can tell a great deal about his approach to the Paris Peace Conference by the people he took with him. First of all, he took members of the press and representatives of his administration to deal with them. Wilson had expressed his thorough disdain for secret treaties, and he intended to see that no such relics of the old order remained at Paris. Ray Stannard Baker, who dealt with the press directly on behalf of Wilson, emphasized the dramatic effect the press had on proceedings in Paris:

"At Paris these ambassadors of public opinion - at least those from America - had come, not begging, but demanding. They sat at every doorway, they looked over every shoulder, they wanted every resolution and report and wanted it immediately. I shall never forget the delegation of American newspaper men, led by John Nevin, I saw come striding through that holy of holies, the French Foreign Office, demanding that they be admitted to the first general session of the Peace Conference. They horrified the upholders of the old methods, they desperately offended the ancient conventions, they were as rough and direct as democracy itself," and also said, "In many ways the most powerful and least considered group of men at Paris were the newspaper correspondents - we had one hundred and fifty of

them from America alone. I heard them called 'ambassadors of public opinion.' Here they were with rich and powerful news associations or newspapers or magazines behind them, and with instant communication available to every part of the world. Since Vienna in 1815, since Verona in 1822, when the great powers agreed secretly to suppress the liberty of the press because 'it is the most powerful means used by the pretended supporters of the rights of nations to the detriment of those Princes' - since those old times popular education, universal suffrage, a cheap press, and easy communication had utterly changed the world."⁶⁰

Wilson's great distaste for the "old order" and its secret treaties is very much reflective of his positions on self-determination and the dissolution of empire. So long as various peoples and nationalities were being secretly bartered about from one country to another without their consent, they could hardly exert any semblance of self-determination. The other group Wilson took along on the George Washington was an assembly of geographers, ethnographers, historians, economists, and other "experts" to deal with the problems of re-partitioning Eastern Europe. Wilson was frequently and sometimes severely criticized by his peers and later historians for espousing high principles and yet ignoring the details of settlements in Europe and elsewhere. However, such individuals often overlook the fact that Wilson was fully cognizant of his lack of expertise well before the Paris Peace Conference was organized. Accordingly, he brought an army of such experts along to deal with those questions which he was not qualified to address himself. One British diplomat even defended his dealing with specific items as well: "Certainly

none of the chief delegates was more eager for the facts in the case than was the President of the United States, and none was more able to assimilate them more quickly or use them more efficiently in the discussion of territorial problems"⁶¹ In giving them their charge Wilson reflected the importance he attached to their work: "Tell me what is right and I will fight for it. Give me a guaranteed position."⁶² Wilson had a very clear approach to the conference: the experts were to provide him all necessary details for particular settlements, and he was to provide the broad principles of agreement that would provide a means for a more permanent peace.

Ray Stannard Baker provides an interesting insight into the discussions taking place aboard the George Washington: "We have no record of this meeting in the ornate cabin of the George Washington save notes made at the time by Dr. Isaiah Bowman (which he has entrusted to me; but these notes show plainly enough what lay in the President's mind at the time, and what he proposed to do. Condensed to its essentials, the President said that the American delegation would be the only people at the Conference with a disinterested point of view; it was supremely necessary to 'follow the opinions of mankind and to express the will of the people rather than that of their leaders at the Conference,' and that the decisions must rest upon this opinion of mankind and 'not upon the previous determinations and diplomatic schemes of the assembled representatives.' "Above all, there must be an organization, a league of nations, to give both security and elasticity to the settlements, and to make easier alterations in them after the time of present passion has subsided."⁶³ Some

important points can be drawn from these statements. First of all, as the only "disinterested" party, the United States could objectively apply its principles of fairness. Directly related to that, Wilson recognized a moral "high ground" held by the United States and assumed a mandate from the peoples of the world to the point of overriding their leaders: "The Poison of Bolshevism, he said, was accepted readily because 'it is a protest against the way in which the world has worked. It was to be our business at the Peace Conference to fight for a new order, 'agreeably if we can, disagreeably if we must'"⁶⁴ Secondly, Wilson demonstrates his predetermined conviction that the "new order" be institutionalized through some means of collective security: "It is not possible to secure the happiness and prosperity of the world, to establish an enduring peace, unless the repetition of such wrongs [as occurred in the war] is rendered impossible...In my judgment, it is not sufficient to establish this principle. It is necessary that it should be supported by a co-operation of the nations which shall be based upon fixed and definite covenants, and which shall be made certain of effective action through the instrumentality of a League of Nations."⁶⁴ He further sees this as a "constitutional" means of allowing self-determination (and thereby orderly revolution) by providing an institution through which those peoples and nationalities who were not satisfied with the specific settlements at Paris could have their grievances addressed.

