PrepUS History

Unit 7 - Changing America

Woodrow Wilson Biography

Woodrow Wilson, nicknamed the "schoolmaster in politics," is chiefly remembered for his high-minded idealism, which appeared both in his leadership on the faculty and in the presidency of Princeton University, and in his national and world statesmanship during and after World War I.

Wilson was born in 1856 in Staunton, Virginia (and named Thomas Woodrow Wilson). He grew up in Georgia and South Carolina during the suffering of the Civil War and its aftermath. He was also deeply influenced by the Presbyterianism of his father, a minister and sometime college teacher.

Wilson first went to Davidson (N.C.) College, but withdrew shortly because of ill health. He ultimately graduated from the College of New Jersey (later to become Princeton University) in 1879. Determined to become a statesman, he studied law for a year at the University of Virginia in 1879-80 and was admitted to the Georgia bar in 1882, but his law practice did not prosper.

Wilson went to Johns Hopkins University in 1883, studying government and history. At Johns Hopkins, he wrote Congressional Government, which was published in 1885. That book, still admired today as a study of lawmaking in the national U.S. government, was accepted as his dissertation, and he received the Ph.D. degree in political science from Johns Hopkins the following year. Wilson is the only U.S. president to hold a Ph.D.

Wilson taught at Bryn Mawr (Pa.) College, then at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. In 1890 he became professor of jurisprudence and political economy at Princeton University. He wrote nine books and became an accomplished essayist. The trustees of Princeton University named him president of the institution in 1902.

As president of Princeton, Wilson strove to institutionalize intellectual contacts between students and teachers. He resisted in some ways Princeton's reshaping of the time as it became a university focused more on graduate studies and less on the moral and intellectual upbringing of undergraduates.

In 1910 Wilson accepted the Democratic nomination for governor of New Jersey. He won the election in a landslide. His ambitious and successful Progressive agenda, centered around protecting the public from exploitation by trusts, earned him national recognition, and in 1912 he won the Democratic nomination for president. Wilson's "New Freedom" platform, focused on revitalization of the American economy, won him the presidency with 435 electoral votes out of 531 and a Democratic Congress.

As president, Wilson's domestic agenda continued his campaign against corrupt trusts. In 1913, the Underwood Act and the Federal Reserve Bill were passed, the former creating honest tariff reform by greatly reducing rates (for the first time since the Civil War) and instituting income tax; the latter creating new currency and establishing the twelve Federal Reserve banks and their board of governors to perform central banking functions. The Federal Trade Commission was established in 1914 to restrict "unfair" trade practices.

Despite provocation and pressure to enter the widening war in Europe that had begun in 1914, Woodrow Wilson maintained American neutrality for two years. He ran for reelection in 1916 with the slogan, "he kept us out of war." But rapid escalation of submarine warfare by Germany to include unlimited war on neutrals as well as belligerents left Wilson with no alternative but to ask Congress for a declaration of war in April 1917.

The world would look to America and Wilson's leadership to resolve the First World War. Wilson's Fourteen Points Address of 1918 called for a peace of reconciliation, based on democracy, self-determination, without annexations and indemnities, and a postwar League of Nations. The Paris Peace Conference in 1919 concluded with the signing of the Versailles Treaty with Germany, but a new Republican Congress at home was not in agreement with the peace negotiated under Wilson, particularly with the League of Nations and collective security aspects. Ultimately, a separate peace was negotiated between the United States and Germany. Wilson was awarded the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize, and heralded in Europe as a savior of peace.

Exhausted from his vigorous efforts toward ratification of the Versailles Treaty, traveling 8,000 miles by rail around the country, Wilson fell ill and would never fully recover. Wilson was unable to campaign for the presidency, whichWarren G. Harding would win in 1920 defeating Democratic candidate James M. Cox. Wilson retired to Washington, D.C., where he passed away in 1924.

Wilson's idealism and status as a great world leader led to the creation of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars as the U.S. memorial to him. The Center is not an institution for the study of Woodrow Wilson, but aims to embody Wilson's ideals by putting scholarship at the service of the world's public life.

*http://www.wilsoncenter.org/about-woodrow-wilson*