One of these groups that Wilson took on board the George Washington proved to be a formidable if not unexpected ally. His declarations for openness at Paris had somewhat endeared him to the press, and when things became difficult during the course of

the negotiations they lambasted the other leaders for their recalcitrance. The December 19, 1918 Manchester Guardian (a British Newspaper) is a good example:

"President Wilson has come with certain perfectly definite principles of policy in his mind and a perfectly resolute intention to see them carried out in any settlement to which he is to be a party. These are the principles which he himself has enunciated, which the vast majority of the American people approve and which the Allies have quite formally and definitely accepted. Yet, in spite of the fact that they have thus been accepted and that the surrender of Germany took place on that clear understanding and no other, President Wilson cannot have long breathed the air of Paris without discovering certain strange discrepancies between this professed acceptance and the sectional and purely nationalistic demands actually put forward in various countries, not excluding our own."⁶⁶

This support from the press was certainly helpful because it put pressure on the other allied leaders as their own publics became aware of some of the games that were being played at Paris. A good example of the "old order" would be Lloyd George's two positions on self-determination - one public and one private. Lloyd George said he would like the Conference to treat German colonies as part of the Royal Dominions which had captured them. Baker observed, "He was as vigorous and vivid in his arguments now for this solution, which President Wilson called a little later a 'mere distribution of the spoils,' as he had been vigorous and vivid in January, 1918, when the shibboleth 'self-determination' was sweeping the world and he had pressed its

application further than President Wilson had ever thought of doing - to the native tribes of Africa. On January 5, 1918, he had said to the Trade Union Congress which was vigorously supporting the principle of 'no annexations': 'With regard to the German colonies, I have repeatedly declared that they are held at the disposal of a conference whose decisions must have primary regard to the wishes of the native inhabitants of such colonies.' At that time he had vividly imagined these colonies as somehow controlling their own destinies, but in the present argument, where he had a wholly different purpose to serve, he saw some of them with equal vividness as 'cannibal colonies, where people were eating each other.'"⁶⁷

A matter of key importance is the subject of collective security as it relates to self-determination and the dissolution of empire. Herein was the means by which Wilson most directly sought to reconcile self-determination with a desire to prevent dissolution of empire. He had certainly discussed the concept of a League of Nations before, but the Paris Peace Conference was the designated place to put it in motion. Wilson had set out immediately upon his arrival at Paris to press collective security as a permanent means of addressing the problems of self-determination and dissolution of empire, saying, "This is the central object of our meeting. Settlements may be temporary, but the actions of the nations in the interests of peace and justice must be permanent. We can set up permanent processes. We may not be able to set up permanent decisions."⁶⁸ He also set out immediately to draw distinction between the "old order" and the "new order." Baker noted, "This in many respects, is the most

important subject connected with the Peace Conference; for it was the concrete symbol of the whole struggle between the 'new order and the 'old order.'" Again and again Wilson called the League the "key to the whole settlement."⁶⁹ The popular press throughout Europe and the United States as well as Asia had been Reporting Wilson's plans for peace, which gave him a distinct advantage. He took advantage of the momentum he gained by the time of his arrival by trying to influence the course of the agenda. He argued that "the world's unrest arose from the unsettled condition of Europe, not from the state of affairs in the East, or in the Colonies, and that the postponement of these questions would only increase the pressure on the Delegates of the Peace Conference. He would therefore prefer to set in process immediately all that was required to hasten a solution of European questions...it was then decided that the Secretary General should ask all Delegations representing Powers with territorial claims to send the Secretariat their written statements within ten days."⁷⁰ The "old order' was not to give in without a fight, though. Those at Paris had already accepted on January 13 the President's "list of subjects for discussion,"⁷¹ in which the League of Nations was first followed by reparations and territorial questions, with colonies last of all. Baker reported, "They were not going to fight him on his main contentions. That would have been poor tactics. It was the familiar policy which he himself described later in the Council of 'acceptance in principle, but negation in detail."⁷² Further, the "impetuous" Lloyd George precipitated the discussion of the German colonies on the next day, "an exceedingly bold and clever tactical

move."⁷³ The next day Lloyd George "ups the ante" by bringing in W.F. Massey of New Zealand, Lieutenant General J.C. Smuts of South Africa, W.M. Hughes of Australia, and Sir Robert L. Borden of Canada to argue for the outright annexation of German colonies to their respective dominions.⁷⁴ The next tactical maneuver by Lloyd George and Clemenceau was to try to sidetrack the League of Nations issue by referring it to a committee and overloading the committee with too many members, particularly from small countries.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, Wilson outdid them all by appointing himself to the committee instead of someone else, and then by becoming chairman. Baker reported that interest even shifted from the Council to the League of Nations Commission. Having already appointed General Robert Cecil and General Smuts of New Zealand (both of whom favored the League), it would have been very difficult for Lloyd George to change his mind and appoint himself. Baker reports the obvious reason for which the issue had been referred to a committee: "There can be no doubt that the other heads of States - not one of whom really believed in the League...considered that in referring it to a commission they were at least getting it temporarily out of the way - so they could proceed to the business that really interested them: the division of the colonies, the assessment of damages against the Germans, and so on."⁷⁶

On January 25, Wilson once again lectured his colleagues as self-designated representative of the popular will: "Gentlemen, the select classes of mankind are no longer the governors of mankind. The fortunes of mankind are now in the hands of the plain peoples of the whole world. Satisfy them and you have

justified their confidence not only, but established peace. Fail to satisfy them, and no arrangement that you can make will either set up or steady the peace of the world."⁷⁷ Herein Wilson makes a very pointed comment directed at the "select classes" (elsewhere he refers to them as the "governing class") who were the upholders of the old order, with a veiled threat about what would happen if they choose to ignore popular opinion.

On January 27 problems began to arise with the Japanese. "Lloyd George had precipitated the demand of the British dominions for the possession of the former German colonies - especially the islands of the Pacific - and Wilson had countered with his proposals for a new mandatory system of control. It appeared at once that he was opposing also the Japanese, who, like the Australians and the New Zealanders, wanted no mandatory system, but actual annexation,"⁷⁸ The Japanese government then claimed the unconditional cession of the leased territory, railways, and other rights possessed by Germany in the Shantung province of China, as well as all the German-held islands in the Pacific Ocean north of the Equator. This triggered a watershed of demands from the other allies. The next day the French Minister for Colonies demanded Togoland and the Cameroons, the Belgians demanded a piece of German East Africa, and Italy made other provisional claims based upon the secret treaty of London.⁷⁹ Portugal then joined in but was ignored. Wilson was clearly perturbed by such self-interested wrangling: "The world would say that the Great Powers first portioned out the helpless parts of the world, and then formed a League of Nations. The crude fact would be that each of these parts had been assigned to one of the Great Powers."⁸⁰

On February 13 problems once again arose with the Japanese. Japanese representative Baron Makino introduced a racial equality clause for insertion in the covenant of the League which read as follows: "The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord, as soon as possible, to all alien nationals of States Members of the League, equal and just treatment in every respect, making no distinctions, either in law or fact, on account of their race or nationality."⁸¹ As early as November, 1918 the American Ambassador to Japan, Roland S. Morris reported the great interest of the Japanese in securing recognition of the principle of racial equality.⁸² The popular press there was also pushing for inclusion of racial equality among the terms of the peace.⁸³ This brings to the fore the question of how issues of race affected Wilson's position on self-determination and the dissolution of empire, or for that matter where Wilson stood on racial issues in general. The efforts of the California state legislature to restrict alien land ownership, directed in particular at the Japanese residents of the state, had generated numerous problems for the United States and its diplomatic relations with Japan. On the very sensitive issue of immigration quotas, Wilson appears to have "played politics" with the issue. On the one hand he told L.E. Miller that he opposes the restrictions: "I like other Democrats have always held liberal views with regard to immigration. I feel that it would be inconsistent with our historical character as a nation if we did not offer a very hearty welcome to every honest man and woman who comes to this country to seek a permanent home and a new opportunity."⁸⁴ On the other hand

he told James D. Phelan, ex-mayor of San Francisco, he was in favor of restrictions: "In the matter of Chinese and Japanese coolie immigration I stand for the national policy of exclusion. The whole question is one of assimilation of diverse races. We cannot make a homogeneous population out of people who do not blend with the Caucasian race. Their lower standards of living as laborers will crowd out the white agriculturalists and will in other fields prove a most serious industrial menace...Oriental coolieism will give us another race problem to solve, and surely we have had our lessons."⁸⁵ Wilson does not appear to have been an overt racist, but he did at some times exhibit a bit of condescension toward other cultures. As early as 1901 he said: "We might not have seen our duty, had the Phillipines not fallen to us by the willful fortune of war; but it would have been our duty, nevertheless, to play the part we now see ourselves obliged to play. The East is to be opened and transformed, whether we will or no; *the standards of the West are to be imposed upon it*; nations and peoples which have stood still the centuries through are to be quickened, and made part of the universal world of commerce and ideas which has so steadily been a-making by the advance of European power from age to age."⁸⁶ He did believe that all peoples were capable of self-government, but in reference to democracy he said, "...immature peoples cannot have it, and the maturity to which it is vouchsafed is the maturity of freedom and self-control, and no other."⁸⁷ Thus he would later submit that although all were capable of self-government, some needed direction, and thus the mandates system took shape. Wilson also showed particular partiality to the English speaking and Anglo

cultures.⁸⁸ One of his associates, Ray Stannard Baker, makes a less than flattering reference to some groups when discussing the disposition of German colonies, calling them "vast derelict populations of more or less helpless native people."⁸⁹ Baker also gave indication of some hostility toward the Jews when referring to an article in the second draft of the Covenant of the League that required all new states to grant equal rights to their racial or national minorities. He says, "This article was undoubtedly derived from the propaganda of the Jews, who always put their cause on the same footing as that of the Lithuanians in Poland or the Slovenes in Italy." The Commission on Syria and Palestine opposed the Zionist program on the grounds that the current population would have been abused: "The fact came out repeatedly in the Commission's conference with Jewish representatives, that the Zionists looked forward to a practically complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, by various forms of purchase. For the initial claim, often submitted by Zionist representatives, that they have a "right" to Palestine, based on an occupation of two thousand years ago, can hardly be seriously considered."⁹⁰ Obviously, the latter quotes are not from Wilson but his associates, and may not be indicative of his position. Although some groups do appear to have been "looked down upon" more than others, it does not appear to have significantly affected Wilson's views on self-determination rights for any such groups.

The ultimate question to ask is what Wilson did wish to accomplish (at Paris in particular) in light of his policies on self-determination and the dissolution of empire. Baker argues

that there was a very distinct set of intentions at Paris: "The new way so boldly launched at Paris (so ineffectively carried out!) was, first, to start with certain general principles of justice, such as those laid down by President Wilson and accepted by all the world; and, second, to have those principles applied, not by diplomats and politicians each eager to serve his own interests, but by dispassionate scientists - geographers, ethnologists, economists - who had made studies of the problems involved. It has often been charged that Wilson had no program: this was his programme."⁹¹ Wilson went to Paris with the idea of setting in motion a permanent mechanism for peace. It is interesting to note that Wilson told a French diplomat of his intention to bring about a "scientific" peace. As a political scientist he appears to have held a few prescriptive theories of his own for world politics. However, Wilson did not live in a vacuum insofar as the practical realities of world politics were concerned. It is rather clear that he did not think "certain general principles of justice" would resolve the particular problems of the boundaries of Europe and elsewhere. Herein lies the other side of a "scientific" peace, with geographers, ethnologists, and economists designated to find the most "scientific" means of resolving the particular items of contention. Baker described Wilson's position as follows: 'There were two central ideas in his programme, both American in their origin. One concerned the political rights and liberties of human kind, the other the obligations and controls of humankind. Specifically, they were:>1. The right of "self-determination" of peoples; that governments must rest upon the consent of the governed.[i.e. the Declaration of Independence].2. The obligation

to cooperate in a world association for mutual aid and protection; in short, a league of nations.[i.e. The Constitution]".⁹² At Paris, Wilson had fought with diligence because he believed the first part of his plan was useless without the second. In his mind it appears to have been analogous to the United States having the Declaration of Independence without the Constitution or Articles of Confederation. Wilson summed it up very well himself: "These great objects (of the peace) can be put in a single sentence. What we seek is the reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed, and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind."⁹³

End Notes

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